The Circulation of Blackface:
Nostalgia and Tradition in US Minstrel Performance of the Early 1920s

by

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Abstract

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Due to related issues of distribution and technology, the minstrel show was no longer a commercially viable form of professional entertainment in the second decade of the twentieth century. But the minstrel show did not disappear. Instead, it was absorbed into the technological mass-culture media that was either invented or reached new prominence during the era: national advertisements, promotional products, printed scripts, sheet music, audio recording, and film. This dissertation looks at the first years of the 1920s and analyzes the methods through which minstrelsy's elements were consumed by the US public, the individuals who circulated these conventions, and the racial hegemony of the time period.

Some complicated questions arise when minstrelsy is mediatized. How are the show's conventions affected? And its message? What type of reification occurs under these conditions? In what way are there opportunities, particularly for minority performers, to challenge the racist hegemony when faced with such powerful, seductive, and lucrative performances?

The chapters of this dissertation are a series of interlocked case studies that examine the pervasiveness of blackface and minstrel tropes in different levels and areas of US society. Chapter two examines how the legacy of Aunt Jemima helped shape the pancake mix advertising campaigns of the 1920s. Chapter three focuses on the mail-order amateur theatrical industry and the minstrel shows written specifically for non-professional performers. Chapter four contrasts three vaudeville circuits, their routes, and their business practices: Big Time white vaudeville; the Theatre Owners' Booking Association, a black circuit; and the Joe Bren Theatrical Company, which toured the country helping community groups stage minstrel shows. The final chapter analyzes the black musical comedies which performed on Broadway: *Shuffle Along* being the most famous and influential, but also lesser-known works such as *Put and Take*, *How Come*, and *Chocolate Dandies*. What this dissertation aims to prove is just how central blackface and minstrelsy still were to ideas of racial formation, how technology aided and changed these messages, and how adaptable these racist caricatures were to changing social conditions.

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Introduction

"Greeted on 'Change": The Circulation of Race and Culture in the United States

In a 1926 essay of cultural criticism titled "The Negro-Art Hokum," African American journalist, poet, and novelist George Schuyler wrote:

> Because a few writers with a paucity of themes have seized upon imbecilities of the Negro rustics and clowns and palmed them off as authentic and characteristic Aframerican behavior, the common notion that the black American is so "different" from his white neighbor has gained wide currency. The mere mention of the word "Negro" conjures up in the average white American's mind a composite stereotype of Bert Williams, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Tom, Jack Johnson, Florian Slappey, and the various monstrosities scrawled by the cartoonists.[1]

The quotation pointedly describes the construction of US racial identity as a jumble of popular- and mass-culture images from different eras grouped together and equated with blackness. The "composite stereotype" described by Schuyler is a mixture of real entertainers and fictional characters from print and advertising, an amalgam that simultaneously connotes laziness, servitude, and violence. These figures, who reappear throughout this project, each represent a different method of racial embodiment or impersonation in the US cultural landscape: Bert Williams, the most famous black blackface comedian in US history; Jack Johnson, boxer and sometime vaudevillian who won the heavyweight title in 1910 and was then prosecuted for dalliances with white women; Uncle Tom, icon of quiet black suffering and subservience from literature, the stage, and film; Aunt Jemima, Mammy stereotype and pancake shill; and Florian Slappey, main character of the dialect-laden stories written by Octavus Roy Cohen for the *Saturday Evening Post*. These people and caricatures, famous in different eras starting back in the 1850s and in arenas from the live stage to the market shelf, together created a patchwork image of blackness for the dominant white society—an image accrued over eighty years of US cultural production.

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[1] George S. Schuyler, "The Negro-Art Hokum," in *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance, 1920–1940,* ed. James Hatch and Leo Hamalian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 405.

Economics and class are implicit throughout Schuyler's critique, as his conception of "the average white American's mind" can be inferred from the list: both the *Post* character and the face of ready-mix pancakes allude to a middle-class domesticity. In Schuyler's calculation, "average" means more than "general"; it means economically stable, even prosperous. Also, that these images have gained "currency" is evocative, denoting coinage and circulation, the flow of ideas and goods and money. Another metaphor from the quotation hints at the frustrations felt by blacks about cultural representations of blackness: imbecilities "palmed... off" as genuine. The demeaning fake authenticity is a crooked game of chance with loaded dice or a marked card. In this situation, of course, the house always wins.

I must admit to using Schuyler *against* Schuyler as an introduction to my project. My reading of race here is contrary to Schuyler's own beliefs as described in the rest of the article. He argues that African American art is the same as white art and should not be judged by separate, less rigorous criteria; he finds such efforts patronizing and infantilizing. But he extends his ideas about art criticism to the formation of race itself. For Schuyler, "[T]he Aframerican is merely a lampblacked Anglo-Saxon,"[2] a phrase he uses to erase ideas of race difference. He is saying all race is racism, and expresses it metaphorically by referencing blackface makeup.

His argument is valid: relying on race difference is a cheap way of inflating an artwork's aesthetic value, but it ignores any positive elements of racial ideology or any oppressive aspects of racist hegemony. A week later, Langston Hughes responded to Schuyler in the same magazine, the *Nation*. His essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," refutes Schuyler by stressing an essential difference in temperament between blacks and whites. "The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs," he writes in defense of a black racial individualism.[3] His perspective, as noble as Schuyler's in that both concern political advancement and social empowerment through artistic production, fails to account for the way racial ideologies are formed or how a racist hegemony is perpetuated. A position between these two conceptualizations is navigated in this dissertation: race is not based in biology or a difference of soul; nor is race merely blackface paint.

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[2] Ibid.

In the US in the 1920s, race underwent a shift in how it was conceptualized and understood. At that time the performance of race was newly conveyed through different technological media, and this dissertation analyzes works of art amidst and alongside the technologies then reaching fruition: film and recordings and advertisements most directly, but also train travel, the automobile, wire service, and the parcel post. These technologies exerted economic and even artistic pressure on the cultural arena, which in turn altered the way messages of race were received by various publics. As Matthew Jacobson perceptively put it, "To write about race in American culture is to exclude virtually nothing."[4] Jacobson is saying that all of US culture *involves* race. But the cultural form most central to *defining* race was the minstrel show.

***

Minstrelsy an Institution

Minstrelsy is a changing yet lasting phenomenon in US culture, an entertainment form that has adapted to any number of social, political, and economic fluctuations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The minstrel show proper developed out of the performances of white racial impersonation that were part of the cultural landscape from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Dale Cockrell finds this racial habitation on the professional stage and in seasonal mummer parades of Northern urban areas.[5] The direct antecedents to the minstrel show were the individual blackface entertainers who populated and then dominated the variety show stage in the 1830s. The most famous "Ethiopian delineator" was Thomas D. "Daddy" Rice, whose Jim Crow persona immediately became a sensation first in the US and then abroad.[6] The minstrel show, a full evening's program devoted solely to the songs and antics of a group of ersatz black men, arose in the early 1840s. The phenomenal success of the Virginia Minstrels in 1843 spawned innumerable imitators, and for the rest of the century the minstrel show was a commanding form of entertainment, recognized nationally and internationally as an authentically American creation.

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[3] Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in ibid., 412.

[4] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 11.

