

# **Tapping Through Prejudice: Shirley Temple and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson**

Abbey Marra

University of Bristol  
Faculty of Arts  
Department of Film and Television

---

## **Abstract**

During Hollywood’s prime era of cinematic racism in the 1930s, Shirley Temple starred in four films alongside renowned Black performer, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson: *The Little Colonel* (1935), *The Littlest Rebel* (1935), *Just Around the Corner* (1938) and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1938). Audiences delighted in the pair’s chemistry on screen, as the six-year-old emulated the veteran’s tap steps in dance numbers interspersed throughout each feature. Routinely cast in Uncle Tom and subservient roles throughout his film career, Robinson plays Temple’s servant, slave, doorman, and farmhand in their collaborations. In spite of his inferiority, Robinson’s characters often become surrogate father figures for Temple after an estrangement from her parents, often allowing her to transcend racial boundaries and become an integral part of both the Black and white family structures. The performers were able to subvert the racism inherent in their films through Temple’s appropriation of her co-star’s blackness and Robinson’s ability to perform his agency despite being cast in demeaning roles. Serving as Temple’s choreographer and dance instructor, Robinson also formed a close relationship with the child star off screen. As the duo came to prominence during one of the most racist cinematic climates in history, their relationship remained uncontroversial due to Robinson’s presumed status as an Uncle Tom figure, both in life and on film.

## Introduction

Awarded an honorary Oscar at the age of six, Shirley Temple became one of the most admired Hollywood starlets of the 1930s. With signature golden ringlets and a dimpled smile, she lifted the nation's spirits during the Great Depression and maintained unprecedented levels of box office success. While Temple captivated audiences with her solo performances, some of her most memorable films included the presence of renowned Black performer and tap dancer, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. After achieving considerable notoriety on the vaudeville stage, Twentieth Century Fox paired Robinson with Temple in an attempt to amalgamate the sophistication of Harlem with her childlike charisma and innocence. He would go on to star in four films with the young starlet: *The Little Colonel* (1935), *The Littlest Rebel* (1935), *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1938) and *Just Around the Corner* (1938).

In each film, tap became one of the central features of the pair's relationship, and they were to become the first interracial couple to dance on screen. The duo's first tap number proved to be so popular with filmgoers that Robinson/Temple dances were included in each of their collaborations. While Temple observed and then imitated Robinson's steps in their first appearance together, she was soon dancing alongside him as an equal. Throughout this case study, I will be exploring the complex relationship between Robinson and Temple during their successful run from 1935 to 1938, both on and off screen. Examining the historical and political context surrounding the films as well as the texts themselves, I will analyze each film through a lens of race, ultimately contending that the pair achieved great lengths in overcoming racial boundaries despite Hollywood's racist cinematic climate in the 1930s, doing so chiefly through the use of a particular medium—tap.

In my examination of the relationship between the young, white starlet and the older, Black performer, I will organize the case study from a chronological standpoint; that is, separate my analysis of the Temple/Robinson relationship into four sections, exploring the beginning, middle, and end of their time together on screen. First, I will briefly discuss each star's background and rise to fame, as well as their bond off screen. For the duration of their working relationship, Robinson acted not only as Temple's co-star, but also as her dance instructor. He became immensely proud of the child's natural talent, boasting about how quickly she perfected each dance routine. Robinson also assumed an almost grandfatherly role off screen, buying Temple expensive gifts, hanging pictures of the two of them in his home, and giving her the nickname, "Darlin." Temple affectionately referred to Robinson as "Uncle Billy," and in her autobiography has nothing but kind words for her dance partner. She not only praises him for treating her as his equal, but maintains that he was her favorite all time co-star.

Next, I will explore the historical and political context surrounding films released in the 1930s. Throughout the Great Depression, Hollywood was ingrained in a climate of cinematic racism following the success of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and continuing through the end of the decade with *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Depression era films regularly featured Black actors in demeaning roles, depicting them as illiterate,

subservient, and dependent upon/grateful to white masters. The popular romantic vision of the antebellum South became a common theme throughout films released during these years, making for an excellent fantasy for white moviegoers in the midst of an economic crisis. The most successful genres attempted to divert attention from the harsh reality of the Depression, invoking nostalgia for a time and place that was, for white people, simpler, happier, and more secure. Portrayals of content Black servants who “knew their place” helped assure white audiences that a more stable social order had once existed, and they were comforted by the display of wealthy households filled with characters who faced no economic hardship, as well as a dependable and working racial hierarchy.

Each of Temple and Robinson’s films were deeply ingrained in this racist cinematic climate. With roles including a servant, slave, farmhand, and doorman, Robinson’s characters can be defined as the quintessential Uncle Tom figure, and although many Black audiences were pleased with his successful transition to Hollywood, others were angered by his continual acceptance of Jim Crow roles for the duration of his career. In the midst of this criticism, Robinson attested to being tremendously proud of what he saw as a triumph over racial prejudice, pointing to the fact that he received more recognition from white organizations than any other Black performer in the United States at the time. All of Robinson’s characters were situated firmly beneath Temple in every respect; despite being 40 years his junior, she remains his superior in all four of their films. Even so, Robinson’s characters often take on a paternal and oftentimes heroic role after the disruption of Temple’s family structure: her father is captured by the Yankees, her mother dies from disease, her stepfather sends her to live with an aunt in the countryside. Following all of Temple’s misfortunes, Robinson emerges as the girl’s protector and confidant, displaying his unflinching optimism through tap numbers to lift her (and the viewers’) spirits in the face of hardship.

Later, I will analyze *The Little Colonel* and *The Littlest Rebel* through textual analysis, both of which are set either in the immediate aftermath or during the Civil War. Temple plays the wealthy, privileged daughter of Confederate fathers in both films and is accompanied by Robinson, cast as her servant, Walker, and slave, Uncle Billy respectively. Each story takes place on a Southern plantation, and the properties are populated with Black servants and their children in an assumed idyllic environment. In these chapters I will also discuss how “blackness” and the state of being a child converged—both proposed states of powerlessness within society. But while Temple’s characters will presumably grow out of childhood, Robinson’s will remain cemented in their Uncle Tom roles for the foreseeable future.

Temple’s relationship and interaction with Black children in each film are also of considerable importance, and I will look at how she merges the codes of Black and white during their play dates, most notably when they reenact a baptismal ceremony that they have just seen performed by Black servants in the river. I will also examine a number of instances in which Temple “borrows” Robinson’s blackness through the emulation of his dance steps, facial expressions, and manner of speaking, even physically blacking up with shoe polish as a disguise in *The Littlest Rebel*. She also wades into the mud with her Black playmates as they make mud pies, her arms and face covered in grime, blacking up before our eyes until her grandfather chastises such behavior. In both films, Temple traverses between the Black and white worlds with ease—she is the only character to do so. Despite blatant displays of racism in both films, viewers can’t help but be drawn to the chemistry between Temple and Robinson—they become two parts of the same unit.

And finally, I will examine the actors' last two collaborations: *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and *Just Around the Corner*, in which Robinson plays farmhand, Aloysius and doorman, Corporal Jones. Even though these later films are set in Northern cities and in present day, Temple remains Robinson's superior. While his earlier roles can be read as heroic figures in the face of racial stereotypes, these characters are pushed to the margins of each plot, with Robinson's brief appearances serving to satisfy the audience's expectation for beloved tap numbers. Ultimately, I will attempt to unpack the contradictory nature of the duo's on and off screen relationship, and propose that the pair succeeded in subverting the racism inherent in each of their films.

## Fame Comes in Black and White

*“Bill Robinson treated me as an equal, which was very important to me. He didn’t talk down to me like to a little girl. And I liked people like that. And Bill Robinson was the best of all.”*  
–Shirley Temple Black (NPR 2014)

When examining Temple and Robinson’s multifaceted relationship, it is important to understand the historical and political context surrounding the stars’ rise to fame, as well as a brief background of their early careers. On the surface, the two performers appear to be polar opposites: Robinson, a fifty-year-old Black tap dancer cast in demeaning film roles throughout his career, and Temple, a six-year-old white girl catapulted to stardom as the innocent, charming child who would allow moviegoers to escape Great Depression woes. Despite these oppositions, the stars quickly formed a bond off screen that was to foster their chemistry in front of the camera, causing viewers to clamor for additional collaborations, and most importantly, additional tap scenes. Temple and Robinson both began as child performers, although under quite different circumstances, but tap would become the common thread that was to connect them for the duration of their successful run.

In the years leading up to their partnership, the relationship between Hollywood and race was evolving out of the days of minstrelsy, as Black entertainers began to inhabit roles on the silver screen that were most often relegated to racial stereotypes. In the midst of such circumstances, Robinson and Temple were able to overcome racial barriers through their chemistry onscreen and simultaneous subversion of each film’s racist setting. Production stills and rehearsal photos of the two performers during their successful run help to convey their camaraderie and deep affection for one another (Figure 3). Without understanding the racist historical context during the decade in which they performed, one might assume there was nothing unusual about the duo’s close relationship. Indeed, throughout their partnership, Robinson doted on Temple as if she were his granddaughter. They affectionately referred to one another by the given nicknames, “Darlin” and “Uncle Billy,” Robinson had a number of framed photos of the pair on display in his Harlem apartment, and he regularly spoiled Temple with expensive gifts (Figures 1-2). These included a motorized custom car in “Shirley Size” from the Knickerbocker Motor Company, emblazoned with “Shirley Temple” in bright red, and a rare wooden whistling figure custom made by Griesbaum of Switzerland in his likeness, which Temple cherished throughout her career.

