Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 4 (53) No.2. - 2011 • Series IV
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

MUFFLED VOICES IN ANIMATION. GENDER ROLES AND BLACK STEREOTYPES IN WARNER BROS. CARTOONS: FROM HONEY TO BABS BUNNY

Xavier FUSTER BURGUERA[1]

Abstract: *This essay will use a Tiny Toons episode, "Fields of Honey", as an excuse to survey stereotypical female and racial roles depicted in the most representative cartoons of the 20th century. It is particularly relevant to go back to a 1990s cartoon series since, in that decade, Western animation was undergoing crucial changes in its conception which would determine significantly the upcoming animated instalments of the new millennium. Moreover, contemporary cartoonists are now those grown-up children that watched the earlier American cartoons whose allegedly unconscious female discrimination and "innocent" racism might somehow have been fossilised among its audience and become thus perpetuated in the culture and imaginary of the globalised world. Finally, it is also important to be acquainted with the contents of cartoons understood as children's products, especially in a period where television is taking over most of the parental duties and guidance in children's development into adulthood.*

Key words: *popular culture, media and animation studies, gender roles, black stereotypes, Warner Bros., Tiny Toons.*

1. Introduction: All this and rabbit stew

Cartoons were born at the beginning of the 20th century, thanks to the technological revolution that was changing the face of the world in that period. Although the first experiments in image motion took place in Europe, the United States of America would soon take the lead in animation production, especially after the closure of the First World War, to such an extent that nowadays the States are the main worldwide provider of cartoons, feebly challenged by the Japanese industry.

Animation, as well as real-image featurettes, became an extension of the theatrical ritual. Cartoons started to be projected before a theatrical performance or as interludial pieces as soon as 1911. When some theatres specialised in film projections, owners ordered and bought cartoons in order to place them before longer features to please the children of their potential familiar audiences. But in this early period, animation did not have an expression truly adapted to this new medium and they were perceived as

[1] Universitat de les Illes Balears, Palma.

BDD-A20151 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:09 UTC)

recorded and thus fixed Broadway, cabaret or vaudeville performances. While cartoon producers were looking for a genuine way of expression, they created short features that closely resembled a quaint vaudeville act, taking advantage of the great plasticity of the animated medium. US vaudeville had many features that could help to create a product that entertained children: reliance on slapstick comedy, fast pacing, weak plots in favour of the action, visual impact, stock characters and a pivotal dependence on music. Often, the very settings of these early cartoons were vaudevillian theatres, cabarets or nightclubs with their diegetic audiences, thus generating a highly metafictional medium (Sartin 1998: 70-79).

Until the arrival of television in US homes, cartoons governed in theatres in a period known as the golden age of animation. Walt Disney was the first animator to success in the short animation arena by setting a philosophy of pleasant aesthetics, appealing sentimentalism and neutral ideology for cartoon production; a formula that worked particularly well in feature-length releases with the adoption of rotoscopy.[i] After a period of "Disneyfication", Warner Bros. shorts gradually pushed Disney's hegemony in animation exclusively to the feature-length domain, thanks to entities such as Leon Schlesinger, Harman-Ising Productions, Friz Freleng, Tex Avery, Chuck Jones or Charlie Thornson. Indeed, Warner Bros. earlier cartoons blatantly imitated a good deal of material, strategies and formats used productively by Disney and the initial attempts to create a cast of regular characters derived into, now forgotten, parodies of Disney's protagonists (Bosko, Honey, Foxy, Piggy, Goopy Geer, Sniffles the Mouse or Inki). Crawling out from Disney's precepts in animation, Warner Bros. cartoons developed their particular style through the 30s, 40s and 50s, employing frantic pacing, extreme body postures, senseless physical laws and charismatic performances (Maltin 1987: 234). In these decades Warner Bros. would swell the casts of their shorts series – *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies*– with names that still remain well known, while other recent creations had already fallen into oblivion: Porky Pig, Daffy Sheldon Duck, Bugs Bunny, Elmer J. Fudd, Tweety Pie, Sylvester J. Pussycat, Yosemite Sam or Pepé Le Pew, among many others. The plots of most of the shorts went from the vaudevillian and musical numbers to the chase formula, which employed more violence in these cartoons than in the ones by Disney. In this subversive way, Warner Bros. took the reins of the short theatrical animation.

