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LET ME FEEL YOUR FINGER FIRST

Anthropophagy and anthropomorphism: constructing ‘Post-Colonial Cannibal’

Keywords

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LMFYFF character
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Abstract

In the 1930s and 1940s, a popular genre of animated film emerged in the United States – the ‘cannibal cartoon’ – in which the anthropomorphized ‘white hero’, marooned on an island, was captured by a tribe of savage cannibals and thrown into the cooking pot. London-based comic art project Let Me Feel Your Finger First are designing a new animated character – ‘Post-Colonial Cannibal’ that makes reference to – and challenges – the depiction of ‘the savage’ in these early animated films. This article presents and discusses some of LMFYFF’s initial design ideas and examines two examples of the cannibal cartoon, Ub Iwerks’s Africa Squeaks (1931) and Walt Disney’s Trader Mickey (1932). Focusing on the animators’ visualizations of the cannibal king, the cannibal tribe and the anthropomorphized ‘white hero’, the article identifies particular components of the animators’ designs and considers the coded meanings contained therein. LMFYFF reflect on the influence of blackface minstrelsy and consider the cannibal’s place in animation’s ignoble history of racial stereotyping. And LMFYFF pose Post-Colonial Cannibal’s implicit question: how can a medium that has historically depended upon caricature – with its accompanying modes of simplification, exaggeration and distortion – represent otherness?

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The anthropophagus is the wielder of a dialectical knowledge. On the one hand, he is the eminent incarnation of a crime against nature. On the other hand, in the case in which anthropophagy is excused by absolute necessity, the cannibal is the very man of nature, and as such is governed by the laws of nature.

(Avramescu 2009: 20)

Some day I'm gonna quit this cotton-pickin' job.¹

In the 1930s and 1940s, a popular genre of animated film emerged in the United States. Henry T. Sampson's *That's Enough Folks* lists over fifty cartoons made between 1930 and 1960 that feature a 'black cannibals' storyline (see Sampson 1998). Many of the films of this genre share a similar plot. The anthropomorphized hero gets shipwrecked or winds up on an island and is captured by a tribe of savage cannibals. He is presented to the cannibal king and subsequently thrown into the cooking pot. He escapes – usually by playing some kind of musical instrument with which he hypnotizes the tribe – but is recaptured by female cannibals who attempt to crown him king. The film generally ends with the terrified hero running back to the cooking pot and jumping in. Films such as Ub Iwerks's *Africa Squeaks* (1931) and Disney's *Trader Mickey* (1932) utilized this generic storyline, with the directors inserting their animated star – Flip the Frog or Mickey Mouse – into the role of the 'white hero'.

Post-Colonial Cannibal (One)

Our objective is to design a new animated character – Post-Colonial Cannibal – from the vestiges of this difficult and disturbing imagery. A character that makes reference to – and challenges – the depiction of 'the savage' in early animated films. This article presents and discusses some of our initial design ideas and examines two early examples of the cannibal cartoon, *Africa Squeaks* and *Trader Mickey*. Focusing on the animators' visualizations of the cannibal king, the cannibal tribe and the anthropomorphized 'white hero', we identify particular components of their designs and consider the coded meanings contained therein. We reflect on the influence of blackface minstrelsy and consider the cannibal's place in animation's ignoble history of racial stereotyping. And we pose Post-Colonial Cannibal's implicit question: how can a medium that has historically depended upon caricature – with its accompanying modes of simplification, exaggeration and distortion – represent *otherness*?