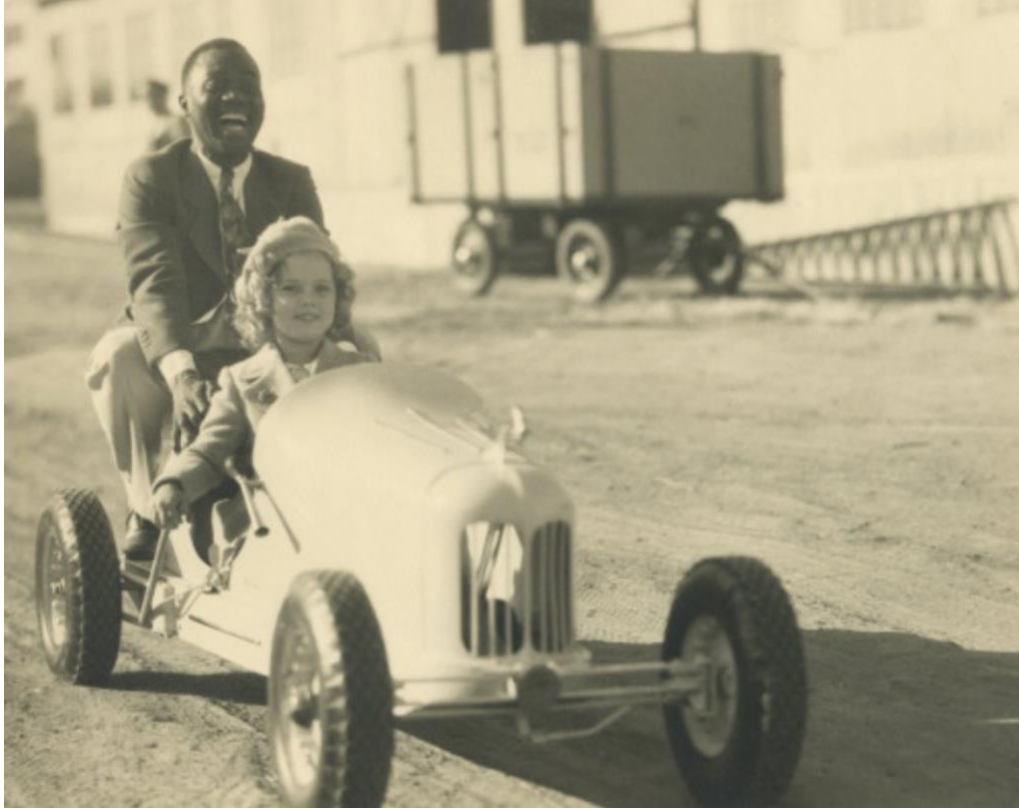


Figure 1. Temple and Robinson drive around the 20th Century Fox studio lot in her new car, 1937



Figure 2. Robinson gives Temple a wooden whistling doll in his likeness, 1938



Figure 3. Robinson and Temple behind the scenes during a tap rehearsal, 1938

Shirley Jane Temple was born in Santa Monica, California on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1928, before beginning her film career at age three. While she attracted little notice in early performances, everything changed following the release of *Stand Up and Cheer* (1934), a film Fox released soon after President Franklin D. Roosevelt's inauguration. The studio aimed to convey how the entertainment industry was dispelling the gloom of the Depression right alongside the president, with Temple as their muse. Temple would remain the most popular star at the box office from 1935 to 1938, both in the United States and worldwide, a record that was never to be equaled (Kasson 2). Her power and presence could be purchased in a wide variety of merchandise including Shirley Temple coats, hats, shoes, dresses, and books. Her face was plastered on everything from cereal boxes to decorative plates and mugs, and the Shirley Temple doll accounted for almost one third of all dolls sold in the United States in 1935 (4). No child performer has since achieved the same level of success and universal recognition as the young actress. Starring in more than thirty films, she writes in her 1988 autobiography, *Child Star*, that she had greater name recognition at the age of seven than either Amelia Earhart or Eleanor Roosevelt, and bigger box office success than the likes of Clark Gable or Bing Crosby (Temple Black 22).

Like Temple, Robinson also began his career as a child performer, but under rather different circumstances. Born Luther Robinson on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1878, he was orphaned at age seven and quickly learned how to dance for white patrons while working as a bootblack on the streets of post-Reconstruction Richmond, Virginia. At the first opportunity he moved to

Washington D.C., where he transitioned from a street performer dancing for change to playing pickaninny roles in minstrel touring shows such as *The South Before the War* (1891) and *In Old Kentucky* (1900). As one of America's first Black stage and screen stars, Robinson's Hollywood roles represented a rare chance for audiences to see Black performances in mainstream films. Marshall and Jean Stearns have noted that following his performance in the musical revue, *Blackbirds of 1928*, he became the first Black performer to dance on the Broadway stage and achieve real critical acclaim, "creating a new and much larger public for vernacular dance" (151).

From minstrelsy through the jazz age, Black performance had become central to American theater and music, and the film industry was eager to capitalize on talents that had proven their popularity in other mediums. The advent of sound created vast new possibilities for film, including a new medium for tap, and studios began to adapt popular stage acts for a national audience on screen. Performers associated with Harlem including Cab Calloway, the Nicholas Brothers, and Robinson had been involved in a small number of short films and Black cast musicals on Broadway, but bringing in acts so closely tied to Harlem posed a challenge for Hollywood studios as they struggled to structure films that suited the disparate tastes of different regions. Black performers such as Robinson were appealing precisely because they evoked the sophistication and excitement associated with Harlem, but the cultural and social mixing that Harlem represented also provoked certain fears about the stability of America's racial status (Hatch 82). Film studios turned to methods that would capitalize on the performers' talent while managing to avoid provoking such fears. The most prevalent technique for incorporating Black performance into films—while ensuring they would remain appealing to white, southern audiences—was to limit Black characters to broad stereotypical roles previously established through nineteenth century minstrelsy and the ubiquitous Tom show (90). Robinson posed a unique challenge to this method, due in large part to the fact that he was chiefly identified by the precision and elegance of his tap dancing, as well as an air of grace and self-control—attributes that were not easily adaptable into racial stereotypes (98). Fox soon made the decision to pair him with another screen sensation in the form of Temple, the most famous little girl to emerge from Hollywood.

The pairing of Robinson and Temple in four films during the 1930s tie the image to a wider concern in contemporary film and cultural studies; namely, the ways in which the interplay between Hollywood production values, audience subjectivities, and a performer's own interpretation of his or her role implicitly challenges the rigidity of popular cultural boundaries. Robinson also fits into wider concerns regarding historical hybridities and ambiguities in Black performance. As one of the most famous Black performers to emerge from 1930s Hollywood, he highlights the reductive nature of Black performance while also revealing its subversive and humanizing potential. By teaming up with Temple, the pair appealed to both white and Black audiences at once, administering a subtle rebuke against racial prejudice as her small, white hand gripped his large Black one during their first tap number.

Robinson complicated associations with blackface performance by suggesting that contemporary Black audiences were receptive to his artistry and identified with his achievements as a Black performer. While this identification rests chiefly on his stardom at the time, it also has much to do with the fact that he was both recognized by and better than the movies in which he starred; he is deservedly *in* but not *of* the films (Durkin 56). Robinson



also transformed the tap art form into something of his own; making little use of his arms or hands, he danced principally from the waist down with a precision and intricacy to his steps that defied imitation. While he occasionally leapt upward, “Bojangles” performances would not have been considered acrobatic. Instead, he concentrated on close rhythms, his feet coming barely an inch above the floor:

Sandwiched between a Buck or Time Step, Robinson might use a little skating step to stop-time; or a Scoot step, a cross-over tap, which looked like a jig: hands on hips, tapping as he went, while one foot kicked up and over the other; or a double tap, one hand on hip, one arm extended, with eyes blinking, head shaking, and derby cocked; or a tap to the melody of a tune such as “Parade of the Wooden Soldiers;” or a broken-legged or old man’s dance, one leg short and wobbling with the beat; or an exit step, tapping with a Chaplin-esque waddle (Stearns and Stearns 34).

Robinson’s success on stage led to his casting in some of the more prominent Black roles in Fox films during the 1930s, which were a far cry from the sophistication of Harlem. Instead of the metropolitan present, he was placed in a mythic southern past, one in which every Black person was either formally or practically enslaved. Now stripped of prestige and power, his characters were chiefly on screen to offer a bright smile and infuse the most mundane tasks with virtuosity—all while under strict white supervision. Robinson’s firm placement in stereotypical film roles during the 1930s was not a rarity given the cinematic climate of the decade. Scholars including Donald Bogle, James Snead, Thomas Cripps, Daniel Leab, Jacqui Jones, and Jim Pines have examined how preexisting stereotypes, such as the “jiving sharpster” and the “shuffling stage Sambo” were transferred from antecedent media into 1930s Hollywood films. Bogle explores representations of Black performers in Hollywood in his book, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (1994), foregrounding the unequal struggle between Black performers and the stereotypical roles offered them by Hollywood. He outlines five major stereotypes of the era:

**The servile “Tom,”** referencing Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, roles often played by Robinson.

**The “Coon,”** often played by Stepin Fetchit, a type subdivided into the pickaninny, a harmless eye-popping clown figure, and the Uncle Remus, a naïve, congenial folk philosopher.

**The “Tragic Mulatto,”** normally a female character, victim of dual racial inheritance who tries to pass for white in films such as *Imitation of Life* (1959) and *Pinky* (1949); or else the demonized mulatto man, ambitious and devious, as evidenced by Silas Lynch in *Birth of a Nation*

**The “Buck,”** a hypersexualized, brutal Black man; figure of menace inherited from the stage whose most famous filmic incarnation is perhaps Gus in *Birth of a Nation*.

**The “Mammy,”** cantankerous, overweight, ultimately sympathetic female servant/cook who provides the glue that keeps households intact, most famously played by Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind*.