The television meant a new platform for cartoon experimentation and improvement, but it ultimately enabled an increasingly wider audience to enjoy animation. Hanna-Barbera revealed itself to be the most successful company in broadcast animation when adapted the cheaper "limited animation" of the UPA to produce cartoons whose length could fulfil a thirty minutes timeslot in the television schedules (advertisements included). Moreover, by strategically mixing features of different genres (Hilton-Morrow & McMahan 2003: 75-77), Hanna-Barbera created the first animated sitcom to be aired in primetime and to appeal to the adult sector of the audiences, *The Flintstones* (1960-1966). Although adult-oriented animation did not really take off until the 90s, *The Flintstones* allowed animation to move into the realm of television series, with 20/30-minute-long episodes –instead of the usual six-minute-average theatrical shorts. All this animation, but for very few exceptions, remained in the television timeslot intended for children: weekday afternoons and Saturday mornings.

BDD-A20151 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:09 UTC)

While Disney animation effortlessly governed, and reinvented itself, in playschool materials and the feature-length realm –hardly challenged by independent or foreign animation–, the 60s ended with the Warner Bros. cartoons prosperity. The original *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* production team was in one way or another dismantled. While anthologised shorts –with little new bridging footage– had a moderated success on primetime television at the beginning of the 60s (*The Bugs Bunny Show*), the new theatrical releases –with notably low budgets– lacked most of the freshness, dynamics and funniness that characterised the old Warner Bros. shorts and they are still widely seen as the worst animated production of the company. The Warner Bros. animation division was about to close its doors definitely in the late 70s, but Chuck Jones managed to keep it alive through the 80s and the early 90s with random specials for TV, home video and cinema and some theatrical shorts (Maltin 1987: 274-280).

Fortunately, Steven Spielberg was interested in these new Warner Bros. releases and joined the studios to energize their cartoons (Neuwirth 2003: 125) and thus start its silver age. From this interest, we get the epic Disney-Amblin Entertainment collaboration *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), which instilled the Warner Bros. animation studios with some liveliness. Spielberg had been in the cartoon business for some time, producing two features that could have challenged Disney's hegemony in the late 80s: *An American Tail* (1986) and *The Land before Time* (1988). Therefore, it was quite a wise move to turn Steven Spielberg into the executive producer of the television cartoons that opened the last decade of the second millennium: *Steven Spielberg Presents Tiny Toon Adventures* (1990-1992), *Steven Spielberg Presents Animaniacs* (1993-1995), its spin-off *Pinky and the Brain* (1995-2001) and *Steven Spilberg presents Freakazoid!* (1995-1997). Thus, Spielberg forced the renaissance of the Warner Bros. cartoons for television, which practically specialized in kindergarten and teen audiences: *Taz-mania* (1991-1995), *The Sylvester and Tweety Mysteries* (1995-2001), *Baby Looney Tunes* (2002-2005), *Loonatics Unleashed* (2005-2007), *The Looney Tunes Show* (2011-), some adaptations of DC Comics characters (such as Batman and Superman) or the appropriations and revivals of Scooby-Doo, Tom and Jerry or Jonny Quest series (Simensky 1998: 176). Randomly, Warner Bros. produced some shorts for cinema, but it did not succeed in the realm of length-feature animation except for the emblematic *Space Jam* (1996) and *Looney Tunes: Back in Action* (2003). In this last point, Warner Bros. has to make do with co-producing some computer-animated films or distributing some feature *animes*.

2. *Tiny Toon Adventures*: Welcome to the nineties!

Steven Spielberg Presents Tiny Toon Adventures (henceforth *Tiny Toons*) is not a compulsory title for the history of animation in general, but it is for that of Warner Bros. in particular. Indeed, Fox's Christmas 1989 release of primetime *The Simpsons* would remain as the most important cartoon in the evolution of Western animation. *The Simpsons* would spearhead the creation of animation for adults and would establish it in the North-Americtan primetime, by now, permanently.