Some will question the legitimacy of exhuming these images, arguing that they function only as shameful reminders of old racist attitudes and should be relegated to the past. We disagree. Speaking of Winsor McCay's blackface character Impy from the *Little Nemo* cartoons, Edward A. Shannon

1. Deputy Dawg, (quote from) *Echo Park* (1963).

Anthropophagy and anthropomorphism



**Cannibal originally drawn by Ub Iwerks
(*Africa Squeaks* 1931)**

Redrawn by Let Me Feel Your Finger First 2010

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reminds us that '[Impy's] ghost still haunts the American comics page, the racist id of the comics lexicon, suppressed beneath more tolerable, seemingly non-racist (or non-ethnic) ego characters like Disney's Mickey Mouse' (Shannon 2010: 202). As with previous LMFYFF characters, Post-Colonial Cannibal confronts 'difficult' imagery whilst approaching the construction of character in a quirky, exploratory fashion. Post-Colonial Cannibal will be something akin to a Frankenstein monster, a character stitched together from the visual debris of old dead cartoons; an experiment to see whether the original intentions of the animators can be discarded and the imagery reconfigured in such a way as to bestow it with new meaning. At the same time, Let Me Feel Your Finger First exists as a provocation. Its composite characters frequently reference uncomfortable comic stereotypes. They – and the animated scenarios they find themselves in – are manipulative, calculated to provoke a response from their audience. They might prompt the spectator to *laugh again* at the stereotype, purposely lead the audience *down the wrong alley* or incite hilarity and disquiet simultaneously.

At this point it is worth briefly mentioning the name we have chosen for the character. It is not our intention for this text (nor our principal objective in creating the character) to attempt to tackle the intricacies and arguments associated with the term postcolonialism. Rather, we use the phrase in its broad, descriptive sense, as expressed by Peter Hulme when he speaks of postcolonialism referring to 'a process of *disengagement* [sic] from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and is probably inescapable for all those whose worlds have been marked by that set of phenomena' (Hulme 1995: 120).

Let Me Feel Your Finger First is developing Post-Colonial Cannibal in collaboration with the animator Elroy Simmons, who we previously worked with on the animated short *Francis*. Elroy is contributing ideas to the design process and will animate the final character. Let Me Feel Your Finger First is also indebted to Christopher P. Lehman, Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies at St Cloud State University, Minnesota and author of *The Colored Cartoon: Black Representation in American Animated Short Films, 1907–1954* who has supported us in our research and whose work has informed this text.

Cannibal representation in *Africa Squeaks* and *Trader Mickey*

Ub Iwerks's *Africa Squeaks* (1931) and Walt Disney's *Trader Mickey* (1932) are two early examples of the cannibal cartoon genre. In each film, the anthropomorphized hero is captured by a group of spear-wielding savages who march him off to meet the cannibal king before he is thrown into the cooking pot.

In Iwerks's *Africa Squeaks* a cannibal tribe captures Flip the Frog after he mistakenly takes aim at one of them. Iwerks's cannibals are skinny figures; they have small black foreheads, black noses, big white eyes and broad white lips. On their heads they have a knot of hair with a bone in the middle.

2. Private correspondence between Christopher P. Lehman and LMFYFF.

Their clothing consists of grass skirts, white gloves and white footwear. With the exception of the cannibal king – a fat character in a crown who resembles a dog – the tribesmen are identical. They march the same, they laugh the same, they lick their lips in an identical manner. The females are also clones – their appearance, though, differs from the males in that they have ringlets of hair on their heads instead of bones and they wear tighter-fitting skirts. The cloning of the cannibals is undoubtedly a way to ease the burden of drawing for the animator but their replication gives them the feel of a homogenous collective and underscores their lack of individuality, in contrast to the ‘white hero’. They are reproductions and as such they lack value. According to Christopher P. Lehman:

In any cartoon in which a European American character visits a land populated by those who are not European, the indigenous characters are designed homogeneously in order for the cartoon to illustrate that they are all different from the European American in exactly the same ways (skin colour, lip size, costuming, etc.).²

The mode of representation here brings to mind a certain fear of *loss of individuality* that surfaces in the anxious reveries of European explorers and is evidenced in their accounts of contact with native tribes. In *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism* Catalin Avramescu describes a species of speculative geography that, in contrast to common physical geography, is ‘concerned with describing and explaining bizarre inversions beyond the boundaries of common understanding, whence stretch regions in which civilised individuality is doomed to perish’ (Avramescu 2009: 9–10). The cloned cartoon tribe reveal the mindset of their creator. Aimé Césaire spoke of colonialism not only exploiting but *objectifying* the colonized subject (whilst at the same time degrading the colonizer) and proposed that colonization equalled ‘thingification’ (Césaire 1972: 21).