The tripartite structure of these early shows established the model used well into the twentieth century, which was able to highlight both individual talent and group performance. In the opening section, called the walkaround, the performers entered together and arranged themselves in front of a semi-circle of chairs facing the audience. A white interlocutor, the only actor not in blackface, was ostensibly the master of ceremonies; his authority was constantly undermined by the endman characters, traditionally named Tambo and Bones after their instruments. The walkaround section placed humorous dialogue of elaborate wordplay alongside songs both sentimental and comedic. The middle section, or olio (which means miscellany or hodge-podge), was a collection of short skits, solo songs, and stump speeches. The stump speech, a central characteristic of the minstrel show, featured a performer delivering a malaprop-laced tirade on current events or pressing social problems. Like much of the minstrel show, the seemingly straightforward comedy of pompous oration hid a complicated message. These routines simultaneously expressed a real social anxiety while humorously undercutting the speaker's ability to fully comprehend or change it. The final section of an evening's program was a comedy skit featuring the whole company in contained and chaotic circumstances.[7]

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[5] See the chapters "Blackface on the Early American Stage" and "Blackface in the Streets" in Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[6] In addition to Cockrell, recent books that historicize Rice and the transition from solo blackface performances to the minstrel show include: W.T. Lhamon, jr., "An Extravagant and Wheeling Stranger," introduction to *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

These formal elements of the 1840s minstrel show still existed in the 1920s, sometimes wholesale and sometimes in pieces. In addition to the structure, audiences quickly became accustomed to the show's content and expected a certain type of song and style of humor. Another definitional trope was the character of the down-trodden (or lazy, or shiftless) African American, who usually worries about money and schemes for the easiest way to get it. Ragged costuming and contorted dances were the norm for these figures. And the most crucial element to the minstrel show, so obvious yet so in need of being stated, was blackface; the makeup supplied the necessary racial impersonation and grotesquerie to the proceedings. The continued endurance of blackface is a key theme of this dissertation.

The performances of the 1840s and 1850s were undoubtedly exercises in racial domination, but as Eric Lott has persuasively argued, these first minstrel shows must not be read purely as carnivalesque japery or race hatred. Rather, the performances, characters, and songs exhibited a "dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy"—a nearness and attraction amidst the anger and denigration.[8] Lott carefully limits his history to antebellum minstrel culture, and one of the main ideas analyzed in this project is what happens to such flickering when it is riven by technological mediation.

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[7] A collection of skits are anthologized in Gary D. Engle, ed., *This Grotesque Essence: Plays from the American Minstrel Stage* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

[8] Lott, 18.

The next major change to US minstrelsy occurred after the Civil War, when African Americans became professional entertainers. Hicks's Original Georgia Minstrels was the first, and many other black minstrel troupes followed. In the late nineteenth century, they were the real innovators of the form. The history of blacks in blackface—in minstrelsy, vaudeville, and the nascent form of the musical comedy—has been historicized elsewhere,[9] but it is sufficient for this project to state that by the twentieth century, US audiences were quite comfortable seeing corked-up African Americans on the stage.

In the twentieth century the minstrel show lost much of its social importance and cultural impact. This decline was not a vague matter of relevance or quality; the minstrel show was no longer an economically viable form of professional entertainment and no longer commanded attention in the theatrical centers of the country. Article after article in the black and white entertainment trade papers of the 1910s and 1920s discussed the decline, as in this 1923 piece by white minstrel impresario Leroy White titled "Minstrelsy an Institution." His boosterism of the institution is expected:

> I have often been asked if minstrelsy is dying out. I, for one, say no—positively no.... Some minstrel shows have made the mistake of drifting away from the minstrel idea a little and have found that it hurts somewhat.... We find conditions gradually righting themselves all over our routes, and, we believe, it's only a question of a very short time till the country is back to normalcy.[10]

The fascination with "dying," "the minstrel idea," and "normalcy" was commonplace to how minstrelsy was discussed at the time. So is the notion that minstrelsy is indicative of a national normalcy; or, even more accurately, that minstrelsy can help in a *return* to normalcy.

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[9] See Annemarie Bean, James Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); Thomas Riis, *Just Before Jazz: Black Musical Theatre in New York, 1890–1915* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989); Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980); Henry T. Sampson, *The Ghost Walks: A Chronological History of Blacks in Show Business, 1865–1910* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1988); Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[10] Leroy White, "Minstrelsy an Institution," *Billboard,* December 15, 1923.

From a historian's point of view, arguing over the death of an art form is as silly and arbitrary as picking a date when it began. The death of minstrelsy in the 1910s and 1920s is really the dearth of minstrelsy, and this project analyzes not the form's cessation but its dissolution and atomization. All that is solid melts into air, for minstrelsy did not disappear or molder in the earth. It was absorbed into the emergent media of the early twentieth century which eventually overtook not just minstrelsy but all live theatre forms in terms of economic and cultural dominance. Elements of minstrelsy endured at all levels of US society.

General histories of minstrelsy mostly confine themselves to the nineteenth century, with anything later relegated to a footnote or epilogue. In these books, minstrelsy's decline is rarely discussed in material or economic terms; the focus remains on changing aesthetics (the public was bored and the shows were too large) or an awakening racial consciousness (African Americans asserting their self-identity caused society to view minstrelsy distastefully). Consequently, histories of twentieth-century minstrelsy fall into two categories: either they are biographies of specific entertainers like Bert Williams and Stepin Fetchit, or they analyze minstrelsy within a single medium other than the stage—usually film, advertising, radio, or the recording industry.[11] This latter category always references the nineteenth-century roots of the form, but with few exceptions fails to acknowledge that live minstrelsy was still being performed. An aim of this project is to extend the discussion of minstrelsy into the 1920s and examine how both live and mediated minstrelsy supported and reinforced each other.

Blackface studies is the term I use for another group of cultural histories that covers some of the same terrain as the histories of minstrelsy. Books in this field trace examples of racism and racial impersonation from the earliest manifestations of Jim Crow up to the present, across decades and media. Many books in the genre[12] are examined in detail later, but the exemplar of the type is W.T. Lhamon's *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*. His central argument rests on the idea of the "blackface lore cycle." As he describes it:

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[11] Bert Williams, film, advertising, and recordings are discussed in detail in subsequent chapters. A recent biography of Stepin Fetchit is Mel Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit: The Life and Times of Lincoln Perry* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005). An excellent history of a radio program which was foundational to the medium is Melvin Patrick Ely's *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (1991; repr., Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001).

> The small fraction of (popular) culture with staying power pumps up into a cycle with momentum by way of a strong web of internal tensions. Its various parts pull in different directions—toward violent anger, toward farce, toward delicate myth, against pretentious eloquence. Gradually a web of internal tensions evolves that can absorb and counterbalance these pressures.[13]

Through the vague terminology of tensions, pressures, and counterbalances, Lhamon grants himself license to join together moments of cultural history across centuries and contexts. For example, in a single paragraph Lhamon follows a "persisting template" of interactive racial relations that starts with the dancing performances on the New York docks in 1820 and continues up through silent films, talking pictures, TV in the fifties, and finally MTV.[14] Later, he connects various whistled impressions of trains "from 1820 to the end of the 1920s, from vernacular presentation to theatre, through literature to mass film."[15] What Lhamon discusses as a sophisticated concatenation of popular and mass culture in the US, I believe is actually coincidence and conjecture—a historiographic method akin to the nationalist mysticism of the "Lincoln and Kennedy Assassination Connections" I once saw on a restaurant placemat.