Hollywood's vision of the antebellum South in films like *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* actively occlude human abuses at the heart of slavery. Films set in the plantation genre during the depression years reassured audiences through denial and escapism, functioning to contain and structure race relations.

Kristen Hatch asserts that the Robinson/Temple pairing in such films was specifically designed to forge a national audience by proposing a solution to the impasse over the place of Black performers in American culture. She argues that Fox's casting of the most recognizable Black entertainer with the studio's most popular starlet provided a solution to the challenge of how to capitalize on the talents of a celebrated Black performer while also minimizing the perceived threat of an increase in Black performers in show business. The pairing also helped confer the sophistication associated with Harlem onto the child, whose films otherwise risked being dismissed as an "anachronistic vestige of lachrymose melodrama" (Hatch 80). Temple lent Robinson her innocence, and he in turn provided her with sophistication. Hatch also argues that their appearances together suggested the meeting of Black and white bodies could be exhilarating and harmless without destabilizing racial boundaries (85). Temple's association with Robinson also helped to reinstate the racial difference ideology that was so central to American national identity—this intellectually superior white child could mimic the Black man's steps while deflecting his sexuality. Fox attempted to counteract fears about the "mongrelization" of American culture by suggesting that jazz music and dance were the product of an immaculate amalgamation rather than a fertile intermixing, and Temple/Robinson tap numbers helped audiences imagine away the racial mixing that had contributed to the ubiquity of jazz (87).

While his characters' dialogue in features with Temple were generally superficial and unvaried, when Robinson began to dance, audiences were no longer focused on what he had to say. Particularly for Black audiences, "a Robinson performance was never about what his character had to say as in what he came to represent" (Bogle 50). Wielding tap as a makeshift weapon against racism, his performances with Temple enabled him to reach a wider range of viewers and subvert the racial stereotypes he portrayed. Maurice O. Wallace has described dance as a "valuable sign system, a means of communicating with an audience that is unconnected to a film's script and presumably its plot intentions" (Wallace 12). In dance's "deepest structures lies an alternate reality of Black masculine subjecthood, one characterized by new stylistic options" for identity display. Wallace sees dance numbers as non-linguistic devices which provide their own representational strategies, creating meanings that are inherently transgressive, which also contest the film's framework even when it appears to be subsumed by them (Durkin 238). Wallace's reading of dance as a field of communication disengaged from film structures positions creative performances like Robinson's as having the potential to subvert popular cinematic representation of Black masculinities (238). It is in this vein that Temple and Robinson were able to undercut the racist tendencies of their films.

Many readings of minstrelsy ignore the ways in which Black performers intervened in the genre to develop methods of physical expression that allowed them to talk back to racialized social hierarchies and attain a measure of self-affirmation. When he first appeared on the commercial stage, Robinson was confined to minstrel shows, playing a pickaninny in his first role in *The South Before the War* (Kasson 45). Working within the minstrel tradition, Black performers developed an improvisational aesthetic that would become key components of jazz and tap, using innuendo to subvert racial codes while challenging

puritanical societal attitudes towards the body, which restricted human behaviors. Particularly significant about Robinson's career is that it captures Berndt Ostendorf's notion of "Black historical memory," which is torn between the dual and alternating heritages of pathological ascription and celebratory achievement, between outside habits of racist ascription and the appreciative inside view, and between past significance and present meaning (Ostendorf 114). According to Ostendorf, ascriptions of meaning can be contextualized, which hints at the potential fluidity and interpretative possibilities of Robinson's screen identity. His image, which has been equally maligned and celebrated, can be read as part of a conflict between present interpretations and historical, cultural, and racial discourses (119).

In *White Screens, Black Images* (1994) James Snead notes that "the repetition of Black absence from locations of autonomy and importance creates the presence of the idea that [Black people] belong in positions of obscurity and dependence," positioning many scenes with Robinson as cinematic capitulations to racial segregation (69). However, this reading does not consider the complexity of Robinson's performances, such as the ways in which racist identity codes overlapped with self-referential creative artistry and subversive "play" to heighten new possible interpretations of his cinematic personality while simultaneously colluding with the representational stereotypes. Sean Griffin's critical approach to film musicals suggests that the African American specialty number represented an alternative discourse of racial representation. He hoped to recover such scenes as "the raison d'être of the musical genre," arguing that "minority performers could at times use the structure of the musical to take over the film" (Griffin 22). Griffin asserts that "in all likelihood, audiences flocked to these films more for the musical numbers than for the plot lines, and evidence indicates that the virtuoso talent of minority specialties often worked effectively to "interrupt and supersede the white stars and the narrative trajectory" (29). Griffin interprets such scenes as sites of cinematic anarchism that displace conventional racial hierarchies by providing a platform for performers like Robinson to display their superior technical artistry and thus to steal attention from less talented white actors. They overcame positions of racial "otherness" to become the films' most visually dominant and most memorable performers. Indeed, the dance sequences are what we remember about Temple/Robinson films most of all.

But while many of these scenes can be read as spontaneous, reinforcing popular themes of innate Black musicality, they can also be understood as acts of creativity and artistry, much like jazz improvisation, a key component of tap dance. As an art form, tap often appears spontaneous, but is rooted in an ability to think quickly as well as have and understanding and the capability to rework complex artistry. Jacqui Malone explains how "rhythm tappers are jazz percussionists who value improvisation and self-expression. Jazz musicians tell stories with their instruments and rhythm tappers tell stories with their feet" (Malone 95). It is this improvisational aesthetic inherent in African American vernacular dance that liberates the performer from societal structures:

In swing aesthetic body suppleness, vitality, and flexibility—the intelligence of the dancing body—were more important for dancers than demonstrating a predetermined movement technique such as the standardized ballet vocabulary. Rhythm, timing, vital flashes of innovation that might change with each

performance—in other words, the overarching power of improvisation—were valued above set, formal, repeatable patterns (Gottschild 14).

In each of his Hollywood roles, Robinson works within early twentieth century African American performance traditions of improvisation and self-expression to expand upon the boundaries of the blackface image in which he performs (Durkin 238). He plays inventively with each scene's expressive possibilities to realize a very personal art form, counteracting the fixed representation. He also manages his own spatial image through self-reflexive tap steps to reveal a creative authority that challenges the film's racially homogenizing framework (238). With Temple's added presence in these scenes, her characters can be read as learning from a master of his art. While nearly all of his roles position Robinson as expendable to the plot, his arresting presence in each dance number "defies racial subservience by facilitating his representational agency" (239). Robinson's physical distance and authority over his Black peers in each film also creates a contrast to their childlike but physically oversized characterizations. Stearns and Stearns note that the effect of Robinson's artistry "was to make the audience and the critics watch his feet" (55). This focus away from the body undermines attempts to objectify the dancer. Instead, it encourages audiences to abandon their cultural associations of "blackness" and engage with his artistry. Such emphasis supports Wallace's suggestion that the dancer's performances shattered rudimentary cultural notions of Black physicalities—such as the mindless coon played by Willie Best in *The Littlest Rebel*—by articulating a particularly elegant, cerebral, and self-affirmative stage image.

The history of Black performance is one which continuously battles against confining types and categories, each battle "homologous to the quotidian struggle of three-dimensional African Americans against the imprisoning conventions of an apartheid style system" (Bogle 56). At their best, Black performances undercut stereotypes by individualizing the type or slyly standing above it. The "flamboyant bossiness" of McDaniel's Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, her way of looking Scarlett right in the eye, within this perspective, translated aggressive hostility toward a racist system. Many Black performers developed resilient imaginations as they played against script and studio intentions, expanding their capacity to turn demeaning roles into resistant performance: "Who could forget Bojangles' urbanity? Or Rochester's cement-mixer voice? Or Louise Beaver's jolliness? Or Hattie McDaniels' haughtiness?" (37). Black actors throughout Hollywood successfully managed to reveal some unique quality within their characters to which audiences immediately responded, and "performance itself intimated liberatory possibilities" (39). Robinson became an expert at this craft, and although each Temple film strictly adhered to the racial stereotypes of the decade, he subverted these racial codes again and again throughout performances with the child star, beginning with their work together in *The Little Colonel*.

## I Want to Do That Too: *The Little Colonel*

*“Every sound matched, every gesture, the shuffle.  
The staccato tap, a sharp-toed kick to the stile,  
a triple time race up and down the staircase, tapping as we went.  
The smile on my face was not acting—I was ecstatic.”*  
–Shirley Temple Black (*Child Star* 1988)

Released in 1935, *The Little Colonel* was the first collaboration between Robinson and Temple, and is set in what might be called the primal scene of American cinematic racism. A terrain first trod upon in D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, this setting is none other than the antebellum South—a thriving plantation in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, portrayed as a cultured and idyllic environment populated by Black servants and white masters who must grapple with Northern intrusion. Such a setting describes the first two of four films in which Temple and Robinson star, as if only the conditions of plantation life were acceptable for what audiences were about to witness: an intimate relationship between a young white girl and an older Black man. On the surface, such a partnership appears to be a violation of the times, and indeed, the pair’s dancing sequences are almost always interrupted by an authority figure, resulting in guilt and embarrassment. However, even as the duo’s relationship adheres to Uncle Tom stereotypes, by digging a little deeper to look past studio intentions, it becomes evident that inherent in the stars’ performances is a clear subversion of the film’s racist elements.