Unlike *The Simpsons*, *Tiny Toons* was not especially ground breaking. *Tiny Toons* clearly aimed at children, far clearer than the original *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie*

BDD-A20151 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:09 UTC)

Melodies. Its premise followed one of the most popular trends in cartoon production of the 80s: the Tiny Toons are teen versions of the aforementioned classical *Looney Tunes* characters but had no relation to them –unlike *Jim Henson's Muppet Babies* (1984-1991), *The Flintstones Kids* (1986-1988) or *A Pup Named Scooby-Doo* (1988-1991), which featured the younger eponymous characters of their respective series. The Tiny Toons, as the show's opening song states, attend the Looniversity, where they "earn [their] toon degree", and whose "teaching staff's been getting laughs since 1933". This teaching staff is composed of, predictably, Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Porky Pig and all their *Looney Tunes* cohort. Finally, although the pilot episode was aired in primetime, the rest of the series was broadcasted in either weekday afternoons or weekend mornings. The most notable aspect surrounding the production of *Tiny Toons* may well be that the production team set up an alliance with seven other animation houses in order to have 65 episodes premiered for the first season, almost five episodes per week. All in all *Tiny Toon Adventures* was composed of three seasons containing 98 episodes, plus two specials released in 1994 and 1995 and a direct-to-video movie (1992).

The premise of *Tiny Toons* foreshadows the metafictional mood of the whole series, but not all the episodes revolved around the Looniversity; other episodes contained parodies of other films or TV formats, lampoons on popular culture and celebrities or the adventures of the Tiny Toons in Acme Acres, the main setting of the series where they live along with many other classic characters from the *Looney Tunes*. Apparently, nothing new in *Tiny Toons*: the premise followed a popular trend of children animation in the 80s and the series maintained the relevance of metafiction, satire, soundtrack and stock characters of the classical Warner Bros. cartoons –even half of its 21-minute-long episodes were divided into three seven-minute-long independent segments, as the theatrical shorts. Then, what made *Tiny Toons* truly outstanding among the formulaic cartoons for children of the beginning of the 90s?

While *The Simpsons* was gradually concocting the appropriate ingredients for adult animation, *Tiny Toons* updated children cartoons. *Tiny Toons* tackled issues of the most immediate topicality of the early 90s in the US: celebrities, new popular trends, New Age practices, drug abuse, environmental concerns or underground youth culture, among others. All this articulated safely from an explicit moral or didactic message provided by these metafictional characters in wraparound segments.[ii] As new topics and approaches were introduced in the 90s children cartoons, others needed to be revisited. The representation of women and the subversion of female stereotypes were obviously in the agenda of *Tiny Toon Adventures*.

3. Hello, Nurse! Female roles in animation

Up to this point, the roles of female characters in cartoons produced in the United States were extremely limited. The appearance of women, either human or female anthropomorphised animals, in animated shorts responded to the classical stereotypes we can find in the early films. Women were supposed to be either courted and sentimentally pleased or else be saved from a villain by, obviously, a male character (Thompson & Zerbinos 1998: 653). Minnie Mouse, Honey, Cookie, Petunia Pig or Daisy Duck were some early mainstream examples that fit in this

BDD-A20151 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:09 UTC)

line of passive female characters who depend on the male characters. This insensitive approach to the female figures can be understood if we take into account that animation crews were mainly formed by men (Wells 1998: 198). Fleischer's 1930s testosterone-inspired Betty Boop, who began as a highly active naïve pinup girl but ended up as an unsexy and severe governess after the Production Code enforcement, might have derived from this situation (Cohen 1997: 19-23). The women that appeared in colour cartoon shorts remained confined to domestic environments or were depicted negatively outside the household domain, thus reproducing the dominant male discourse. Characters like Granny, Mammy Two Shoes or Olive Oyl could be described as unattractive angels in the house, whereas others like Hazel Witch, Red Hot Riding Hood or Little Lulu were empowered women in public spheres but presented in negative terms. Significantly, few female characters were the core of theatrical cartoon series. Needless to say, women in Disney animated features perpetuated (and still perpetuate) the updated medieval female stereotypes from the fairy tales on which their plots are mostly based, resulting in an idealised, and therefore unattainable, princess-based conception of femininity (Wells 2002: 41).

