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## History isn't kind to the original 'Dumbo;' remake sidesteps issue

Before Pearl Harbor, before *Brown v. Board of Education*, before Rosa Parks sat down on that bus, there were the “Dumbo” crows, led by the bowler-hatted, cigar-chomping top bird, Jim Crow.

When Dumbo the baby elephant first took flight in the 1941 Disney animated feature, he landed in a tree. Out on a limb, the black crows were there to greet him.

Teasingly kind and mockingly helpful, these “boys,” as they were called by Dumbo’s mentor, friend and business manager Timothy Q. Mouse, are the tricksters who present Dumbo with the tail-feather talisman that gives him the courage to soar.

Jim Crow, named after the segregationist policies of the South (in what must have seemed like an clever joke at the time) was voiced by Cliff Edwards, the white actor behind Jiminy Cricket in 1940’s “Pinocchio” and sang “When You Wish Upon a Star.”

With Jim Crow as frontman of their tree-top quintet, the black birds sang a toe-tapping Cab Calloway-style scat number, “When I See an Elephant Fly.”

Anthropomorphically speaking, the crows were good people. Fun too. So why is everyone forever trying to prune their perch?

It’s the blackface.

In “Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow” and his PBS series, “Reconstruction,” Harvard professor and genealogy buff

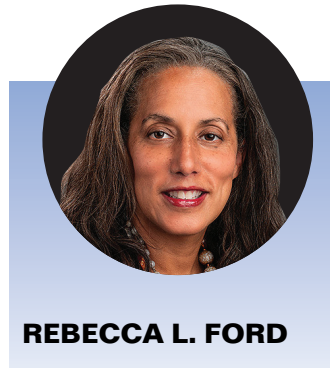
Henry Louis Gates provides some context.

Although the blackface character Jim Crow goes back to the 1830s, blackface minstrelsy — white performers with blackened faces presenting African Americans as simple minded, happy-go-lucky and primitive — became popular as a post-slavery tool to show blacks as unworthy of freedom, responsibility and the right to vote.

The powerful visual rhetoric of blackface was then endlessly repeated in mass-produced advertisements, postcards and tchotchkes, as well as on stage and in motion pictures.

The black characters in 1941’s “Dumbo” reflect pre-civil rights notions about black people and demonstrate the power of entertainment to reinforce reprehensible social attitudes. Vestiges of this presentation persist in today’s advertisements and entertainment.

While the crows were metaphors, the animation also directly depicts black men with the roustabouts who pitch the big top tent overnight after the circus train pulls into town. These nameless, faceless, dark-skinned figures sing the “Song of the Roustabouts,” vocalized by “The King’s Men,” a popular white quartet of the ‘30s and ‘40s, who were also the off-screen voices of the lollipop guild in “The Wizard of Oz.” The tune came with representative lyrics such as: “We work all day, we work all night, we never learned to read or write,



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we’re happy-hearted roustabouts, we don’t know when we get our pay, and when we do, we throw our pay away.”

It’s too much to ask a pre-adolescent target audience to separate the animation’s antebellum racial message from its believe-in-yourself moral. “Dumbo” has been long due for a makeover.

Enter Tim Burton. His live-action “Dumbo” isn’t a poignant tear-jerker like the original. It’s a children’s adventure as imagined by the guy who brought you “Batman.”

Gone are the crows and the beloved Timothy Q. Mouse. Instead, Dumbo, separated from his mother after she wrecks the

big top in an effort to protect him, is befriended by two motherless children, Milly and Joe (Nico Parker and Findley Hobbins), who belong to Holt Farrier (Colin Farrell) a former trick-riding horseman who lost an arm in World War I.

Priggish Milly doesn’t see a circus in her future and, inspired by Madame Curie, uses scientific principles and experimentation to teach Dumbo to fly. She’s assisted in this effort by her ebullient little brother and a beautiful French aerialist named Colette (Eva Green).

The original Dumbo story takes up the first act of the new movie. In act two, Michael Keaton appears as V.A. Vandevere, the evil Walt Disney-esque owner of the Dreamland theme park who buys Dumbo’s tattered circus from Max Medici (Danny DeVito).

Keaton and Burton have reunited to deliver a beautifully stylized, Gotham-dark cartoon in which good triumphs over evil.

The elephant in the room is that Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus closed in 2017 largely because it eliminated its pachyderm act after animal rights groups objected to the manner in which the animals were trained and treated in captivity.

No snappy songs, no talking animals, and few black folks to speak of, the new “Dumbo” successfully sidesteps the animation’s problematic issues. So can we finally put a fork in the argument over blackface?

When elephants fly.