Lhamon justifies his lore cycle through a curious amalgam of social theorists: "Minstrel performers... were making dramatic the corporeal inscriptions, the discipline and surveillance, the hegemony and habitus which Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu have since made proverbial."[16] A harmonious combination of these three seems highly unlikely, and Lhamon proves throughout the book that Gramscian hegemony and Bourdieu-ian habitus are merely window dressing for what is a Foucauldian genealogy of blackface—and is in fact a bad interpretation of Foucault's historiography. What Lott termed a dialectical pairing of love and theft, Lhamon calls an ahistorical combination of disavowal and need. Beholden to no historical specificity, Lhamon freely connects whichever dots he wishes in constructing his narrative of racial and cultural heritage. Books that mirror and sometimes reference Lhamon's lore cycle begin with their conclusions, usually a tidy summation of US culture as an entity which continually supports racial divisions, and pick only those details which support it—a method of thinking and writing which is at best confusing and at worst unethical. These books pervert the notion of racism, and undermine racist motivations for acts of oppression and aggression.

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[12] Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult and Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006); Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999).

[13] W.T. Lhamon, jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 124.

[14] Ibid., 5.

[15] Ibid., 91.

Against any obfuscating lore cycles, this dissertation works with clear definitions of minstrelsy and blackface, both considered concretely and grounded in a performance tradition. Minstrelsy is a form of entertainment, not something that is entertaining: an objective designator as opposed to the subjective descriptor. In comparison, racism and stereotyping may be entertaining but they are not entertainments. The terms "minstrel tropes" and "minstrel conventions" refer to qualities of the minstrel show that since the nineteenth century were part of its definition: costumes, jokes, songs, routines. The blackface mask is the main object for signaling the category of entertainment, its presence indicating the promise of the intention to amuse—similar to the way that, as Slavoj Žižek points out, the laugh track in television sitcoms convinces the viewer they are enjoying themselves.[17] These designations allow for an analysis of specific cultural incidents based in material and economic concerns.

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[16] Ibid., 127.
[17] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso Press, 1989), 35.

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Quilting Racism

My methodological and analytical framework builds upon two theoretical disciplines I believe are necessary for a discussion of blackface and minstrel performance during the 1920s: postcolonial race theory and Marxist cultural materialism derived from the Frankfurt School. Not only do these two disciplines address aspects of minstrelsy like racial impersonation and cultural economics, but they are also able to answer for each other's failings. That is, Frankfurt School theorists are criticized for ignoring race as a social factor; as Edward Said writes, "Frankfurt School theory... is stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire."[18] These concerns are central to postcolonialism. Conversely, postcolonialism's lack of mediation between economics and culture makes it resistant to historical specificity. Crystal Bartolovich notes in the introduction to *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies*, a collection of essays dedicated to bridging the gaps between those three terms, "What distinguishes a specifically Marxist critique... from a more general anti-colonialism, is the insistence that cultural analysis of the everyday (and the extraordinary alike) is inseparable from questions of political economy."[19] By examining a particular kind of racial impersonation and the specific economic and social factors that supported it, this project aims at an effective combining of these schools of thought.

One of the innovations of postcolonial theory, starting with Frantz Fanon, is that it acknowledges the social construction of race and analyzes race as performance, at least partially. These ideas are succinctly expressed in two famous statements from Fanon's *Black Skin, White*

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[18] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 278.

[19] Crystal Bartolovich, introduction to *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 6.

Masks: "I am overdetermined from without," and "I can't go to a film without seeing myself."[20] The first encapsulates the notion of race as mapped onto the body through physical characteristics, primarily phenotype. The second describes the colonized subject's reaction to the mediated cultural products of the colonizers: like the imbecilities that angered Schuyler, film's powerful depiction of racial difference and subservience imprints itself on Fanon. With an understanding of how belief systems are created and maintained, later thinkers like Said and Homi Bhabha (to name two prominent individuals) remove race from the antipodal thinking of a black and white binary.[21] Although the study here deals almost exclusively with white and African American cultural and social interactions, it does not indulge in nor is it predicated upon easy dualities.

Specifically turning to the United States, a helpful and applicable definition of race comes from Michael Omi and Howard Winant, whose work has an obvious affinity for Fanon's themes. "The effort must be made," they implore, "to understand race as an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle.... [*R*]*ace is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies*."[22] Crucially, this definition discusses race as an effect of political conflict: a method of categorization that represents a concurrent (and changing) social negotiation. When looking at how race was conceptualized in the 1920s, Omi and Winant's definition exposes as false the biological underpinnings for racial divisions. It also allows blackface to be analyzed as a material symptom that exists as part of culture—but a symptom (and this is in direct opposition to Lhamon's theorization) altered by the technological method of its presentation.

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[20] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markham (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 116, 140.

[21] See also Henry Louis Gates, jr., *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985); Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[22] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55. Emphasis in original.

Discussions of race in this dissertation are intertwined with analyses of popular culture, mass culture, and technology. For these interrelated ideas, the Frankfurt School thinkers provide inspiration and guidance. In the twentieth century, dialectical thinking of the Marxist tradition attempted to articulate a critical social theory of capitalism. "Social theory," as concisely summarized by Alex Callinicos,

> has concerned itself more than anything else with the three main dimensions of social power—economic relations, which have reached their furthest development in the market system known as capitalism; the ideologies through which forms of special power are justified and the place in the world of those subject to them defined; and the various patterns of political domination.[23]

Each of the points in this triad—economics, ideology, domination—are explored within the ensuing chapters. Marxist philosophizing in the social/cultural sphere begin with works by Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci in the 1910s and 1920s which explain how the proletariat accepted a subservient role in society when they were the very power that kept society in place.[24] Lukács and Gramsci articulated notions of reified consciousness and hegemonic control which re-inscribed a capitalistic hierarchy, and Frankfurt School theorists starting in the 1930s built upon these models. This work focused more on individual elements of "the culture industry," a phrase coined by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They were concerned with the content of repeated messages of repression and with the form through which these messages were delivered: "Culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together."[25] Horkheimer and Adorno believed the culture industry enforced notions of false amusement, false ideology, false consciousness; that it created conditions of want and guilt and then sold something to assuage negative feelings. This dissertation discusses the role of technology in sustaining a particular racial hegemony, and its attitude toward technology is as critical, even distrustful, as Horkheimer and Adorno's.

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[23] Alex Callinicos, *Social Theory: A Historical Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 1.

[24] See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1968); Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

The distinction between popular culture and mass culture is also an important aspect of this discussion of minstrelsy. During the 1920s the popular and the mass were in a moment of uneasy overlap, with technology central to the imposition of the latter over the former. For this reason, Michael Kammen terms the years 1908 through 1938 as the era of proto-mass culture.[26] What separates popular from mass has nothing to do with aesthetics or commercialization, both were part of the cultural marketplace. Rather, the categorical differences stem from notions of distribution and interaction. To quote Kammen's useful distinctions between popular and mass culture:

> The somewhat less important criteria involve matters of scale... and increasing dependence upon technologies of visual access, entertainment, and information rather than avenues of personal access, self-instruction, or amusement.... Which leads to the distinction that matters most. I regard popular culture—*not always but more often than not*—as participatory and interactive, whereas mass culture... *more often than not* induced passivity and the privation of culture.[27]

A shift from private, passive, and mediated to public, interactive, and live shapes the structure of this dissertation.