The television era did not improve the representation of women in animation; indeed, it would firmly establish the basis of women discrimination in contemporary cartoons. The first animated sitcom, *The Flintstones*, would depict its women, Wilma and Betty, as domestically engaged and prone to motherhood and sensitivity. This would be repeated in practically all familiar cartoon series henceforth: *The Jetsons*, *Wait Till Your Father Gets Home*, *The Berenstain Bears* or *Rugrats*. In non-familiar cartoons, women would be infused with more prototypical features, at the shadow of the male's active roles: submissive, idealist, tender, compassionate or hysterical. There were only two aspects in which pre-90s cartoon women acquired more positive roles: they are more rational subjects and keepers of the familiar unity (often through religion). These types are still in force in contemporary animation, when the setting is an overtly chaotic male-ridden world (Thompson & Zerbinos 1998: 654). In independent animation this was not always the rule: women were also depicted as entities conscious of the power of their bodies to articulate their identity and achieve their personal goals. Whether or not this can be read as an embryonic manifestation of feminism in cartoons, these audio-visual representations could be a target for the fiercest criticism of body policies in pornography and (heterosexual) male-oriented products.

Tiny Toons tried to transform these perspectives on female representations in cartoons. The choice of their main characters, Buster and Babs Bunny, is a marker of this change. Thus the equivalent of Bugs Bunny is translated in *Tiny Toons* as a split lead role between a male rabbit and a female rabbit. To some extent, this decision responds, subtly, to political correctness: the female lead character, Babs Bunny, can perform some of Bugs Bunny's lunacies that put at stake his masculinity when resorting to transvestism or homosexuality to fool his adversaries (Sandler 1998: 162-165). In *Tiny Toons*, Babs disguises herself far more frequently than Buster and, when she dresses up as a man, it might be seen as a safer gender role model for children than otherwise. In any case, cross-dressing is a recurrent, and accepted, source of humour in animation (Cohen 1997: 45) and many male characters in *Tiny Toons* would disguise themselves as women for comedy's sake,

BDD-A20151 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:09 UTC)

as long as they immediately restore their heterosexual male status.

Babs Bunny consciously becomes a ground breaking female character. As the co-protagonist, Babs has a far more active role than her cartoon predecessors, to such an extent that she is the main character in several episodes –which clearly appealed to a very specific sector of its viewers. A female character, suddenly, acquires great importance for the delivery of jokes and creating humour, something that rarely happened in previous cartoons. She is no longer the keeper of virtue, good conduct and elegance; she misbehaves, has an assertive character and makes little use of rational thinking, thus generating many of the plots centred on her. Perhaps, all this fits into the characterisation of a West Coast rebel female teenager at the beginning of the 90s, but it ultimately created a new kind of an animated cocky female character. In many other aspects, Babs still bears, unavoidably, many girlish features: she is easily frightened; she loves gossiping, soap operas, talking to her friends on the telephone for hours, being courted by Buster or using make-up. For semiotic purposes, Babs' design is filled with features culturally attributed to womanliness (Wells 1998: 204): her fur is pink, her underdeveloped breast is always covered and she wears two purple bows and a skirt –a colour also linked to feminism. All in all Babs is a character externally recognizable as a woman but, behaviour-wise, she intermittently fits into the most common and monolithic stereotypes of female cartoons.

Other female characters in *Tiny Toons* try to catch up with Babs' understated transgressions. Shirley "the Loon" McLoon, a character based on several girlfriends of Daffy Duck's, has more presence and takes on a more active role than her *Looney Tunes* counterparts. Elmyra Duff, Sweetie Bird and Fifi La Fume are female versions of originally male Looney Tunes characters –Elmer Fudd, Tweety Pie and Pepé Le Pew, respectively. Elmyra reverses the hunting violence of Elmer by chokingly petting and nursing every cute animal, thus creating the new female stereotype of the spoiled and piercing-voiced girl. Sweetie is a sour pink canary, the first overtly feminine cartoon character who, violently, beats up her male chasers, especially Furrball, and turns herself into the ill-starred hunter, when she wants to eat Bookworm –both male characters. Fifi is an open-minded French female skunk who actively pursues her ideal love, instead of waiting to be wooed by a gentleman. Although these female stereotypes might not be considered good at all, at least they provide the path to open up new attitudes and patterns of behaviour for the female characters –often by disdaining the censors' advice.