The cannibal tribe that Mickey and Pluto encounter in Disney’s 1932 cartoon are a more varied bunch than Iwerks’s template tribesmen and women. At the start of the film, we see several cannibals who are more detailed in their design. They have the standard small black forehead, big white eyes and large white lips but they also have painted faces and/or elaborate masks on and all have rings through their noses. One wears an ornate headpiece of animal horns and spikes. The next three we see look even more fearsome. The first holds a spear, another wears a skull as a hat and all have whirling hypnotic eyes. In the next shot, we see a less decorated spear-carrying cannibal who has only a bracelet on his head with a tuft of hair poking out of the top. This cannibal presents an opportunity for the animator to execute an oft-repeated visual gag – he has a set of household keys attached to the ring through his nose. The gag is one of many that mocks the savage’s *difference* and underscores his lack of sophistication.

The female members of the tribe in the Disney cartoon also possess more visual detail than Iwerks’s characters. They are smaller than the men and carry offspring on their backs. They sport

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lip-plates, which the animators use in another visual gag where they function as percussive instruments. In one sequence, a male cannibal ‘plays their plates’ with a bone, before his own teeth become the keys of a piano that starts playing. The cannibal king is a more complex figure than the tribesmen and women. In *Trader Mickey* the mouse is brought before a fat, avuncular character who wears a tall, thin crown, arm bracelets and a grass skirt. He sits on a makeshift throne decorated with skulls and spears, laughing at a copy of *Ballyhoo*, a 1930s parody magazine. He has a single tooth at the front of his mouth that gives him a childlike appearance and seems intended to signify lack of intelligence. Like the king in *Africa Squeaks* his fat health sits in stark contrast to the skinny bodies of the rest of the tribe. The suggestion is that he lives off the fat of the others and as such, is cleverer than they are. Both Disney’s and Iwerks’s cannibal kings exhibit a mixture of ferocious and childlike traits and both are ultimately outwitted by their potential meal.

Mickey Mouse and Flip the Frog perform the role of the ‘white hero’ in each of these cartoons. Mickey is a colonial trader transporting a shipload of musical instruments along the African coast and Flip an amphibian explorer. Flip is dressed in his trademark bowtie, white gloves and short pants but he also wears a pith helmet and carries a rifle. Mickey’s outfit is his customary white pants, gloves and shoes; the only addition is the rifle he takes ashore. It is his behaviour, though, that distinguishes him from the savage tribe as he *tames* them during a musical routine that he initiates. Indeed, each of the protagonists uses a similar ruse to escape from the cooking pot. In *Trader Mickey* the cannibal chef, having added a variety of chopped vegetables to his mouse stew, stirs the pot and samples his cuisine with a saxophone liberated from Mickey and Pluto’s cache of trading goods. Suddenly Mickey grabs the instrument from him and starts playing. The chef is transfixed and starts dancing, followed by other members of the tribe, whilst the fat king sways rhythmically on his throne and clicks his fingers in time to Mickey’s tune. This all turns into an elaborate animated musical number with cannibals, mouse and dog playing, singing and dancing their way to the finale of the cartoon. In *Africa Squeaks* Flip the Frog finds himself in a similar position to Mickey.³ As the cannibal tribesmen dance menacingly around the pot, rhythmically licking their lips, the flames get hotter and hotter. Flip hits upon an idea and pulls a penny whistle out of his pants. His playing hypnotizes the flames under the pot and they chase off the hungry cannibals. Flip is not entirely out of trouble, though. With their men gone, the women of the tribe try to crown him their new king but the prospect fills him with such dread that he runs back to the cooking pot and dives in.⁴

These sequences point to the highly suggestible nature of the cannibal tribe and again stress their communal circumstance. Their lack of individuality endows them with a collective strength yet it is also their weakness: once you have power over one, you have power over all. The cannibals are simple and fickle in their affections – as demonstrated by the women’s attempts to crown Flip their new king – and naïve when confronted with the trappings of modernity. During the musical number that forms the second half of *Trader Mickey* the animators lampoon the tribe’s ignorance of western

3. The cooking pot in *Africa Squeaks* is itself animate – it has eyes and legs and, once summoned by the king, gallops on to the log pile.
4. In an interesting departure to the generic storyline, Mickey wears the crown at the end of Disney’s animation but it is the cannibal king who ends up in the cooking pot.