Building on Kammen's definitions, mass culture imposes a sense of sameness (to reference the culture industry). As Andreas Huyssen writes, "Mass culture depends on technologies of mass production and mass reproduction and thus on the homogenization of difference."[28] By contrast, the popular can be thought of as an arena of and for social conflict and plurality, as Lott describes the antebellum minstrel stage.[29] An idea examined in detail throughout this dissertation is that the blackface cultural products of the 1920s included elements of both mass and popular. An example is the amateur-minstrel industry, the subject of chapter three. Amateur minstrel scripts were mail-order products, mass-produced for a national public; yet, in order to be successful entertainments, they relied on interactions within local communities and the participation of non-professional community members.[30] An uneasy awareness of technology and homogenization marks all the cultural products under consideration.

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[25] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94.

[26] Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 17. Kammen specifically employs the term "overlap" instead of "transition" to describe the movement between popular and mass culture over time. Ibid., 21.

[27] Ibid., 22. Emphasis in original.

The combination of race, culture, and technology leads back to the pairing of postcolonial race theory with Marxist cultural theory as a way of best analyzing minstrelsy and blackface. Both postcolonialism and Marxism use a set of related terms to convey the idea of circulation: movement, motion, currency, flow, surplus, excess. When employed in subsequent chapters, this terminology means the simultaneous circulation of ideas, products, and money throughout US society.[31] As Paul Gilroy notes in a discussion of black music and rationalizations of authenticity:

> The aridity of those three crucial terms—production, circulation, and consumption—does scant justice to the convoluted... processes to which they now refer. Each of them, in contrasting ways, hosts a politics of race and power which is hard to grasp, let alone fully appreciate.[32]

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[28] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 9.

[29] Lott, 17–18.

[30] Kammen uses Norman Rockwell to make a similar point about the elusiveness of the definitions he establishes. "How does one categorize a Norman Rockwell illustration on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* when its circulation edged close to three million—popular culture or mass? The answer must be both, of course, because Rockwell's illustrations are, in their own curious way, beyond category." Kammen, 21.

[31] My multi-layered use of circulation is inspired by Žižek's combining of Marx's and Freud's conceptualizations of the fetish. See the chapter "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?" in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

[32] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 103.

Almost as if in response, Bartolovich writes that the persistence of material inequality "makes it doubly important to situate all cultural works and forms in their *specificity*, with reference to their conditions of production and circulation at their point of origin as well as in wider circles."[33] This study attempts to grasp and appreciate a particular racial and power dynamic through its specific manifestations.

As an example of the overlap between postcolonialism and Marxism, I would like to examine an oft-cited quotation from Bhabha that discusses circulation as a social phenomenon of ephemeral ideas and tangible goods. In a seminal article on racial belief systems in colonial discourse, he states:

> For it is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency: ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability.

Bhabha's phrase "force of ambivalence" is especially clever, seemingly contradictory but actually conveying a sense of the necessary power imbalance of imperialism. He further defines stereotype as something that "must always be in *excess* of what can be empirically proved or logically construed."[34] Though the focus of Bhabha's essay is on the ambivalence of the stereotype, the two terms I want to emphasize are "currency" and "excess"—both of which are used by Marx and Marxist theorists in the service of economic and cultural analysis.

Currency is a loaded word, etymologically linked to fluidity, money, and time. For Marx, the money-form was dialectically both a measure of value and a medium of circulation within the capitalist economic system—thus combining the three main definitions of currency. The money-form symbolizes the intangible concept of value, allowing one manufactured product to be exchanged for another product through a socially derived equivalent measure of wealth. This "social metabolism"[35] was essential to the industrial revolution, when both the market and the consumer were physically distant from the producer and any exchange of value had to pass through a money-form intermediary. So what for Marx is the socially created symbol of value is elaborated on by Bhabha to explain socially created symbols of racial hierarchy.

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[33] Bartolovich and Lazarus, 14. Emphasis in original.

[34] Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 95. Emphasis in original.

A related term, important to the continued success or relevance of these monetary and racial currencies, is surplus. Stereotypes, like goods, must be produced beyond the point of saturation; there must always be a remainder to allow the stereotype to retain its effectiveness (excess of stereotype is another way of saying force of ambivalence). The objective traces of race exist in the marketplace as a surplus of goods. (This glut of racist effluvia is today coddled as kitsch: postcards, piggy banks, salt-and-pepper shakers, and so on.) Žižek writes that a combined ideological and material surplus allows racism to be "quilted" onto a society across class or geographic categories. In ways echoing Fanon's overdetermination and Bhabha's force of ambivalence, Žižek writes: "Even *racism* could be elitist or populist.... The 'quilting' performs the totalization by means of which the free floating of ideological elements is halted, fixed—that is to say, by means of which they become parts of the structured network of meaning."[36] Blackface and minstrel elements are floating signifiers of race delivered through technology to various levels and areas of US society, which quilt together a porous yet stable ideology of race and racism.

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Circulating Race in the Machine Age

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[35] Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 198.

[36] Žižek, 87. Emphasis in original. He also dissects ideas of nationalism in this manner, writing, "It is the same for all so-called 'mass-media symbols' of America.... [T]he point is that this vision of America itself achieves its identity by identifying itself with the signifier 'Coke.'" Ibid., 96.

This dissertation focuses on the United States during the first half of the 1920s, and examines the circulation of blackface and minstrelsy through a series of interrelated case studies. The subjects of the chapters rarely reference one another explicitly; in many ways they were completely unaware of each other. The simultaneous "calendrical coincidence"[37] of these events, items, and people is an example of floating signifiers quilted together to create a dominant racial perception.

The 1920s is a crucial decade in the history of US theatrical entertainments and their relationship to technological and industrial innovation. Media culture drove live performance toward obsolescence; at the same time, performances themselves adapted to technology and acknowledged the encroachment of these new media in everyday life. The US was in the middle of what has been called the Machine Age. David Nasaw has tracked the importance of electricity for the rise of public entertainments starting in the late nineteenth century,[38] entertainments which were replaced by more domestic amusements as the Machine Age continued. Gilman Ostrander notes, "Among the most talked-about innovations of the twenties were the household appliances that operated on electricity."[39] This was at the same time as the explosion of industrial production and commodity consumption in American life. Ostrander continues, "America in the twenties was a nation of avid, astonished, and somewhat aimless consumers amid movies and records and radios and appliances and cars and trucks and airplanes and on and on, ad infinitum."[40] The effects of this exponential increase in speed and consumption are felt throughout this project.

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[37] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso Press, 1991), 33.

[38] David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 6–8.

[39] Gilman M. Ostrander, *American Civilization in the First Machine Age: 1890–1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 221.

[40] Ibid., 226–27.