In fact the 30th *Tiny Toons* episode, "Fields of Honey", addresses feminist issues directly. In this episode, it is Looniversity Day, which means that each Tiny Toon character is going to work with their role models. Babs finds herself alone "without a guru", without an idol to look up to, because "the old Warner Bros. stars were guys; no one girl". Guided by a mysterious light and an off-screen male voice, Babs watches several classical cartoon shorts in the film vault, and she eventually comes across "Bosko in Person" (1933). In this white-and-black short, which was completely re-made for this *Tiny Toons* episode, Babs discovers the figure of the talented comedian Honey –probably far more talented than the original Honey. She researches on Bosko and Honey and discovers that they fell out of fame because of the increasing popularity of Porky and the introduction of Technicolor. After her findings, Babs starts

BDD-A20151 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:09 UTC)

a crazy quest to revive Honey's cartoons, in order to resuscitate Honey with the laughter they provoke, by projecting them in a local theatre all day long. When Babs manages to call in all Acme Acres into the cinema and everyone is laughing at Honey's shorts, Honey is revealed to be among the audience as an old lady and Bosko, the vault keeper, to be the mysterious voice. Finally, Babs finds her mentor, her guru, her idol, someone to look up to.

There are several points worth highlighting in the development of this episode, which make it particularly outstanding when compared to the previous animation tradition. First of all, Babs' involvement in the action is particularly remarkable. As we can see, Babs' role in the episode is extremely active: with no male help but the voice's guidance, she leads all the actions that move along the plot of the episode. Secondly, her aim is noteworthy as well: she wants to bring to light the talent of the female Warner Bros. cartoon characters, Honey in particular. Babs is completely alone in her quest; no one else seems to worry about the *status quo* of women in Warner Bros. animation, let alone help her rescue Honey from oblivion. She needs to pioneer this process, since the common practice of animation in the early 90s was to neglect the figure of women. We have to take into account that in historical and critical terms, the 80s was a well-known decade of active feminism in the Western world. In this respect, Babs is an earlier example of a feminist cartoon.

Much of her quest, in this extremely metafictional episode, reflects a social reality of the late 80s: there is a scene where Babs has gathered the Looniversity's Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) and she emphatically asks for a "big huge theatre" to be opened so that it can "show nothing but Honey cartoons". The PTA, which looks at her completely flabbergasted, is made up of the classical Warner Bros. characters, all male, while Babs stands for the new generation of cartoons. Because of her behaviour, she is eventually taken as insane and sent to the nursery, a symbolic way of referring to the feeling of the first feminists, alone in her fight for their rights and considered insane by most of the main masculine-laden trends of the society. In another scene, Babs has to ask the rich Montana Max for money in order to build the theatre. She does not tell him directly why she wants the money and tries to fool him by dressing herself as a girl scout, an orphan and a rich executive. This scene can be metonymically read as the real struggles that women come across when fighting for their rights: Babs has to overcome a world where men have the economic power –note how other previous multimillionaire cartoon characters, Scrooge McDuck and Richie Rich, were male as well. In this sense, we can conclude that the main hindrances for the feminist expression are set, in the real-life, by the mainstream which operates from intrinsic patriarchal discourses.

The construction of the theatre also has a strong symbolic meaning. In this male-centred society, women need to find a way to express themselves and fight for their rights. Consequently, women have to articulate their needs in a neutral and non-hostile space, at least a space free of male-chauvinist prejudices. The theatre stands for this space. Initially ignored and scorned, the theatre offers Honey a place to start from scratch, articulate an identity and thus claim credibility or attention. But this politically-loaded space is not appealing for *any*body; it only attracts the others' attention when TV forces a zombie-like mass multitude to go there.

BDD-A20151 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:09 UTC)

The overall reading of this seems to be that nobody is genuinely concerned with this kind of political commitment, especially when politics is a game of interests. The only one genuinely involved in the potential outcome of this space is Babs, thus generating a new kind of comradeship among female cartoon characters.