From her initial breakthrough in 1934, Temple’s innocence and charm were immediately set against the smiles and submission of Black adults. In *Stand Up and Cheer* (1934) Stepin Fetchit performed his signature role of a lethargic, mumbling fool, and Tess Gardella appeared as blackface character, Aunt Jemima. Willie Best played a number of slow-witted Sambo characters in Temple films including *Little Miss Marker* (1934) and *The Littlest Rebel*. Fetchit and Best continued to star alongside Temple in an array of feature films, serving as fools and foils to her poise and intelligence (Bogle 98). Comforting Mammy figures also emerged, including Hattie McDaniel in *The Little Colonel*. But of all the Black characters in her films, none became more closely associated with Temple than Robinson. Costarring together in four features, Bogle asserts that “theirs was the perfect interracial love match; for surely nothing would come of it” (22). Audiences so readily accepted them as a pair that in *The Littlest Rebel*, their biggest success, Robinson assumes the role of Temple’s guardian—the first time in the history of motion pictures that a Black male was made responsible for a rich white girl.

Premiering *The Little Colonel* to a nation that remained divided nearly three quarters of a century after the Civil War had ended, filmmakers at Twentieth Century Fox were charged with the difficult task of catering to a national audience that espoused conflicting ethical and aesthetic principles, especially with regard to maintaining boundaries between Black and white populations (Knight 98). The Temple/Robinson pairing was specifically designed to eliminate regional differences and forge a national audience, proposing a

solution to the problem of African Americans in popular culture. Throughout the film, Lloyd (Temple) is able to seamlessly merge the codes of Black and white “on a sustained level that cinema has never seen before or since” (Snead 47). Her characters regularly transgress barriers of decorum and convention with virtual impunity. The genius of Temple characters lies in the way in which they have become disciplined negotiators between two opposing worlds, much like Black characters, who were similarly plunged into childlike roles amidst hostile and patronizing white adults (49). If Temple’s characters were presumably allowed to grow out of childhood, perhaps much of the pathos of *The Little Colonel* comes from understanding that Robinson and his entire race, addressed by first name or “boy,” are relegated to servile and dependent status, and can hence “never escape the imposition of a childlike mask that whites can don or discard at will” (49).

The deeper irony of the Temple persona is that her circumvention of white adult norms takes place within a formal context conceived by the adult filmmakers, ultimately supporting the final legitimacy of adulthood renewed and made tolerable by the discovery and co-optation of “the child in all of us” through vicarious identification with Temple’s qualities (50). Robinson’s presence allows viewers to see this process reenacted in the realm of race, rather than merely age; just as mature audiences converted Temple’s cuteness into some unattainable ideal that was to mollify the rigors of adulthood, we observe her borrowing Robinson’s blackness in a number of instances: from emulating his various dances, to recreating the servants’ baptismal ritual, to her literal expropriation of blackness by covering herself with mud as she plays with Black children. Snead contends that under certain societal norms, blackness and the state of being a child are conditions of relative powerlessness made to converge. But Temple’s subversions also point to wider possibilities of protest against a stifling environment, chiefly through her close relationship with Robinson’s character and their tap numbers, as well as her relationship with her Black playmates. The conceptual interpenetration of blackness and childhood works both for and against the racist content of the film itself (50).

*The Little Colonel* begins shortly after the end of the Civil War, as a title card flashes across a wide shot of a plantation that reads, “KENTUCKY IN THE 70S.” When Lloyd’s mother, Elizabeth (Evelyn Venable) marries Yankee Jack Sherman (John Lodge) against her father’s wishes, the Confederate Colonel Lloyd (Lionel Barrymore) disowns her, beginning the disruption of Temple’s family structure that is so often the starting point for her films. Most importantly, these are the preconditions for a paternal intervention by Robinson’s character, head servant Walker. From the opening scene, in which he nearly drops an expensive vase, Walker appears to be another clumsy servant placed for comedic effect; however, more so than any of the other Black characters, he serves as a mediator and conciliator throughout the Colonel’s feud with his daughter. Additionally, he provides Lloyd relief from her grandfather’s callousness, while risking his own position in the process.

Throughout the film, Lloyd’s character serves as a bridge between both the Black and white communities, able to move freely between them as she pleases. She “borrows” her servants’ blackness on a number of occasions, and is even invited to attend an intimate baptismal ceremony on the riverbank. The baptism sequence stands out stylistically from other scenes in the film, which were shot on a sound stage using rear projection for exterior scenes (Hatch 95). In contrast, the baptism ritual is shot on location at a riverbank populated with Black extras. The soundtrack features a Black choir singing the popular spiritual, “Wade in the Water,” and Lloyd is noticeably the only white spectator at what has been framed as

an exotic spectacle, serving as a makeshift tour guide for white audiences (95). As the film progresses, Lloyd eventually persuades her curmudgeonly grandfather to recognize his character flaws, reconcile differences with his daughter, and even outwit con artists in the story's final turn of events. Her grandfather's change of heart, portrayed as a sort of spiritual redemption, is catalyzed by Lloyd's participation in the earlier riverside baptism with the Black servants. She later reenacts the baptism with her Black friends, Henry Clay (Nyanza Potts) and May Lily (Avonne Jackson), blacking up both physically in mud and figuratively by assuming the servants' religious ritual. Lloyd again acts as a catalyst between the two races, underscored by the playing of the Black spiritual, "Deep River" during the film's end credits (96).

Black characters on the plantation often become surrogates for Lloyd's own fractured family, and she chooses to spend most, if not all of her spare time with them. Her only playmates are Henry Clay and May Lily, and at one point she even manages to convince her grandfather to offer the children ("pickaninnies," in his words) a joy ride with their wagon hitched to his horse. Lloyd's relationship with May Lily and Henry Clay is just one of the ways in which she can be perceived as a bridge between her own privileged white world and that of her Black counterparts. May Lily and Henry Clay are never properly introduced as characters; the first we hear of them is when Mom Beck (Hattie McDaniel) tells Lloyd to "run along and play with May Lily." It can be assumed that the reason the children play with Lloyd is that they are the only ones on the plantation, but she appears to be genuinely interested in a friendship with them. When we first see the trio together, they are deep in conversation walking down a dirt road, as Lloyd tells them of her self-ascribed status as the "Little Colonel." She leads them to her grandfather's front lawn, causing May Lily extreme discomfort. To May Lily's dismay, Lloyd picks the Colonel's roses without a second thought before exclaiming, "Come on, May Lily—let's make mud pies!" She proceeds to slather her arms in mud and grime before her grandfather bursts angrily onto the scene. When the Colonel finds the children, May Lily and Henry Clay flee, but Lloyd stands defiantly before him, covered in mud from the waist down. This becomes the first of many instances in which Temple physically "blacks up."

While Lloyd might be able to traverse easily between her Black and white relationships, many of the scenes featuring Black characters are overtly racist in nature, such as when Mom Beck and Walker misspell words to one another on the way to the river baptism so that Lloyd will not be able to learn of her mother's financial troubles. With the little girl walking between them, the scene's principal purpose is to comically reveal their lack of education:

WALKER: What you mean you ain't got any M-O-N-I-E?

MOM BECK: Not only that, we's most outta F-U-D-E.

WALKER: That's too bad. Looky here, wouldn't the K-U-N-E-L give a little L- O-N-E?

MOM BECK: You know Miss Elizabeth wouldn't take nothin' from him! Why before she'd do that she'd go to the, uh, P-O-H-O-S!

Walker doesn't understand what Mom Beck means by the last word, and when he repeats the spelling in question she says, "Sure! The poorhouse! Ain't you got no education?" This scene highlights the fact that Lloyd, a privileged white girl, will eventually outgrow her behavioral childishness while the Black characters will presumably never outgrow their "constitutional infantilism" (Snead 55).

Perhaps the most compelling scene in the film, and arguably Robinson and Temple's most memorable, remains their staircase tap number, which marked the first time a white girl danced with a Black man onscreen. After the Colonel instructs Walker to put Lloyd to bed, the girl pouts, refusing to go up to her room:

LLOYD: I don't wanna go up there.

WALKER: Why, everybody's gotta go upstairs, Miss Lloyd, if they wants to go to bed.

LLOYD: I don't want to.

WALKER: Look here. Will you go if I show you a brand new way to go upstairs?

LLOYD: How could there be a new way to go upstairs?

WALKER: Now you just watch!

Walker then begins an impressive solo tap number up and down the staircase using a simple time signature—mostly four-four—as his feet perform to the music of his own voice impersonating a trumpet. He twirls down the stairs to end his performance, hitting one last beat before extending a hand to Lloyd with a final, "Ah!" She giggles and says, "I want to do that too." They join hands and commence their first tap performance together. Nearing the number's conclusion, the Colonel walks in on them and demands, "What is going on around here?" With hands still clasped, Walker and Lloyd freeze, wide-eyed before sprinting up the stairs into Lloyd's room, safely closing the door behind them (Figure 4). Once inside, Walker breathes a sigh of relief, "Whew! That's the fastest my feet ever moved!" to which Lloyd giggles again, replying, "I like to go upstairs that way." Walker raises his eyebrows and smiles, "You sure learn fast! Now tomorrow, I'll show you some more steps. Goodnight, Miss Lloyd—pleasant dreams!" This scene also marks the first instance in which Robinson takes on a paternal role for Temple. Without parents to put her to bed, the Black servants assume the role of her family members, as Walker hands her over to another female servant for her bedtime routine.





Figure 4. Lloyd and Walker react to her angry grandfather after their first tap number in *The Little Colonel*, 1935

While the famous staircase number has been widely praised, it has also been met with considerable criticism. In these early tap sequences Temple is not so much dancing *with* Robinson as she is dancing *like* him. Each routine has not been designed as a male/female couple dancing together, such as Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, but rather a student imitating her instructor, a dancer teaching an apprentice (Snead 56). The film attempts to show Temple (and white culture in general) being in the “cultural debt of Black culture without actually being subjugated by it” (56). Yet, despite these structural constraints, Snead contends:

The genius of the Temple/Robinson combination erupts in [this routine], and no moviegoer could fail to see, despite the political limitations imposed upon their editing and choreography, that Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson were engaged in an artistic intercourse with a momentum and rhythm that set its own rules, and that virtually exploded the racist myths of the film narrative that surrounded it (57).