Race formation derived from a mixture of social Darwinism, eugenics, legislative restrictions, brutality, and "common sense."[41] The changing parameters *of* race difference within a persistent belief *in* race difference should be viewed relative to the fluctuating ideas of immigration and whiteness. Two recent histories have addressed these standards and ideologies. According to Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color*, the major shift in US racial thinking from the 1840s to the 1920s was from whiteness equated exclusively with an American nativism to the inclusion of European immigrant groups.[42] David Roediger seconds this trend in *Working toward Whiteness*. He tracks how immigrants moved from a category of "inbetweenness" to full inclusion in whiteness, a process that included learning to be "not black": as he devastatingly phrases it, immigrants "gain[ed] fuller humanity" through a "participation in inhumanity."[43] Roediger is always attuned to the role of culture in establishing and reinforcing social behavior. Echoing the idea of minstrel elements as floating signifiers, he writes, "Blackface, blackness, and black culture was often useful as a symbol of freedom and as a commodity, but rarely as an enduring or vigorously sought identification."[44]

This dissertation analyzes minstrelsy in the realm of entertainment, but the cultural products and their general acceptance are tied in various ways to the political and social movements of and by African Americans. Blacks felt a sense of social advancement in the early 1920s, in the wake of World War I (and the participation of black soldiers) and the Northern, urban migration of blacks heading toward jobs and away from Southern oppression. This uplift happened concurrent with the "Red Summer" of 1919. As Barbara Foley notes, the phrase has a double meaning: in that year incredibly bloody race riots erupted in cities around the country and there was an intensification of racist antiradicalization after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. These upheavals created the conditions for a resurgent "100 percent American" nativism on the one hand and a black cultural nationalism on the other, both based in "the essentialization of race, the fetishization of place, and the characteristic function of the organic trope [of 'roots' and 'soil'] in mediating between the two."[45] As Jacobson's, Roediger's, and Foley's findings highlight, the ground for race thinking and racialist hegemony was shifting from a confusing plurality of "nation-races" to a standardization of "color-race" categories such as white, black, and yellow.[46] This idea is central to my project because blackface cultural products navigated the contested terrain and helped literally solidify blackness.

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[41] In summarizing the *US v. Bhagat Singh Thind* Supreme Court case of 1923 denying the citizenship of an Asian Indian, David Roediger notes, "Unable to demonstrate intellectually his nonwhiteness, the justices told Thind that everyone (or at least the 'common' American) simply knew that he was not white. 'Common speech' and 'popular understanding' were to be the new tests for whiteness." David R. Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 59.

[42] Jacobson, 68.

[43] Roediger, 34.

[44] Ibid., 184.

The case studies which comprise each chapter are discussed in their specificity, and each is representative of a different industry or field of cultural production from national advertising to amateur minstrelsy to live vaudeville to black musical comedies. The order of the chapters reflects the larger themes and goals of the project, as they move from the very broad and nationally consumed image of Aunt Jemima to the individual performances of a New York musical. The costs associated with creating, buying, and experiencing the cultural products rise with each step toward scarcity. Yet the most exclusive of the products under discussion, the Broadway musicals, then utilized the various distributive methods discussed in the previous chapters to sell low-cost reproductions of themselves.

Chapter two is an examination of Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix advertisements: their appropriation of nineteenth-century minstrel tropes, placement in magazines, and perpetuation of a particular derogatory image of African American womanhood. The fundamental social tension in the ads is between the glossy image of Southern plantation life and the realities of the technocratic Machine Age. Chapter three focuses on mail-order amateur minstrelsy and one of the most successful playwrights of amateur minstrel scripts, Arthur Kaser. The chapter follows the scripts on the path from playwright to publishing house to the organizations which purchased and performed them. Amateur theatricals in general is a largely overlooked element in US theatre history, and here it proves that the scope and reach of minstrelsy extended far beyond the prominent urban centers of the country.

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[45] Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 162.
[46] The terms "nation-races" and "color-race" are culled from Roediger, 11.

The remaining two chapters describe live events and performers. The centrality of circulation as an analytical tool continues—in fact, circulation becomes more difficult and convoluted when people are moving around the country. Chapter four contrasts three vaudeville routes that criss-crossed the US: a professional white circuit, a circuit of black entertainers, and a company that taught amateur groups how to stage a minstrel show. Each employed blackface actors in their entertainments, for different reasons and with different results. The final chapter analyzes the black musical comedies that played on Broadway between 1921 and 1924. These complicated performances combined regressive minstrel stereotypes with progressive racial imagery to appease the largest number of audiences. The most successful of these musicals traveled as touring productions and further circulated in the form of sheet music and recordings.

Blackface and minstrelsy bind the chapters together, cutting across class and geography and intersecting with the never unrelated topics of race, technology, and culture. Though the case studies are discussed separately, these events and products circulated through society simultaneously. The cumulative effect of this project, I hope, is a snapshot of racism quilted through all levels of society. A better metaphor than snapshot may be x-ray, with blackface and minstrelsy showing the skeletal frame for the racism of the body politic.

The series of dialectical tensions analyzed throughout the project contrast notions of class identity, racial formation, and nationhood. These tensions are examined both within individual artworks and in how the artworks relate to other social factors. The most pervasive pairing, one whose impact is felt in every instance of minstrel japery or corked-up impersonation, is between the concepts of nostalgia and tradition. Both are emotional terms, both involve the past, and both suggest methods and reasons for performing the past in the present. They are employed carefully in the ensuing chapters, with their differences explained in comparison to each other and within the context of the US in the 1920s. Nostalgia is a mediated and capitalistic idea, more concerned with historical erasure than historical accuracy. Tradition, on the other hand, quotes, evokes, and utilizes the past. Through this materialistic conceptualization of tradition, black blackface entertainers, who experienced intense racism as they were circulating racist images, are discussed as able to alter performances and layer productions with double meanings.[47]

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That Large and Representative Class of Individuals

In the introduction to *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott reprints an article about T.D. Rice and a black stevedore named Cuff which purports to tell the tale of the inspiration for the first blackface variety performance. Lott calls it "the least trustworthy and most accurate account of American minstrelsy's appropriation of black cultural practices" because of its obvious falsity and its clear representation of the time period's layered encodings of racial anxieties.[48] I would like to end with a newspaper article that, analogous to Lott's, encapsulates the tensions, aggressions, and disparities of an era: the divide between African American blackface entertainers and their white audiences. The following (not at all trustworthy) story is about Billy Kersands, one of the most famous black minstrels in history. Though the short piece appears in a 1903 edition of the *Indianapolis Freeman* and centers on a performer who died in 1915, its underlying ideas and message could easily apply to Tim Moore, Flournoy Miller, Bert Williams, or any of the other professional black entertainers discussed here. As a parable of black and white relations within the realm of popular culture and live entertainment, it conveys all the social and economic imbalances that such an interaction contained. Here is the article in its entirety:

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[47] The idea of an African American "double-consciousness" comes from W.E.B. Du Bois's remarkable essay "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" that opens *The Souls of Black Folk*. See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (1903; New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999). It has been used as a method of analysis with African American artwork from music and painting to poetry and novels. Some of the best analyses in the field of African American theatre are by David Krasner. See David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) and David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895–1910* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

> THEY SERENADED "BILLY."
>
> How the Advent of a Colored Minstrel Was Greeted on 'Change.
>
> Billy Kersands, the famous comedian with Richards & Pringle's Georgia minstrels, while spending his vacation in New York last summer, dropped into the Stock Exchange one day and took a seat in the gallery, placidly surveying the howling multitude.
>
> A broker was one of the first to spy him. He was one of that large and representative class of individuals who can not see a black face pass without making facetious remarks. He promptly waved his hand.
>
> "Howdy, Uncle!" he greeted him, cheerily.
>
> Uncle beamed blandly through his spectacles, but made no sign of recognition.
>
> "Uncle, Uncle, I say!" shouted the facetious man of the floor.
>
> "Oh, this is rich," he exclaimed, seizing one friend and then another. "Isn't uncle a winner!" Soon a dozen lusty-voiced brokers lined up, and with heads thrown back they sang for the gratification of the solitary guest in the gallery "Old Black Joe."
>
> A hundred brokers turned to listen. It was pretty good singing, and they applauded and watched uncle. The latter looked placidly through his spectacles without any particular sign of enhanced interest.
>
> "What's the old scoundrel going to do?" queried the choristers perplexedly of their leader.
>
> "He don't even notice us," they complained.