The representation of relationships among women is also a key aspect for the feminist reading (and devising) of texts. In this episode, although both female characters do not meet until the last scene, there is a healthy relationship between Babs and Honey. Instead of the idealised rivalry among women to achieve the man's favour, Babs feels she has to help her potential mentor with a painful display of sisterhood. Babs is committed to helping Honey, despite of the emotional consequences that all this would entail in a male-ruled society. In this sense, the age difference between Babs and Honey is particularly telling; roughly sixty years. In her effort to bring to light the woman's role in animation, Babs has dug up a forgotten history, a micronarrative, a tradition that is meant to "get canned" by the patriarchal society, like the old cartoons. Thus, this intergenerational sisterhood not only serves to create a new model of conduct among women, free of male-chauvinism fancies, but it also claims that the male dominant discourse has also silenced Other voices that could be rescued, visualised, reanalysed and socially accepted and appraised.

4. Black stereotyping: Ain't that cute? (But it's wrong!)

At this point, it is relevant to ponder upon racial issues, considering that Bosko and Honey's original designs were based on black people. While female representation is obviously in the agenda of *Tiny Toon Adventures*, the depiction of black people is not at least that explicit yet, and so it deserves a brief consideration.

The relationship between black folk and animation is as old as the medium (Cohen 1997: 50). Since most of the early animation is based on vaudeville conventions, it is common to find vaudevillian types in these cartoons (Sartin 1998: 67). The US vaudeville of the beginning of the 20th century used black people stereotypes in order to make their audiences laugh. The blackfaces were white actors covered in makeup except for their mouths which remained unpainted in order to create the illusion of thicker lips. Blackfaces performed a range of stock routines typically perceived as ethnic and ultimately funny (Wells 1998: 216). Taking advantage of the black-and-white images, earlier cartoons were designed to recall this kind of characters. Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, Felix the Cat, Bosko, Mickey Mouse, Bimbo, Foxy or Piggy are clear examples of characters modelled after blackface actors. These characters loved dancing and singing. They often burst onto stages with Afro-American accents, and were prone to perform slapstick comedy as the blackfaces in vaudeville (Sartin 1998: 72-73).

These early cartoon designs could have remained anecdotic, if an "innocent" racist cartoon production had not derived from it. A popular animation handbook published in 1928 by E.C. Matthews, offered some hints to make cartoons funny:

> The colored people are good subjects for action pictures: They are natural born humorists and will often assume ridiculous attitudes or say side-splitting things with no apparent intention of being funny. […] The cartoonist usually plays on the colored man's love of loud clothes, watermelon, crap shooting, fear of ghosts, etc.
>
> (in Lindvall & Fraser 1998: 124)

BDD-A20151 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:09 UTC)

In order to make people laugh, authorities in the medium recommended using the most common and hilarious stereotypes for depicting black people: they are assumed to be primeval, superstitious, naïve, good-natured, compulsive gamblers, lazy, prone to singing and dancing or chicken and watermelon eaters. While the first cartoons based on animals could stifle the black source, towards the end of the first half of the 20th century, cartoons did show human black people. These early black stereotypes, both in animation and vaudeville, respond to Orientalist strategies and, as Wells put it, reflect "an anxiety about the collapse of global imperialism and decolonisation" (1998: 220), especially if we take into account the national context where they came from.

While other animation companies practised self-censure and gradually removed black people from their cartoons, Warner Bros. used black stereotypes for a longer time (Cohen 1997: 54). Inki is probably the most famous indigenous black character of Warner Bros. that suddenly disappeared from production. Warner Bros. has other famous controversial blacklisted *Merrie Melody* shorts involving offensive black stereotyping when they got syndicated for television: "Hittin' the Trail for Hallelujah Land" (1931), "Sunday Go to Meetin' Time" (1936), "Clean Pastures" (1937), "Uncle Tom's Bungalow" (1937), "Jungle Jitters" (1938), "The Isle of Pingo Pongo" (1938), "All This and Rabbit Stew" (1941), "Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs" (1943), "Tin Pan Alley Cats" (1943), "Angel Puss" (1944) and "Goldilocks and the Jivin' Bears" (1944). By the end of the Second World War –after an explosion of ruthless xenophobic contents in cartoons (Cohen 1997: 50)– racist images and plots were radically self-censored and practically left out from animation for several decades (also see Lehman 2001).