In their first feature, the duo’s partnership and its representation, as well as its performative qualities, exceed narrative constraints. When they are together, the racist context of the 1930s appears to dissolve.

In Walker’s final scene, Lloyd visits the stables where he works the morning after their dance routine. At first it appears that she has come to show off her new dress to Walker,

May Lily, and Henry Clay, but it soon becomes apparent that she hopes to dance with Walker once more: “Are you going to show me some new steps today?” she asks. He reluctantly turns her down before doing just that: “Not today, Miss Lloyd. You see, I gotta drive to town.” We hear a female voice call for Walker to hurry up before he says, “Hear that? Now you know I ain’t got no time for dancin’!” The camera cuts to May Lily, who has pulled out her harmonica and begins to play. Walker cannot help but improvise a few steps as he talks in rhythm: “I say—you hear me?—I just ain’t got time—to do no dancin’ today.” The second tap sequence between the two performers functions more as a makeshift “dance-off,” as each character improvises before pausing to watch their partner (Figure 5). Lloyd not only wants to imitate Walker’s steps; she wants to create her own, just like him. “Now I’m really goin’!” Walker quips after being reprimanded by the female voice again. He dances and laughs his way out of the stable to the delight of the children, and subsequently, out of the rest of the film. Lloyd’s implicit desire to learn from and dance with Walker, as well as her comfortable entrance into the stable establishes her once again as a member of the Black family structure, where she appears to feel most at home.



Figure 5. Lloyd dances in the stables with Walker in *The Little Colonel*, 1935

Released during a decade of overt cinematic racism, *The Little Colonel* saw Robinson and Temple team up for their first feature film, much to the delight of audiences across the nation. Firmly situated as an Uncle Tom, Robinson's character conformed to the political ideologies of viewers who held traditionally racist views, reciting dialogue that is often painful to watch, especially in light of his successful and sophisticated career as a solo stage performer. Yet, when paired with Temple in the two dance numbers, his subservient role dissipates. The duo charmed their way into hearts across America so well that they were to repeat and build upon their relationship in another film released during the same year. Their next collaboration was to give Robinson a much more prominent role in regard to his relationship with Temple, as well as his status as a paternal and heroic figure.

## Uncle Billy Can Do Anything: *The Littlest Rebel*

*"There's no use going through life as if you were in a funeral procession. After all, there's a lot of fun in it, so why grump and grouse? Why not dance through life?"*

–Bill Robinson

Appearing in the same year as *The Little Colonel*, *The Littlest Rebel* was released in December of 1935 and shared striking similarities with the former. In each storyline, external or internal disorder threatens Temple's family structure, her mother is sincere but powerless, and her father is either absent or concerned with matters outside the family. In Robinson and Temple's second feature the plot centers around Virgie Cary (Temple) and her Confederate father, Captain Herbert Cary (John Boles), who escapes from Union troops with the help of a Yankee officer. He is eventually recaptured, imprisoned, and sentenced to death. In order to acquit him, Virgie and her servant, Uncle Billy (Robinson) travel to Washington D.C. with the intention of securing a pardon from President Lincoln. Robinson's Uncle Billy is more central to the plot here than Walker in *The Little Colonel*. He becomes the storyline's driving force, reuniting Virgie's parents before her mother's death, serving as her guardian during their travels to the North, and acting this time not as her dance teacher, as in the previous film, but as her dance *partner*. Additionally, he has the opportunity to perform his agency in a solo number during one of the film's opening scenes. The duo's tap sequences together are also more involved than they were in *The Little Colonel*, the longest taking place when Virgie and Uncle Billy dance in the street to raise money for their train fare to D.C. Their second feature film "cements the kinetic bonds between the older Black man and the young white girl," proving to be the most successful of their four collaborations (Snead 62).

Although the film heavily relies upon expanding Temple and Robinson's onscreen relationship, Robinson is also afforded a chance to showcase his abilities without the girl by his side. This example of his solo talent can be found in one of the film's earliest scenes, when Virgie entreats Uncle Billy to dance at her birthday party in the ballroom. She announces, "Listen everyone—listen! How would you like to see Uncle Billy dance?" The children cheer as Robinson takes to the floor with Jim Henry (Willie Best) accompanying him on the harmonica. A wide-angle shot from behind a large dining table shows Virgie's friends as they watch him perform. We, the viewers, observe the dance from the head of the table along with Virgie, positioning the scene from a white perspective. It is here, in his solo number that Robinson truly showcases his talent as a dancer, with the floor all his own. Even as Hollywood's Jim Crow imagery dominates the screen in close-up shots during his performance, zoomed in on his wide eyes, open mouth, and raised eyebrows, full-body shots reveal "coded subversions of those stereotypes" even as he embodies the minstrel trope of a content, Black man dancing for a white audience (Morrison 25). Bogle argues that filmmakers regularly incorporated this smiling minstrel mask into the role of a well-dressed house slave in order to convey the Uncle Tom figure's contentment, which "has always been used to indicate the Black man's satisfactions with the system and his place in it" (Bogle 8).

However, through his self-possessed body carriage and a virtuosic performance of sophisticated choreography, Robinson expertly performs his agency in spite of these restraints. Utilizing grace, precision, and elegance in his dancing as key strategies to embody and display empowered, Black masculinity, he subverts pervasive portrayals of Black powerlessness (Stearns and Stearns 291).

While she is no longer his dance partner, Virgie remains central to Robinson's solo performance. The spectator views the entirety of his routine through her eyes by virtue of the camera's placement. Additionally, Uncle Billy and Virgie maintain continuous eye contact throughout the performance; he grins broadly and teases her with a "shame on you" hand signal before she retaliates with another gesture (Figure 6). In fact, there are three separate similar interactions between the two characters throughout his routine. These intimate moments reinforce the interdependency of the pair; Uncle Billy's gaze appears to be directed solely at Virgie for the duration of the tap number as the guests fade into the background. The exchange of giggles, smiles, and gestures suggests that he is performing for her and no one else. In this, their second and most successful film, Temple and Robinson became much more than Hollywood's "first interracial couple." Instead, Virgie and Uncle Billy become two parts of the same unit as the film progresses. Their devotion to and unflinching trust in one another gradually manifest themselves as the plot unfolds (Snead 62). While the stark contrasts of race, age, and gender remain, the duo shares striking similarities in terms of wit, talent, resourcefulness, and even vulnerability.



Figure 6. Virgie playfully gestures to Uncle Billy during his solo performance in *The Littlest Rebel*, 1935

Immediately following Uncle Billy's performance, a messenger bearing news of the war interrupts the party, forcing the guests to leave. Virgie is confused as to what the man means when he announces the "war," and asks Uncle Billy to define it:

UNCLE BILLY: Well, a war is a lot of soldiers and battles where men kill each other with guns.

VIRGIE: Really and truly kill each other?

UNCLE BILLY: Yes mum.

VIRGIE: Why?

UNCLE BILLY: Seem like to me, honey, no one knows why. I hear a white gentleman said there's a man up North who wants to free the slaves.

VIRGIE: What does that mean, "free the slaves?"

UNCLE BILLY: I don't know what it means myself.

Even though Uncle Billy is the most intelligent and articulate of all the house servants, Ann duCille argues that his "ignorance of freedom is a narrative necessity" in this scene, affirming the dominant belief that devoted Black servants needed slavery to protect them from their own helplessness (duCille 22). Indeed, the servants are eager to help the Rebels who are fighting to keep them enslaved, and tremble in fear whenever Union troops invade the plantation. This response is a reproduction of the nineteenth century minstrel trope of slavery as a benign and civilizing institution that cared for simple and unsophisticated Black characters (24).

Despite his ignorance, Uncle Billy becomes a much more prominent figure here than Walker in *The Little Colonel*. As Virgie's closest friend and confidant, he also morphs into a surrogate father figure, at times taking on both parental roles while maintaining his duties as her slave. Additionally, he is the only other character in the film to enjoy the privilege of a personal audience with the president, nervously shaking hands with Abraham Lincoln in the film's final scene. He is also the only slave to be readily welcomed into both the Black and white family structures. Virgie's adoration for Uncle Billy is evident throughout the film, but in one particular scene, she plainly reveals her assurance in his abilities—the only time he is singled out as a hero. When her mother becomes deathly ill, Uncle Billy crosses dangerous Yankee lines in search of Virgie's father to tell him the news and bring him safely back to the plantation. As Virgie cares for her sick mother, she insists that her father will make everything right once Uncle Billy brings him back. Her mother gently tries to make her see reason:

MOTHER: We mustn't be too sure, darling. Then we won't be so disappointed if he doesn't get here. Perhaps Uncle Billy didn't get through the Yankee lines.

VIRGIE: Uncle Billy can do anything! He can sing, and dance, and climb trees, and do everything in the world! I know he can bring Daddy back.

Virgie is proven correct, and Uncle Billy soon returns safely with her father, at which point she exclaims, “Didn’t I tell you Uncle Billy would find him?”

Uncle Billy’s eventual role as Virgie’s father figure is foreshadowed midway through the film after her mother dies. During the funeral procession, Virgie walks hand in hand with her father, Uncle Billy at her other side, while a choir sings, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” reinforcing Virgie’s need for a guardian. Her father asks Uncle Billy to gather Virgie’s things before another Yankee patrol arrives. Uncle Billy is visibly shaken, and confronts the captain:

UNCLE BILLY: You mean you gonna take Miss Virgie with you, Massa Captain?

CARY: Yes.

UNCLE BILLY: Through the Yankee line?