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[48] Lott, 18–19.

> At this point uncle arose and stepped to the rail. Out of his trousers pocket he produced an old-fashioned copper cent. Tossing it easily to the glee club of brokers he resumed his seat and beamed upon them. There was a roar of derision from the floor of the exchange, the quartet broke up in palpable embarrassment, and the facetious broker swore fervently.
>
> "But I'd give anything to get that old fellow's point of view," he confessed, as he repeated the story that evening, but he would have been surprised if he had known the party was one who had entertained hundreds of thousands of people.[49]

With its social reversals and wordplay, the article could be a minstrel show stump speech, while it is also a cutting reversal of the minstrel show itself. The dialectically paired ideas of performer/spectator and black/white are inverted, as the solitary black professional is entertained by a group of whites singing a decades-old Stephen Foster tune. The Stock Exchange setting evokes the very hub of US capitalist circulation. The flows of capital brokered on the Exchange is contrasted with, and connected to, the copper penny tossed to the patronizing businessmen. Kersands, more than most people, was in a position to understand the aggression inherent in such an exchange of money for service. The central joke of the article is incredibly bitter: the white broker does in fact "get that old fellow's point of view," because of the embarrassment he felt in being shown his subservient position—an inferior economic, social, racial position proven to him when Kersands completed their transaction.

To this story I would like to add a bit more history, an emerging reality for performers in the 1920s unavailable during Kersands's heyday. By controlling more of the modes of production and creating more of the products themselves, African Americans altered the messages that circulated even as they used minstrel tropes and the blackface mask. In my reading of the cultural products created by black entertainers, they are able to overcome a stultifying and racist nostalgia through the manipulation of traditional minstrel tropes. This dissertation analyzes a single moment in the history of US entertainment, a moment that in a slight but very real way points toward a more democratic, egalitarian conception of race. This is a moment of history, thankfully the story does not end here.

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[49] "They Serenaded 'Billy,'" *Indianapolis Freeman*, January 24, 1903.

Chapter Two

"I'se in Town, Honey!": The Aunt Jemima Advertising Campaign

The tagline "I'se in Town, Honey!" was created for Aunt Jemima during the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and was featured in every Aunt Jemima Pancake Flour print advertisement for decades, up through the 1920s. My starting point for a discussion of minstrelsy and culture begins with Aunt Jemima, one of the most ubiquitous and recognizable blackface symbols in US history, because the trademark so completely capitalized on the promises and realities of industrialized production techniques and concurrent improved methods of communication. The icon's tagline readily captures many different aspects of the figure. It is warm, inviting, and enthusiastic; Aunt Jemima addresses the reader with friendship and speaks not of the product but of herself. The slogan (always in quotation marks, as if coming directly from the figure) is written in a slangy, minstrelized dialect endemical of a Southern blackness that objectified the speaker as simple, uneducated, and earthy. But there is a paradox to be found in the phrase "I'se in Town, Honey!" that complicates its message. Though it implied a personal invitation of servitude, this mass-produced slogan and image of Aunt Jemima was multiplied a million times over in magazine ads, on billboards, and on pancake boxes. The figure was always already in town: in the market, in the street, in the home. And this ubiquitous folksiness expanded upon and deepened the racial divisions—in society, in law, in discourse—that already existed in the post–World War I era.

These racial divisions were acutely felt at the time, and the Aunt Jemima image was the focus of ire from the African American community as an emblem of racism and derogatoriness.[1] Alain Locke's epoch-defining 1925 collection *The New Negro* includes an essay by Elise

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[1] Protests specifically against Aunt Jemima began in the pages of *The Crusader* as early as 1918. M.M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 152–53.

Johnson McDougald titled "The Task of Negro Womanhood," a sensitive portrait of the achievements and goals of black women in the decade. McDougald begins with a glimpse of some of the challenges African American women face. She writes:

> [E]ven in New York, the general attitude of mind causes the Negro woman serious difficulty. She is conscious that what is left of chivalry is not directed toward her. She realizes that the ideals of beauty, built up in the fine arts, have excluded her almost entirely. Instead, the grotesque Aunt Jemimas of the streetcar advertisements, proclaim only an ability to serve, without grace of loveliness. Nor does the drama catch her finest spirit. She is most often used to provoke the mirthless laugh of ridicule; or to portray feminine viciousness or vulgarity not peculiar to Negroes.

For these reasons, McDougald stresses, black women collectively have "a sense of personal inferiority."[2] This passage is remarkable for how it intuits the sociological impact of Jemima advertisements. Also, it contrasts the "fine arts" with mass culture—and describes how, in keeping with Locke's overall aesthetic/political project, salvation is to be found in high art. McDougald interestingly discusses the stage as a place between the high art and the mass, a realm of contestation. Drama *could* catch black womanhood's finest spirit, but does not. In keeping with the modernist mindset of the decade, drama occupies a middle ground between the idealized highbrow and the irredeemable low. The latter category included Aunt Jemima.[3]

But the icon was loved by some, as much as it was loathed by others. A singularly remarkable occurrence from the early 1920s proves the continued, desperate celebration of Aunt Jemima grotesquerie: the Mammy Monument which the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) wanted built on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The Mammy Monument Bill, a congressional land grant application, passed the US Senate in February 1923. Anticipating passage, the UDC selected a design for the monument that included "a mammy figure... cradling an infant and gazing at a young girl who stands beside her with her small hands in the woman's lap." The bill died in a House of Representatives committee, unremarked and unresolved.[4] In addition to this calcified representation of Mammy, versions of the pancake icon appeared on the stage. In October 1922, Aunt Jemima became "Vaudeville's Newest Headliner" when she played Keith's Palace Theatre in New York.[5] Aunt Jemima was the onstage persona of Tess Gardella, a white woman whose body type matched that of the advertising image. One review stated that "Aunt Jemima is just about 250 pounds of harmony and personality."[6] Standing in front of a backdrop showing "a river and levee scene" and a group of male musicians in chef's hats, the blackfaced Gardella sang jazz tunes and danced.[7] After a stay in New York, this Jemima began a tour around the county in Keith-sponsored houses. Gardella capitalized on this fame for the rest of the decade: She is most famous for originating the role of Queenie in the 1927 musical *Show Boat*. These complicated ways of enshrining or performing the Mammy/Jemima figure demonstrate just how widely recognized the image was in US society.

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[2] Elise Johnson McDougald, "The Task of Negro Womanhood," in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (1925; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1968), 369–70.

[3] For a definition of modernism's "strategy of exclusion," see Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), vii.