Tiny Toons recovered black characters in an uncompromising way. Mary Melody (pun intended) is a secondary character depicted as an Afro-American teenage girl. But her involvement in the series passes almost unnoticed, she hardly has time onscreen and mostly serves to stuff crowds and backgrounds. We could force some counterproductive and cynical interpretations of this character by relating her blackness to the evocations of her name (musicality, primitivism, candour and, even, racist cartoons) but we could not reach any beneficial conclusion. She is doubly marginalised because she is a girl and she is a black character. Anecdotally, the episode "Acme Cable TV" [S2E7] contains a parody of *The Cosby Show*. It is quite difficult to mock this extremely politically correct show without making any reference to the blackness of its original cast, but *Tiny Toons* lampoons it by using Gogo Dodo, a green dodo bird without any ethnic marker. The parody, in a conciliatory way, deals with the dodo family's Afro-American tastes, stereotypes and accents as markers of "coolness" in urban and street environments.[iii]

At this point, it is necessary to consider the mention of the inspiration of Bosko and Honey in "Fields of Honey". When watching Honey's shorts in the theatre, Plucky Duck wonders about her identity: "What is she exactly? Some kind of a bug?". Nothing else is said about her "species". Indeed, this line is an in-joke that recalls the long-lasting debate in the history of American animation about the "species" of Bosko and Honey (Maltin 1987: 225). In the title of the pilot short of the character (1929), Bosko is described as "the Talk-ink Kid", that is, he was meant to be an ink dot, but anthropomorphically designed, easily recognisable as a (black) human (Schneider 1988: 34). Even in his first appearances he spoke with an Afro-American accent (Cohen 1997: 56). When

BDD-A20151 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:09 UTC)

Bosko and Honey moved to MGM, their Technicolor renditions appeared in mahogany brown, carrying the hues of black people skin, and they acted far more noticeably as stereotyped black people (Maltin 1987: 282, Schneider 1988: 40).

In order to prevent any kind of criticism, Bosko and Honey's designs for *Tiny Toons* have been prominently altered in order to look something closer to dogs. In this sense, *Tiny Toons* has proved to be more evasive when depicting black people, thus trying to avoid the controversy that Warner Bros. cartoons caused in the 30s and 40s. Perhaps this attitude in *Tiny Toons* is the result of a postcolonial period in which visible social right movements, a concern with the assorted contents of cable television and a pretence of political correctness in popular artistic manifestations merged in disconcerting, inconsistent and ambiguous discursive ways.

5. Conclusion: And that's a wrap!

It is quite clear to see that, through animation, the latent dominant discourses have continued to be reinforced. This is a compromising issue if we take into account that the main consumers of this medium are children. In this way, cartoons are not only repeating negative stereotypes of, say, women and black people, but they are also installing and naturalising them in the children's minds, without any critical stance. This is especially dangerous in a period where mothers and fathers leave many of their parental duties in the hands of television and children tend to imitate everything they watch on it (Thompson & Zerbinos 1998: 652). Certainly watching television, as well as surfing the web, is now the most common leisure activity, but this does not ensure that those responsible of their contents should use the appropriate criteria. Generally, but wrongly, in my view, animation is despised as a children's product and, when it is placed in children's timeslots on television, it is supposed to be as inoffensive as educative. And this is not necessarily the case. We have to take into account that animation, after all, is a business and as such, it has to make a profit. If this profit is made by means of politically incorrect or openly transgressor contents, cartoons would eventually be politically incorrect or transgressor, thus appealing an audience that, unlike children, has a freer (and far more critical) access to this new medium. Although nowadays the Internet is making this task difficult, broadcasters should have the proper critical perspective to keep this kind of cartoons away from the reach of children –not surprisingly, and in a fit of critical and corrosive metafiction, TV executives have been referred to in *Tiny Toons* as "[t]he lowest life form of all" [S1E48].