CARY: I’ve got to get her to my sister in Richmond; she’ll be safe there.

UNCLE BILLY: But Captain, it’s dangerous—you can’t do it sir!

We are not allowed to see the conversation unfold, unfortunately, as it is abruptly cut short when Virgie notices a group of Union soldiers in the woods. She cries, “Yankees, Daddy!” before everyone scatters to their respective cabins. But Uncle Billy’s brief confrontation with his master serves to remind viewers of his strong desire to protect the little girl he regards as family. The captain’s plan to flee with his daughter never comes to fruition—he is captured once again by the Yankees.

Similarly, Virgie is established early on as a member of both the Black and white family structures, and “borrows” blackness much like Lloyd in *The Little Colonel*. In the most blatant example, Union troops invade the plantation and Virgie hides with Black children in a small storeroom. When the soldiers search the house and eventually discover the children, one of whom is Virgie, we see her face has been blackened with shoe polish (Figure 7). Uncle Billy’s eyes widen in shock upon seeing her disguise, as she firmly shakes her head as if to say, “Don’t mention it.” The scene’s purpose appears to be for comic relief in an otherwise serious turn of events, and provides the most concrete example of Temple’s character borrowing a Black identity. Yet, even though she is briefly identified with her Black counterparts, Virgie never loses her white privilege. One example of the double-valence of the film’s imagery occurs when the blackfaced Virgie grabs a Yankee sergeant’s leg and pushes him to the floor after he orders her to remove his boots. This is a violently punishable act for a Black child, and the man chases her through the house yelling, “Come here, you little black rascal!” Upon catching her he inadvertently wipes some of the shoe polish from her cheek, revealing porcelain skin. Realizing she is white, he stammers, “I would never hurt a little girl like you,” implying that her whiteness has saved her from a proper beating.



Figure 7. Virgie blacks up with shoe polish as a disguise in *The Littlest Rebel*, 1935

Viewers witness Virgie and Uncle Billy's close relationship early on in the film, but we do not see the two of them dance together until halfway through the story. In fact, their first number is not at all for fun, but used instead as a tactic to stall Yankee troops as her father hides in the loft of a cabin. As they see the soldiers approaching, Uncle Billy and Virgie launch into what appears to be a pre-rehearsed dance number with synchronized steps (Figure 8). Unlike their performance in *The Little Colonel*, here Virgie is not watching Uncle Billy and then imitating his step combinations. She already knows the routine, and executes it with precision, suggesting that she and Uncle Billy have been practicing together.





Figure 8. Virgie and Uncle Billy dance to distract Yankee soldiers from her father's hideout in *The Littlest Rebel*, 1935

The pair's second dance number occurs after Virgie's father has been captured by the Yankees. She and Uncle Billy hatch a plan to save him by obtaining a pardon from President Lincoln, but realize they have no funds for a train fare. To raise money they decide to dance in the street outside the railway station, and a small crowd soon gathers to watch. Once again, this dance number is clearly one in which they've rehearsed, and is more technical than the ruse pulled in the cabin. Without any music, Virgie and Uncle Billy take turns singing and providing trumpet sounds with their voices, reminding audiences of their first staircase dance (Figure 9). The fact that the pair performs in the street, which is where tap dance developed, strengthens interpretations of the scene as a cinematic celebration of African American vernacular expression. The sequence provides a showcase for street life art forms, and is an affirmation that these cultural creations are worthy of significant artistic attention (Snead 65).



Figure 9. Virgie and Uncle Billy dance to raise funds for a train fare to Washington D.C. in *The Littlest Rebel*, 1935

More so than in any other film with Temple, Robinson's embodiment of Uncle Billy was most central to the plot in *The Littlest Rebel*. Providing a reassuring framework for the storyline, he maintains his level-headedness when other characters lose theirs. He patiently listens to Virgie's troubles, sympathizes with her, and makes the decision to help save her father from hanging, something which no other character in the film is capable of doing. While the other slaves are helpless victims of their circumstances, Uncle Billy is articulate, confident, congenial, and consistently reliable. Following the film's release, mainstream reviews praised Robinson as Temple's costar, often emphasizing their pairing even to the exclusion of her white male costars. The *Boston Transcript* noted: "When Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson team up, they work a heel and toe magic that is unsurpassed by any of their contemporaries" (Vered 55). A review in the *Herald Tribune* praised Temple's dancing: "the child star is as good a partner for the great Bill Robinson as Miss Rogers is for Mr. Astaire"

(57). And from *The New York Times*: “As Uncle Billy, the faithful family butler, Bill Robinson is excellent and some of the best moments are those in which he breaks into song and dance with Mistress Temple” (50).

Aside from his relationship with Temple’s characters, Robinson’s performance of Black masculinity draws from his vaudeville act. Both on stage—in a setting where he held artistic agency over his presentation—and in his films with Temple, he fosters a sense of community with the audience by calling attention to his blackness (Morrison 28). Although many films depicted his race as an element of mental and social inferiority, his established agency on the vaudeville stage allowed an empowered performance of race and a clever subversion of the audience’s expectations. Even as Hollywood used its new sound technology to combine tap dance with depictions of Black subservience, Robinson exerts a level of control and sophistication that allows him to perform his agency despite the minstrelsy trope. Robinson’s performances with Temple have facilitated an array of interpretations. On the surface, his role as the jovial, enslaved Uncle Tom appears to render him incapable of escaping the fixed representational framework of each film. However, his “self-referentiality and subversive play enable him to create a cinematic performance that breaks from the film’s plot and works against its depredations” (Durkin 239). Viewers are then forced to acknowledge Robinson’s supreme talent as a dancer, as well as his position as the scene’s star. This self-reflexive artistry coerces the viewer into confronting the individual behind the performance mask. Although rooted in racist iconography, he paradoxically challenges its ability to undermine and confine his cinematic persona. Each scene can be read simultaneously as “subservience to a firmly dictated racial boundary” and as a creative subversion within it (241). Indeed, in most sequences with Temple, Robinson’s expertise reveals how a role that was meant to be expendable is often *superior* to the rest of the film.

Following the resounding success of *The Little Colonel*, Fox studio executives quickly commissioned another film to be released in the same year featuring both stars, this time with Robinson front and center. As Temple’s confidant, surrogate father figure, and dance partner, Robinson subverts the racist tendencies of the film by performing his agency through each tap number, and his close relationship with Temple’s character, as well as Temple’s appropriation of a Black identity, serve to merge the two Black and white family structures. Robinson’s status as a heroic figure also adds to the subversion of the racist 1930s context. He not only crosses treacherous Yankee lines to warn Virgie’s father of her mother’s illness, but is also the sole reason her father receives a pardon from President Lincoln, raising funds for and chaperoning Virgie on the trip to D.C. Regrettably, Robinson’s role as Uncle Billy was to be his most prominent in the four films in which he starred with Temple, and although the next two installments were set in the North instead of the antebellum South, his contributions were considerably diminished.

## If I Had One Wish to Make

*“By the way, Mr. President, I see you got some kind of New Deal going. Just remember, Mr. President, when you shuffle those cards, just don’t overlook those spades”*

-Bill Robinson

The final Temple/Robinson collaborations, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and *Just Around the Corner* were released in the same year (1938) much like their predecessors, but take place in Northern settings and in present day. While the earlier films safely isolated their characters in the mythical antebellum South, in order to maintain credibility, the Northern films had to be contemporary. Big band music replaced the Southern harmonica and banjo, and in these later installments the studio worked to include the by now mandatory Robinson without detailing the oppression Black citizens faced in Northern states. In *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* Robinson plays farmhand Aloysius, an employee of Temple’s neighbor, and in *Just Around the Corner* he plays Corporal Jones, a kindly but ignorant doorman who manages to shirk his duties for a few entertaining tap numbers. In each story Robinson’s characters only appear in a few select scenes with Temple, his inclusion in the films serving as a sort of fan service to audiences who had come to expect tap performances. His waning presence onscreen directly correlated with the stars’ working relationship, which came to an end after the release of *Just Around the Corner*. Yet, despite these less prominent roles, each of his performances embody a dialectical interplay of cultural imagery that facilitate complex, and at times contradictory interpretations.

In *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, Temple plays Rebecca Winstead, an urban girl in the care of a sleazy stepfather who tries to exploit her singing talent for his own financial gains. After entering her into a radio contest in hopes of being crowned, “Little Miss America” by the Crackly Grain Flakes cereal brand, a misunderstanding causes Rebecca to lose out on the gig. Now useless to him, her stepfather sends her to live in the country with her Aunt Miranda (Helen Westley). Once there, Rebecca meets Aloysius, a kindly farmhand employed by Aunt Miranda’s neighbor, Tony Kent, who happens to be in charge of the Crackly Grain Flakes campaign. Aloysius’ inclusion in the overall storyline is limited at best, with his only real contributions consisting of helping Rebecca escape out of a window, teaching her a few dance steps while singing and picking blueberries, and rescuing his employer after he falls into a well. However, even with such limited screen time, Robinson manages to shine during the scenes in which he is included.

Rebecca first meets Aloysius when her cousin Gwen introduces them, asking him to “give Rebecca a pail and show her how to pick berries.” He replies, “Yes, ma’am, it’s a pleasure!” before the two make their way over to the berry bushes (Figure 10). His method for teaching Rebecca turns out to be tapping in rhythm while picking the fruit as he quips, “Now, honey you just watch me!”