5. Private correspondence between Elroy Simmons and LMFYFF.
6. Norman McCabe, 1941.

goods as a succession of cannibals play their musical instruments incorrectly and the king swallows his harmonica in his greedy attempt to get a tune out of it. One could argue that whilst these gags seek to endorse the superiority of western industrialized societies, they also reveal a certain anxiety about the legitimacy of commodity-based culture.

The motivations for using cannibal characters in these early films are undoubtedly manifold (contemporary preoccupations with migration? The animation medium's historical reliance on caricature and ridicule?) yet one can appreciate that the cannibal tribe are fitting subjects for 1930s animators. They are easily assimilated into the world of early animated film where everything is given life and has rhythm, whether conventionally animate or not. The musical routine that Trader Mickey instigates is at once repellent in its stereotyping and exhilarating in its rhythmic exuberance. The animation seems to reflect an ambiguity in European attitudes towards savagery. On the one hand it is primitive and unsophisticated and needs civilizing, on the other hand 'those elements of savagery, which conjure up the "natural" state of humanity and notions of "paradise lost"' (Henderson 2001: 95) evoke a kind of uncanny fascination.

Post-Colonial Cannibal (Two)

When we approached the animator Elroy Simmons to work with us on the design and animation of Post-Colonial Cannibal he warned us that we were 'leaping into a nest of taboos'⁵ but readily agreed to jump in as well. In our initial discussions with him we identified some of the possible visual signifiers that we could cull from the early cartoons and use in the design of the new character. We looked at the 'white hero' – whether in the guise of colonial explorer, hunter, trader or shipwrecked *man-of-nature* – and considered such things as the pith helmet, the salesman's bow tie and boater, the rifle, the khaki attire and the signature fur hat of the marooned islander worn by (amongst others) Porky Pig in *Robinson Crusoe Jr.*⁶ We contemplated the black cannibal with his accoutrements of minstrelsy and his stereotypical condition. The tuft of hair on the head with the bone through it, the nose ring, the exaggerated facial features, the single tooth, the white gloves, the skulls, the arm and ankle bracelets, the spear, the cloned aspect, the licking of the lips, the dancing.

Thinking of the basic character design, we started with notions of disguise, of projection and inversion. The white savage. A cannibal in khaki. A cannibal with absurdly small lips. Black minstrel gloves. Or white, bloodstained minstrel gloves. We discussed the iconic cooking pot. The cooking pot could be a vessel. It could *host* the cannibal like the shell hosts the hermit crab. Two other members of Let Me Feel Your Finger First's comic family operate in a similar fashion: the Bastard in the Sandbox and Ontologically Anxious Organism. The former is a yellow sandbox inhabited by a *being of the most sublime culture and intelligence*. Yet the sight of this being sends others insane. The

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latter is a character who is nervous about *the notion of character*. Ontologically Anxious Organism has therefore disguised himself as a boulder. The type of boulder you might overlook in a panel from some Asterix comic.

Post-Colonial Cannibal could be a relation of these two. Maybe the pot should have life. Or somewhat ambiguous animated half-life. It could have a gender. It could have eyes and little feet. Or holes either side, which the cannibal could slot his feet through in order to move around, Flintstones-style. The anthropophagus inhabitant could appear at intervals like a Jack-in-the-box. He could be a trembling white explorer with some stereotypical twisted black savage facial features. Or a shipwrecked *man-of-nature* (a dog? a pig?) whose body is in constant spasm as stereotypical little black cannibal heads popped out of his naked torso like ghastly reminders of his animated past. He would gobble up the heads as quickly as they appeared. Maybe the pot should house more than one character. Or a slippery character that metamorphoses. We discussed the behaviour of the character and his situation. Maybe his circumstance should reference the idea of the *visual gag* that peppers these films. The cannibal could be stuck in a loop, an endlessly repeating visual gag, whose reiteration acts to draw attention to and undermine the original 'joke'. Or we could lead the audience to believe that they are seeing a stereotype when in fact they are not. The character could *turn round and bite them*. Elroy suggested a musical number. The stereotypical sounds employed in the 1930s cartoons promised all kinds of subversive possibilities. The rhythmic beat of the native drums, the mumbo-jumbo cannibal speech, the sound of hungry lips smacking, the musical laughter of the savages.