This tentative review of "Fields of Honey" has tried to apply the critical language of the Academia to a popular product such as animation. Nevertheless further research is needed in this field and new frameworks of analysis might be suggested from the different postcolonial ramifications that nurture the interests of popular studies and lay bridges among the different academic disciplines. The holistic approaches to popular art reveal to be a scientific way to address properly the contemporary and complex cultural phenomena, taking into account the historical continuum in which they belong and the ideological arrangement of a given place and period. Therefore, the Academia plays an important role in order to promote or, at least, visualize positively new forms of entertainment as cultural artefacts and their relevance in the increasingly globalised contemporary societies. This essay has just superficially reviewed the

BDD-A20151 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:09 UTC)

state of children animation as regards to its feminist and racial commitment in a period of heavy ideological turmoil. Although time puts a helpful critical distance for the analysis of popular entertainment, this kind of studies can help us to construct the systematic basis for tackling the potential commentary of contemporary popular products such as animation.

Acknowledgements

The methodological framework benefited from the help of Dr. Paloma Fresno Calleja and Dr. José Igor Prieto Arranz, Balearic Islands University, Palma, Spain, to whom I address my special thanks.

Notes

[i] The rotoscopy is the animation technique that consists in tracing the movement patterns or character's designs from real-life footage.

[ii] These are some *Tiny Toons* episodes that could be analysed in the light of these topics: "Washingtoon" [S3E11], "Life in the 90's" [S1E15], "Psychic Fun-omenon Day" [S1E33], "Elephant Issues" [S2E3], "Sawdust and Toonsil" [S1E31], "The Acme Acres Zone" [S1E14], "Looking Out for the Little Guy" [S1E10], "Dating, Acme Acres Style" [S1E41] or "Career Oppor-Toon-ities" [S1E37].

[iii] In this sense, we need to mention Will Smith's contribution to US blackness construction in a globalised product such as the television sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996). A construct that many readers would agree that is mainly based on Bugs Bunny's "in-yer-face" characterisation.

References

1. Cohen, Karl F.: *Forbidden Animation: Censored Cartoons and Blacklisted Animators in America*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 1997.
2. Hilton-Morrow, Wendy & David T. McMahan: "*The Flintstones* to *Futurama*. Networks at Prime Time Animation" in Stabile, Carol A. y Mark Harrison (eds.) *Prime Time Animation. Television Animation and American Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2003, 74 — 88.
3. Lehman, Christopher P.: "Black Characters and Social Commentary in Animated Cartoons". In *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 2001, 29/2: 74 — 81.
4. Lindvall, Terry & Ben Fraser: "Darker Shades of Animation: African-American Images in the Warner Bros. Cartoon". In Kevin S. Sandler: *Reading the Rabbit. Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998, 121 — 136.
5. Maltin, Leonard: *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons.* Revised and Updated. New York: Plume Books, 1987.
6. Neuwirth, Allan: *Makin' Toons. Inside the Most Popular Animated TV Shows and Movies*. New York: Allworth Press, 2003.
7. Sandler, Kevin S.: "Gendered Evasion: Bugs Bunny in Drag". In Kevin S. Sandler (ed.): *Reading the Rabbit. Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998, 154 — 171.
8. Sartin, Hank: "From Vaudeville to Hollywood, from Silence to Sound: Warner Bros. Cartoons of the Early Sound Era". In Kevin S. Sandler (ed.): *Reading the Rabbit. Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998, 67 – 85.
9. Schneider, Steve: *That's All Folks! The Art of Warner Bros. Animation*. Ontario: Henry Holt and Company, 1988.

BDD-A20151 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:09 UTC)

10. Simensky, Linda: "Selling Bugs Bunny: Warner Bros. and Character Merchandising in the Nineties". In Kevin S. Sandler (ed.): *Reading the Rabbit. Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998, 172 — 192.
11. Thompson, Teresa L. & Eugenia Zerbinos: "Gender Roles in Animated Cartoons: Has the Picture Changed in 20 Years?" In *Gender Roles*. 1995, 9/10: 651 — 673.
12. Wells, Paul: *Understanding Animation*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
13. Wells, Paul: *Animation and America*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002.

BDD-A20151 © 2011 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 02:12:09 UTC)