Figure 10. Robinson and Temple perform “Old Straw Hat” in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, 1938

The number becomes a solo for Rebecca, as she sings to the upbeat tune of “Old Straw Hat.” Aloysius looks on with pride, but does not join in the singing—he only mirrors her gestures. The scene functions similarly to Robinson’s solo tap number in *The Littlest Rebel*, when Virgie watches Uncle Billy perform as the two share knowing looks. In this instance, the roles are reversed as Aloysius allows Rebecca her turn in the spotlight. The song’s lyrics are also notable, directly correlating with Aloysius and Rebecca’s costumes. Rebecca sings about her fondness for country life, although she was a city girl just days earlier. The song highlights her desire to stay on the farm with her extended family, and to dress exactly as her new farmhand friend. Temple has once again “borrowed” a part of Robinson’s identity, this time in the form of attire:

*If I had one wish to make  
This is the wish I would choose  
I'd want an old straw hat  
A suit of overalls  
And a worn-out pair of shoes  
You just let me roam around  
Laughing at big city blues  
With an old straw hat  
A suit of overalls  
And a worn-out pair of shoes*

Going forward, Rebecca and Aloysius only interact briefly in a few select scenes. After Aunt Miranda has forbidden her to sing on the radio via telephone hookup, Aloysius helps Rebecca escape out of a second story window late at night in order to defy her aunt and perform next door. The scene is a fleeting one—Rebecca climbs down a tall ladder to the waiting Aloysius, grabbing ahold of his hand as he says, “Come on, honey we got to hurry—program is half over now!” Later, when Rebecca’s stepfather returns and demands to regain custody after discovering she has become a radio star, Rebecca bids Aloysius a tearful goodbye on the front porch:

REBECCA: Goodbye, Aloysius. I’m going away.

ALOYSIUS: Goodbye, Miss Rebecca. I sure hate to see you go.

REBECCA: Oh, I’ll be back!

ALOYSIUS: Sure you will, honey. And don’t forget this! (taps their combination from “Old Straw Hat”)

REBECCA: I won’t! (repeats the steps)

Even as the film’s most minor character, Aloysius is notably the only person to appear with Rebecca in the film’s final scene. The pair performs another tap number together after she has found fame, suggesting that his relationship with the girl was not so minor after all.

During the scene, after Rebecca has been discovered for her talent and signed to the radio station, she performs a song and dance number with Aloysius on stage as she sings “Toy Trumpet.” The background dancers imitate toy soldiers, with Aloysius as their leader, and it is significant that he is placed in charge of an otherwise all-white company of men, his uniform plainly marking him as the authority figure (Figure 11). Rebecca confirms this throughout the song:

*Have you heard, have you heard?*

*There’s a new tooter in with the tin pan parade*

*Come along, come along*

*If you’re soon enough you’ll hear him do his stuff*

*Here they are, there’s the leader passing by*

*Ain’t he grand? He’s the star*

*He’s the leader of the band*



Figure 11. Aloysius and Rebecca perform a final tap number in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, 1938

Touching on class antagonisms in Northern states, *Just Around the Corner* was released in November of 1938 and was to be the last collaboration between Robinson and Temple. The story revolves around Penny (Temple), the daughter of a failed architect turned handyman who lives in an upscale hotel in New York City. Penny and her father reside in the basement apartment, and are an integral part of the working class family structure within the hotel: maids, their children, the chauffeur, and the doorman, Corporal Jones (Robinson). Penny soon befriends the nephew of a rich banker who has moved into the penthouse suite, but when she's invited to his apartment from downstairs, his mother and the other wealthy children shun her upon learning of her background. Later, when Penny's father tells her that the fictional "Uncle Sam" needs help, she misunderstands him to mean the wealthy banker and organizes a benefit to raise money for him, gathering all of the working class children to help put on a show in the hotel.

Three tap numbers in the film are of particular importance. The first is when Corporal Jones explosively dances down the hotel's winding staircase to join Penny in a song and dance routine. Penny and one of the hotel maids, Kitty, are playfully singing and dancing to a simple rendition of "Anyone Can Sing This Song," while the chauffeur accompanies them on saxophone. Abruptly, the saxophone is replaced with a flurry of big band music as Corporal Jones catapults down the stairs. He bounds into the all-white group and begins dancing in the circle, making it clear that "his feet and his musicianship are his admission ticket" (Snead 65). It is soon obvious that he and Penny have become the main attraction, as the white characters step aside to watch. Another Temple/Robinson tap duet commences, one that is the most complex of all their routines—Temple is now three years older and a seasoned performer, and it shows in her more complicated steps (Figure 12). Corporal Jones' confidence and commanding presence "seems to alter and even warp the tight ideological nets cast around him," as he freely performs with no inhibitions (65).





Figure 12: Penny and Corporal Jones dance in the hotel lobby in *Just Around the Corner*, 1938

As is the case with all Temple/Robinson films, Corporal Jones and the other Black characters cannot escape being subjected to racist stereotypes. One of the most concrete examples of his lack of education comes to light during a conversation with Penny in which she inquires as to the location of Borneo (Figure 13). Corporal Jones is clueless, but attempts to conceal his ignorance:

PENNY: Corporal, where's Borneo?

CORPORAL JONES: Uh, Borneo? Borneo. Oh! He's moved up in Harlem.

PENNY: Borneo isn't a man; it's a place! Where is it?

CORPORAL JONES: Borneo...oh sure! That's where that big light come from in the sky. Nights. The..."Roara..Borinellis!" Everybody's heard of that.

Realizing that Penny has bought his fib, he continues to explain that Borneo is “way up north near the North Pole,” describing frigid conditions with polar bears and Eskimos. The joke is on him however, since the opposite is true.



Figure 13. Corporal Jones pretends to know the location of Borneo in *Just Around the Corner*, 1938

The bulk of the film’s musical numbers take place during the final act at the benefit for “Uncle Sam,” in which Corporal Jones performs a second tap number without Penny. He has enlisted a group of Black doormen from across the city to join him in a tap dance accompanied by the song, “Brass Buttons and Epauettes.” A chorus line of Black men dance in perfect unison as Corporal Jones performs, with the striking addition of a series of close-ups on each man’s face. Although the shots are included in order to highlight the hotel each man represents (Waldorf Astoria, Biltmore, Roxy), this convention is “similar to those from Busby Berkeley musicals in which long shots of decoratively assembled white women are intercut with close-ups of their faces” (Hatch 93). Even more striking would have been if the studio had not cut out the original lyrics to the song: “Put a handsome darky underneath your marquee and see all the play he gets” (93). The nine men dancing in a style chiefly developed for sexualizing the female body is rendered innocent by the fact that they are performing for an audience of white children, thereby taking on the devalued status of femininity without its accompanying sexuality (94). The final performance in the film, as well as the last time

Robinson and Temple were to dance together onscreen occurs at the end of the benefit while Penny sings “Walk in the Rain” (Figure 14). As she flits across the stage in a raincoat, she encounters Corporal Jones, whose attire is strikingly similar to that of Aloysius in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, a straw hat and overalls. Together the two characters playfully sit and pick cotton, reverting to the Southern paradigms of their earlier films and momentarily discarding their Northern personas.



Figure 14. Temple and Robinson pose for a production still from their final tap number in *Just Around the Corner*, 1938

Robinson/Temple performances highlight a notable comparison with Homi Bhaba’s notion of the ambivalence of mimicry in his 1984 essay, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.” Bhaba asserts that colonialism results in “*trompe-l’oeil*, irony, mimicry and repetition” (130). As colonialism produces these results, mimicry “emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (130). But while illustrating the powerful nature of colonial mimicry, Bhaba leaves it ambiguous as to whom it gives power, and in doing so suggests that the colonized may, in fact, be able to subvert the colonizer. This becomes clearer when he asserts that when placed between “the demand for identity, stasis” and “change, difference—mimicry

represents an ironic compromise" (125). Although Robinson accepted demeaning Uncle Tom roles, his sophistication and artistry allowed him to subvert his "colonizers;" in this case, Fox Studios and the racist context of the 1930s. As he embodies each stereotypical role, the absurdity of such a sophisticated performer relegated to ignorance and subservience becomes clear. Bhaba argues that colonial mimicry is "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (133). The colonizer hopes to improve the Other and to make him like himself, but in a way that still maintains a clear sense of difference. In that sense, the Other becomes "almost the same" as the colonizer, but never quite fits in with the hegemonic cultural and political systems that govern both of them (133). Bhaba argues that for colonial mimicry to work, it must continue to express its difference, which he terms "ambivalence." Ultimately, because mimicry requires this "slippage" to function, it gives power not only to the colonizer, but becomes the subversive tool of the colonized (133).

In an interesting twist Temple often becomes the one who mimics her Black counterpart, a subject traditionally colonized by white men. As stated in previous chapters, examples of her mimicry include the staircase/stable dance numbers and baptismal ritual imitation in *The Little Colonel*, blacking up physically with shoe polish and mud in *The Littlest Rebel*, and assuming Robinson's same style of dress in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. While Snead's assertion that Temple's borrowing of blackness actually serves to converge that blackness with the state of being a child, it also complements Robinson's own performance of his agency—her desire to emulate him is not only due to a childlike fantasy, but to the fact that she idolizes him. Thus, in order to succeed in subverting the racist constraints of their films, both Temple and Robinson must engage in their own forms of mimicry: Robinson simultaneously embraces and subverts each Uncle Tom role while Temple appropriates his blackness again and again, emulating the only true father figure to emerge from her films.

*Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and *Just Around the Corner* were Temple and Robinson's final films together. After the resounding success of their first features set in the antebellum South, these installments worked to remain contemporary by being set in Northern cities in the present day. Unlike his more prominent roles in the Southern films, Robinson's characters were pushed much further to the margins in the last two films, his inclusion appearing to be for audience satisfaction. Yet, even without an abundance of screen time Robinson manages to perform his agency, causing the viewer to feel as though he has been a major player off screen. While he does not embody a paternal role in either film, the previously established rapport between the two stars served to validate their close bond in later features.