7. Born 1875 in Sheffield, England.
8. Followed by the word COHEN metamorphosing into a stereotypical Jewish male face.

Cannibals, blackface and anthropomorphism

Our introduction to blackface was *The Black and White Minstrel Show* a 'light entertainment' television series from the BBC that followed the variety show format and featured white performers singing and dancing in blackface. It was broadcast on Saturday evening primetime television until 1978. Its blacked-up performers could trace their roots back to the first American theatrical form – blackface minstrelsy – in which white performers imitated and ridiculed the black slaves of the antebellum South. Blackface minstrelsy's influence is apparent in the first animated films. In 1907, J. Stuart Blackton⁷ the animator, cartoonist, vaudeville performer and co-founder of the Vitagraph company, made *Lightning Sketches*. It was his second animated film and it included a metamorphosis gag which referenced minstrelsy: the word 'COON' transforming into a black minstrel face.⁸ As Christopher P. Lehman suggests: 'Blackton's use of black and Jewish stereotypes reflected both his own roots in vaudeville and the prevailing cultural climate of his time' yet 'for the cartoonist to weave ethnic generalisations into his film [...] implied that somehow they belonged there' (Lehman 2007: 7). The black stereotypes that minstrels originated were gradually transplanted from stage to screen and

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The Bastard in the Sandbox

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Ontologically Anxious Organism

9. Private correspondence between Christopher P. Lehman and LMFYFF.

Mammys, Uncle Toms, little sambos and lazy cotton-pickers began to populate American animated films. The black cannibal joined them. Minstrelsy dictated that the cannibal's blackness should contrast with his white eyes, big white lips and white gloves.

What is perhaps more curious is the influence that minstrelsy had on the design of some of the animated stars. Lehman notes the resemblance between the blacked-up minstrel's face and the face of Otto Mesmer's Felix the Cat who made his first appearance in *Feline Follies* in 1919. He suggests that

...it established a link between character design and African American caricature. Animators commonly used animal and African American figures with jet-black bodies and large white eyes and lips, thus avoiding the need to draw intricate details for each character on every sheet of paper or celluloid. In addition, the whiteness of the eyes and lips provided contrast with the bodies and made those facial features easier for animators to delineate.

(Lehman 2007: 12)

Lehman adds, that 'in the case of the early films, the blackface design is a matter of expediency. Some studios had become factories, quickly churning out cartoons'.⁹ The original design for Mickey Mouse, as drawn by Ub Iwerks when he worked for Walt Disney, contains some typical minstrel-sque features: big white eyes, broad white mouth, skinny black arms and legs, white gloves. It would seem that minstrelsy was such a popular and pervasive form of entertainment amongst whites that animators made reference to its visual conventions in an attempt to ensure an audience for their films. As the cultural climate began to change, the use of animated animal stars with human characteristics that Mesmer and Sullivan pioneered with Felix the Cat came to serve another purpose. With the advent of the civil rights movement in the United States and the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, animators' reliance on stereotypes of African Americans started to attract complaints and threats of boycott. To avoid offending audiences, animators embraced anthropomorphism as a means of disguise. They could still make visual references to blackface minstrelsy by using animal characters that effectively lacked ethnicity, and meant it was harder to accuse them of racial stereotyping.