Officially, Aunt Jemima Pancake Flour was promoted in many different ways, most frequently and far-reaching in print advertisements. During the early part of the 1920s, there were several different kinds of Aunt Jemima ads being produced for national magazines, each with different illustrations and a different emphasis—on cost, quickness, taste, or nutrition. Two things remained consistent throughout the various campaigns: the image of the Aunt Jemima Pancake box and the mush-mouthed "I'se in Town, Honey!" invitation/slogan by the icon.

The focus of this chapter is on how Aunt Jemima as trademark was important to the company, the ad agency, and the product; no claims will be made about her fulfilling a psychological racist need for the US public or satisfying a society-wide desire to temporarily transgress racial boundaries and embody (or consume) the racial other.[8] Rather, I believe it is the icon's ubiquity, constantly showing up in towns across the country and appealing to various economic levels, that gives it currency. To illustrate this and to show how the stereotype capitalizes on the racialized beliefs of the era, the chapter delves into both the history of the Mammy image and that of mass production and mass marketing before settling on Aunt Jemima—in whom the always objectified and always repeatable blackface mask became amplified to a level that was, as McDougald reveals, inescapable.

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[4] A detailed description of the Mammy Monument, and the outcry in the black press, can be found in Micki McElya's *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 116–206.

[5] The Palace was the premiere vaudeville house of the most powerful vaudeville chain in the country.

[6] "New Shows this Week," *Variety*, October 27, 1922.

[7] "New Acts this Week," *Variety*, October 20, 1922.

Like several of the performers that will be examined in this dissertation, Aunt Jemima has been thoroughly historicized. But her "career" has been treated differently by historians: Not only is she continuous and ageless, but the various stages of her existence have been lumped together, to the detriment of the generational specificities of the icon's use in the marketplace and in society. Advertising historians focus too much on the content of the ads and their interchangeability, not on the method of circulation. Though the image's racism is important, it should be considered in conjunction with those national magazines that distributed it. The uniqueness of an advertising image's ability to reach the US consumer in the public and private realms must be taken into account in analyzing the impact of Aunt Jemima.

Serious historical analysis of Aunt Jemima begins at the same time as other seminal works examining African Americans in mass culture, a groundswell from the late 1960s and 1970s. Written in that time period were the first critical texts on African American dance (*Jazz Dance* in 1968), music (*The Music of Black Americans* in 1971), social identity (*The Black Image in the White Mind* in 1971), film (*Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* in 1973), minstrelsy (*Blacking Up* in 1974), and culture (*Black Culture and Black Consciousness* in 1977).[9] All are rightly critical of the treatment of blacks in their fields of study, yet they collectively established a historiographic legacy that avoided discussions of materiality in analyzing cultural impact; that is, racism is defined as a social reality and a social ill, with cultural products as expressions and evidence of it. Neither the quantity nor the quality of the material products are examined as contributing to the racism.

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[8] For such a reading, see Doris Smith Witt, "What Ever Happened to Aunt Jemima?: Black Women and Food in American Culture" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1995).

Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* serves as an example of this type of historical inquiry. Bogle limits his study to a single media, film, or adds others when they conveniently support his argument. For Bogle, four of the five categories of black filmic images came out of nineteenth-century minstrelsy. The fifth, the Buck stereotype, was created in 1915's *Birth of a Nation*. The thrust of Bogle's thesis can be summed up in this quotation from the beginning of the book:

> In the early days when all the black characters were still portrayed by white actors in blackface, there was nothing but the old character types. They sat like square boxes on a shelf. A white actor walked by, selected a box, and used it as a base for a very square, rigidly defined performance. Later, when real black actors played the roles and found themselves wedged into these categories, the history became one of actors battling against the types to create rich, stimulating, diverse characters.[10]

Bogle reverts to the materialist metaphor of a shopper in a supermarket in his effort to describe the rigidity and adaptability of stereotyping, but unfortunately does not carry it over into the rest of the book. What follows instead is a catalogue of actors and film roles placed in one of the five categories. He then celebrates attempts by African American actors to usurp the roles they were assigned. This leads, over the course of the interpretive history, to its own kind of essentializing through a combination of close readings and a selective use of biography. His analysis sometimes reaches the level of absurdity. Accompanying a photo of Louise Beavers as Aunt Delilah in the 1934 film version of *Imitation of Life* is this caption: "The screen's favorite domestic or its biggest phony? Check Louise Beavers' sly smile and take one look at those beautifully polished nails. Those hands never touched a dish in their life."[11] The implication of subversion is unsupported by anything in the film. Bogle falls for what Pierre Bourdieu calls "the illusion of the constancy of the nominal" or what Helen Scott labels "presentism."[12] Bogle constantly imposes a Civil Rights–era definition of the radical, subversive black artist onto previous generations.

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[9] Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Macmillan, 1968); Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971); George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper Row, 1971); Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th ed. (1973; repr., New York: Continuum Press, 2003); Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, thirtieth anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). In the preface to the thirtieth edition of *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Levine explicitly ties the genesis of his project to the Civil Rights movement. Levine, ix–xxi.

[10] Bogle, 4.

Directly relating to the topic of this chapter is Karen Sue Warren Jewell's 1976 dissertation "An Analysis of the Visual Development of a Stereotype: The Media's Portrayal of Mammy and Aunt Jemima as Symbols of Black Womanhood" that became the basis of *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of U.S. Social Policy*.[13] The focus of her dissertation is "the mass media in general and the visual media in particular" and their negative portrayals of Mammy and Aunt Jemima.[14] This sociological examination focuses on the move from advertising to film to television, and it stresses the minstrel show origins of the stereotype. Heavily influenced by Bogle (who is thanked in the acknowledgements), the work traces the changes of the Mammy figure in various media while implying an underlying, fundamental, ahistorical racist appeal of the character for a white inheritor/perpetrator/consumer.

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[11] Ibid., 65.

[12] Bourdieu, in his criticism of art and literature historians, refers to the imposition of twentieth-century definitions of writer and artist upon earlier centuries, when the parameters of these independent categories was in development. Scott writes of "the habit of projecting contemporary assumptions back into periods before their inception." See Pierre Bourdieu, "Field of Power, Literary Field and Habitus," in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 162; Helen Scott, "Was There a Time Before Race?: Capitalist Modernity and the Origins of Racism," in *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 168.

[13] Karen Sue Warren Jewell, "An Analysis of the Visual Development of a Stereotype: The Media's Portrayal of Mammy and Aunt Jemima as Symbols of Black Womanhood" (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 1976); Karen Sue Warren Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of U.S. Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Marilyn Kern-Foxworth's *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* ostensibly presents a comprehensive summary of advertising trends featuring African Americans, beginning with notices for slaves and continuing up through the celebrity endorsements of Michael Jackson and Bill Cosby.[15] A good portion of the book is devoted to the figures of the title. It analyzes the racism of the images ahistorically; no mention is made of the half-century separating the debut of Aunt Jemima from the creation of Uncle Ben. Nor is the distribution of the image discussed in anything more than a cursory way, as a fact of advertising. By ignoring such historical grounding, the book fails to convincingly analyze why these images were unrivaled in their impact on the US popular consciousness.