## Conclusion

Arguably the most successful Hollywood star to emerge from the Great Depression, Shirley Temple was paired with nationally acclaimed tap dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson in four feature films with Twentieth Century Fox from 1935 to 1938. Together they starred in *The Little Colonel* and *The Littlest Rebel* in 1935 and in *Just Around the Corner* and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* in 1938. The former films were set in the antebellum South, while the latter two transitioned to Northern settings in present day. Audiences applauded the onscreen chemistry between the interracial couple as they held hands while executing delightful tap numbers on screen. Robinson’s firm placement in Uncle Tom roles quelled any concerns about interracial mixing, but the stars were able to subvert the racist tendencies inherent in each film, their close bond off screen merging with their onscreen personas. Temple proudly states in her autobiography that they were the first interracial couple to dance in Hollywood, and what might have been a large risk for the studio turned into cinematic gold (Temple Black 88).

Indeed, audiences enjoyed their pairing so much that Robinson/Temple dance numbers were included in all four films, many of which have been remembered for their inventiveness even today. Throughout this dissertation I have examined the complex relationship between Robinson and Temple during their successful run at the box office during the 1930s. Exploring the historical and political context surrounding the films as well as the texts themselves, I have analyzed each film through a lens of race, ultimately contending that the pair succeeded in transcending racial boundaries despite the overtly racist nature of the films. I have argued that Robinson and Temple subverted these racist tendencies chiefly through their tap routines, obvious affection for one another, and the performance of their agency. While Robinson’s sophistication on the stage was well-known to Black audiences, his association with Temple onscreen boosted his agency for skeptical white audiences. Temple’s emulation of his blackness also served to validate his role as a paternal and heroic figure.

In order to more accurately examine the complex relationship between Temple and Robinson, I organized the case study from a chronological standpoint, separating my analysis of their relationship into four sections, exploring the beginning, middle, and end of their time as an onscreen duo. I briefly discussed the background of each performer along with their rises to fame before coming together as costars. Once paired, Robinson acted as Temple’s choreographer and mentor, and publicly boasted of her accomplishments as his apprentice. They affectionately called one another “Uncle Billy” and “Darlin” throughout their partnership, and in her autobiography Temple insists that Robinson was her favorite costar. Additionally, I explored the historical and political context surrounding 1930s Hollywood, a time of extensive racism across the US. Depression-era films regularly disparaged Black characters, with actors being cast predominantly as servants and slaves happy to be in the care of a white master. Such a romantic vision of the antebellum South became a common theme in 1930s Hollywood, allowing filmgoers a fantasy in the midst of a crumbling economy. Most genres during this decade strived to divert attention from the reality of the Great Depression, invoking nostalgia for a time and place that held more happiness and security for white audiences. Portrayals of subservient Black characters assured white

viewers that a more stable social order had once existed, and they were comforted by the display of wealthy households filled with characters who faced no economic hardship, as well as a dependable and working racial hierarchy that left everyone pleased and kept society running.

Clearly manifested in each of Temple and Robinson's films together, this common thread of racism in cinema did not escape the roles in which Robinson was cast. He plays a servant, slave, farmhand, and doorman in each film, with his characters remaining the quintessential Uncle Tom figure. Always situated firmly beneath Temple in terms of social standing, Robinson never held authority over her, despite being 40 years her senior. However, Robinson's characters often took on a paternal role following the disruption of Temple's family structure, each time doing so with a sunny disposition, bright smile, and the implementation of tap to lift her (and the viewers') spirits and bring enthusiasm to an otherwise depressing turn of events.

Next, I utilized textual analysis to examine *The Little Colonel*, and discussed the pair's initial and most famous staircase tap number, as well as Temple's relationship with Robinson as her servant. The third section focused on *The Littlest Rebel*, Temple and Robinson's second film together, as well as their most successful. These early films were both released in 1935 and harbored distinct similarities. In each story, Temple plays a wealthy, privileged daughter of Confederate fathers who are rarely present, and she is accompanied by Robinson, her servant or slave, who fills in for her father. The films take place on Southern plantations populated with Black servants or slaves in a proposed idyllic environment. In these sections I also discussed how Temple and Robinson were able to merge both the Black and white worlds—she traverses seamlessly through the Black and white family structures while Robinson often embodies the heroic persona normally reserved for white male protagonists. Temple's relationship and interactions with Black children are also of considerable importance, and I examined how she spends her free time with them in *The Little Colonel*, reenacting a baptismal ceremony in the river. I also explored how Temple borrows aspects of the Black characters' identities in both films, through the emulation of Robinson's dance steps as well as his facial expressions and manner of speaking, even physically blacking up with shoe polish as a disguise in *The Littlest Rebel*. She also wades into the mud with her Black cinematic playmates as they make mud pies in *The Little Colonel*, her arms and face covered in grime, as she confronts her angry grandfather with a dual identity. In both films, Temple moves between the Black and white worlds with ease, while the Black and white adults remain firmly rooted in their respective cultures. Despite blatant displays of racism in both films, Temple's desire to emulate her Black counterparts, especially Robinson, along with his clever subversion through their tap numbers helps push against the racist tendencies of each film.

Finally, I discussed Temple and Robinson's final two film collaborations, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and *Just Around the Corner*. Robinson plays farmhand, Aloysius and doorman, Corporal Jones, and his characters remain subservient to Temple in spite of the Northern, present day setting. Additionally, his characters are pushed much farther to the margins than in the earlier films and enjoy much less screen time. Robinson's presence in these last installments appears to be for audience satisfaction and the occasional tap number, but he continues to perform his agency during each dance routine. I then briefly touched on the comparison between Temple and Robinson's relationship and Homi Bhaba's notion of the ambivalence of mimicry, suggesting that Robinson's acute artistry allowed him to

“subvert the colonizers,” in this case, the film studios. Ultimately, I have unpacked the contradictory nature of the Temple and Robinson relationship, arguing that in spite of strong racist elements in each of their films, as well as the racist climate of the 1930s, their tap numbers, onscreen chemistry, and merging of the Black and white family structures helped them succeed in overcoming racial barriers. Though Robinson’s roles were unvaried, simplistic, and relegated to racial stereotypes, he expertly performed his agency through the tap art form, subverting the racism of the decade in each immaculate performance. As Temple emulated the veteran’s dance steps, she validated his status as a heroic figure. Hand in hand, they tapped their way through prejudice.

## Filmography

*The Little Colonel*. Dir. David Butler. Perf. Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson. 20th Century Fox, 1935. DVD.

*The Littlest Rebel*. Dir. David Butler. Perf. Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson. 20th Century Fox, 1935. DVD.

*Just Around the Corner*. Dir. Irving Cummings. Perf. Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson. 20th Century Fox, 1938. DVD.

*Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. Dir. Allan Dwan. Perf. Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson. 20th Century Fox, 1938. DVD.

## Works Cited

Berry, Tommye. "Kansas City Likes the Film, "Hooray for Love."" *The Chicago Defender* 17 Aug. 1935. Print.

Bhaba, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October* 28 (1984): 125-133. *JSTOR*. Web. 5 September 2015

Black, Shirley Temple. *Child Star: An Autobiography*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1988. Print.

Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. 3rd. Oxford: Roundhouse, 1994. Print.

Cripps, Thomas. "The Myth of the Southern Box Office: A Factor in Racial Stereotyping in American Movies, 1920-1940." *The Black Experience in America: Selected Essays*. Ed. James C. Curtis and Lewis L. Gould. N.p.: Austin University of Texas Press, 1970. 116-44. Print.

duCille, Ann. "The Shirley Temple of My Familiar." *Transition* 73 (1997): 10-32. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 July 2015.

Durkin, Hannah. "'It's all the way you look at it, you know': reading Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson's film career." *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 10.2 (2012): 230-45. Print.

Edwards, Anne. *Shirley Temple American Princess*. Cornwall: T.J. Press, 1988. Print. Griffin, Sean. *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*. New York: Palgrave, 2000. Print.



- Haskins, Jim, and N.R. Mitgang. *Mr. Bojangles: The Biography of Bill Robinson*. New York: William Morrow, 1988. Print.
- Hatch, Kristen. "Immaculate Amalgamation: Bill Robinson and Shirley Temple." *Shirley Temple and the Performance of Girlhood*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015. 78-104. Print.
- Kasson, John F. *The Little Girl Who Fought the Great Depression: Shirley Temple and 1930s America*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014. Print.
- Knight, Arthur. *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. Print.
- Leab, Daniel J. *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1975. Print.
- Long, Richard A. *The Black Tradition in American Dance*. New York: Rizzoli, 1989.
- Lury, Karen. *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairytales*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010. Print.
- Malone, Jacqui. *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996. Print.
- Morrison, Margaret. "Tap and Teeth: Virtuosity and the Smile in the Films of Bill Robinson and Eleanor Powell." *Dance Research Journal* 46.2 (2014): 21-30. Print.
- Vered, Karen Orr. "White and Black in Black and White: Management of Race and Sexuality in the Coupling of Child-Star Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson." *The Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal of Film and Television* 39 (1997): 52- 65. Print.
- Ostendorf, Berndt. *Black Literature in White America*. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982. Print.
- Pines, Jim. *Blacks in Films*. London: Cassell & Collier Macmillan, 1975. Print.
- Silk, Catherine, and John Silk. *Racism and Anti-Racism in American Popular Culture: Portrayals of African Americans in Fiction and Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990. Print.
- Snead, James. *White Screens Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Stearns, Marshall, and Jean Stearns. *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1968. Print.
- Wallace, Maurice O. *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. Print.

Wallace, Michele. "Race, Gender and Psychoanalysis in Forties Film: Lost Boundaries, Home of the Brave and The Quiet One." *Black American Cinema*. Ed. Manthia Diawara. New York: Routledge, 1993. 257-71. Print.