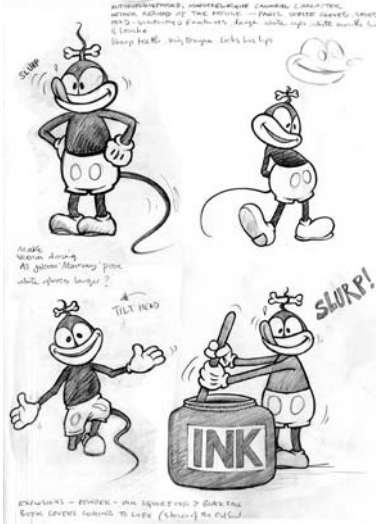
Like the anthropophagus, the anthropomorphized character disturbs conventional boundaries between *man* and *nature*. How anthropophagy and anthropomorphism come together and function in these cartoons is obscured by a confusion of identity, species, character, impersonation and projection. The projection of European notions of savagery on to the African. The projection of human characteristics on to animals. Take Mickey: an anthropomorphized mouse whose design is influenced by blackface minstrelsy, 'entertainment' performed by white Americans mimicking African Americans.

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Post-Colonial Carnival Drawings by Let Me Feel Your Finger First



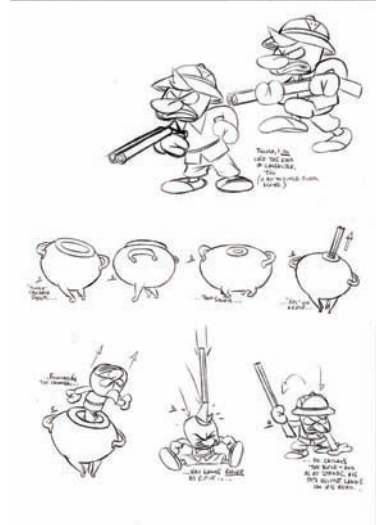
Post-Colonial Carnival Drawings by Let Me Feel Your Finger First



Post-Colonial Carnival Drawings by Envy Simmons



Post-Colonial Carnival Drawings by Envy Simmons



Post-Colonial Cannibal (Three)

In the initial designs for Post-Colonial Cannibal we have focused on the idea of the character as an occupant of the (semi-animate) cooking pot and have attempted to confound the archetypal character roles by utilizing a combination of visual signifiers from both *savage* and *civilized*. In one design, the cooking pot resembles some kind of industrial cauldron. The occupant is a dog in a pith helmet. He is naked save for the bloodstained white minstrel gloves he wears. The pot is filled with what could be blood. A visual link between cooking pot and inkpot is explored in another design, with the cannibal hybrid who stirs the pot flaunting an array of visual influences. In Elroy's designs he addresses the gender of the cooking pot. In one scenario 'she' (representing empire?) struts confidently around then squats down and contracts. Out pops the barrel of a rifle, then the cannibal shoots out and finally a pith helmet. The cannibal's features – his hostile expression, big nose and minstrel lips – suggest a mixture of influences. In Elroy's other design, the inhabitant of the cooking pot is a retro-style white European animated character, sporting a pith helmet and rifle. He licks his lips as small stereotypical black cannibal heads pop out of his naked torso. Chomp! He bites a head off and gobbles it up. Chomp! A new cannibal head appears. And another.

These designs represent a starting point, the commencement of an extended period of visual experimentation that we hope will lead us to our final design. With the relationship between the design, the animation and the sound being so pivotal (and perhaps the key to the successful reconfiguring of the imagery) this phase will also include the production of a number of animatic tests. The project will culminate in the realization of a series of short animated scenarios featuring Post-Colonial Cannibal.

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Contributor details

Let Me Feel Your Finger First (LMFYFF) is a London-based comic art project that disseminates comics, animation, live art, drawing and web-based work. At the centre of the project is a family of satirical characters that includes Francis, Uncle Hans-Peter and Ontologically Anxious Organism. LMFYFF exhibits in galleries and online and the animated films have screened at film festivals internationally. Recent projects include *Francis*, an Animate Projects commission for Channel 4 and the live works *Familienalbum*, performed at the Royal Academy, London and *The Uncle Hans-Peter Party* at the ICA, London.

E-mail: rich@letmefeelyourfingerfirst.com

Website: <http://www.letmefeelyourfingerfirst.com>