A more ambitious and theoretically sound book on a similar topic is Jan Nedvereen Pieterse's *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, which contrasts depictions of the African continent and African natives along with those of slavery and domestic servitude. It features paintings, book illustrations, and advertisements collected from over several hundred years. As Nedvereen Pieterse states in the introduction, "This book is a study of images and power, an enquiry into the social rhetoric of images."[16] Building upon Foucault's power/knowledge matrix and heavily influenced by Said's *Orientalism*, the book's categorizing and cataloguing of such a wide array of images is meant to explain and evaluate the "architecture of power" that "echoes throughout the codes recurring in the depiction of slavery,... colonialism, and up to contemporary advertising."[17] The book's connections to Kern-Foxworth and Bogle are clear, in its method of arranging the information and the genealogy of certain icons followed through various social contexts. By casting a wider net not confined to a specific medium, the usefulness and adaptive repeatability of stereotypes becomes apparent. Such a methodology allows for a juxtaposition of different historical periods and geographic locations because of its underlying belief in an architecture of power as the framework for society—and that the necessary othering frequently manifests itself as a racial hierarchy. What such a methodology disallows is technology's role in distributing such images. *White on Black* effectively utilizes a particular methodology whereas Bogle and Kern-Foxworth overlook the need to examine technology and the material product by confining themselves to a single medium.

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[14] Jewell, "An Analysis of the Visual Development of a Stereotype," xi.

[15] Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994).

Unfortunately and slightly ironically, the books that deal specifically with African American collectables also follow this line of argumentation. Two recent analyses of collectable kitschy images of blacks use this model and both dwell upon the Mammy figure. Both were published in 1994 and have surprisingly similar titles: *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectables and American Stereotyping* and *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies: Black*

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[16] Jan Nedvereen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 12.
[17] Ibid., 23.

Images and Their Influence on Culture.[18] Both have Bogle-style genealogies that trace the perpetuation of stereotyped images over the course of time. As the introduction to *Mammy and Uncle Mose* notes, "literally tens of thousands of such items were produced in the United States, Europe, and Asia from the 1880s to the late 1950s.... These items were common household goods—advertising cards, postcards, house wares, toys and games, and kitchen decorations."[19] But the emphasis is not on volume (the tens of thousands) but on the seventy-year stretch when such images blanketed three continents.

A third book written in 1994 deals with the iconography of Aunt Jemima and, despite its uncritical celebration of the image, comes closest to acknowledging how the technological innovations of the twentieth century changed the way the icon was consumed by a US public. *Collectable Aunt Jemima: Handbook & Value Guide*, a glossy coffee-table book full of color photographs, shows official products created by various parent companies that were given away or sold through the mail. In addition to advertisements, the book catalogues other merchandise: a lapel pin from the 1894 World's Fair, a paper doll family from 1895, a ragdoll family from 1917, up to the official Aunt Jemima Children's Baking Set of the 1960s. The images are prefaced by a short essay tracing the trademark from the minstrel stage to the frozen-waffle box, and mostly summarizes the chapter on Aunt Jemima included in the 1967 authorized history of the Quaker Oats company. The wholly enthusiastic piece concludes with the author's pronouncement that "Aunt Jemima's face and famous pancakes are as much of an American institution as apple pie!"[20] Despite ignoring the pervasive racism of the image, the book and its author hint at the impact of the mass-culture image, not in the essay but through the value guide itself. Accompanying the various products are their prices on the collectables market. The quantity of a promotion when first produced leads to a plentitude that drives down the price; conversely, the scarcer the promotion, the higher the cost. For example, a 1916 advertisement featuring an Aunt Jemima Rag Doll Family is priced at twenty to twenty-five dollars and the Rag Doll Family coupon from the same year commands twice as much.[21] The more mass-produced and durable collectables have survived in larger quantities and have lower prices. The catalogue/coffee-table book gives a sampling of the vast array of products created in service of pushing the Aunt Jemima image on adults and children. And, interestingly, the pricing system of the collectors quantifies in monetary terms the ubiquity of the products.

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[18] Kenneth W. Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectables and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

[19] Goings, xiii.

[20] Jean Williams Turner, *Collectable Aunt Jemima: Handbook & Value Guide* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1994), 9.

Micki McElya's *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* is a series of case studies, mostly from the 1920s, of the impact of the Mammy myth in discourses at varying levels of society. Referring to the pancake icon, McElya writes:

> With the rise of consumer capitalism, commodity culture, and technological innovation, far from dwindling in power or quantity, stories and images of the enslaved mammy became more prevalent nationally than ever.... Loving, hating, pitying or pining for mammy in the twentieth century became a way for Americans to define the character of the nation, the meaning of freedom, and the racial and gender boundaries of the citizenry.[22]

This type of othering which McElya describes is discussed in particular performative contexts throughout this dissertation.

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Making Aunt Jemima

Separating the image of the Mammy from that of Aunt Jemima is important for this study. Because this chapter examines a particular image whose distribution was controlled by a particular company, my focus shifts from racism as a sociological system of classification and instead looks at this copyrighted figure as a case history for how stereotypes reached the US public. But the creators consciously elaborated upon the Mammy figure to create Aunt Jemima's back-story, so a brief excursus into its blackface performance history is in order—not to construct (or rehash) a genealogy but rather to show how the figure's servitude, size, and smile was used by the pancake company.

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[21] Ibid., 34–35.
[22] McElya, 13.

The Mammy is as old as the minstrel show itself, and was the subject of comedic songs like "Coal Black Rose" and "Miss Lucy Long" as early as the 1840s. The character type was sometimes called "the wench," and was a drag performance in the realm of the all-male minstrel show. Eric Lott refers to such blackface transvestism as "the supreme form of 'vulgarity' in the popular theater and the most difficult to assess. The immense popularity of cross-dressing in the blackface theater suggests that this was one 'objectionable feature' no self-respecting troupe of vulgarians could do without."[23] Images of the Mammy that appeared on sheet music emphasized her corpulence and corporality. A post–Civil War addendum to the wench figure was the female impersonator. According to Annemarie Bean, "Coming out of the darkened shell of the wench, the prima donna required the mulatta to forego her position as the 'lyrical and theatrical object' in minstrelsy to a superior position—that of a highly stylized and costumed near-white woman."[24] Bean explains a double shift in the female figure on the minstrel stage: The character was lightened, became closer to white, and at the same time moved from the periphery of the entertainment to the center of attention. The exact reasons for the character's longevity is in dispute,[25] but its popularity is not. And it is here that the image and the business of ready-mixed pancakes collide.

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[23] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 159.

[24] Annemarie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy," in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed. Annemarie Bean, James Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 249.

The construction of the Jemima image employed a "dense semiotic network"[26] that associates pancakes with servitude, Southern-ness, and blackness. The image draws much of its puissance from minstrelsy, but is also utilizing a common image of black domestic servitude as well as careful, even loving, descriptions of the same in the era's printed publications. Some elements of performed minstrelsy are part of the ads, but some are not. Jemima never sings, and she is an African American woman, not the obviously fake copy by a white man. But even without being a literal blackface character (and these ad icons never are in blackface) they perfectly portray the functions of minstrelsy, and are as manipulated as any stage caricature.

The history of the Aunt Jemima logo and how it came to adorn the packages of one of the world's first instant foodstuffs has been thoroughly documented by both official and independent sources. In 1889, Chris Rutt and Charles Underwood bought a grain mill in St. Joe, Missouri and began experimenting to create an instant pancake mix for sale in the US's emerging consumer marketplace. They were also looking for a faster way to sell flour. As outlined in Susan Strasser's *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market*:

> Decades before Henry Ford and his men applied continuous-process principles to the 1913 Model T in the first assembly line, companies packed meat, brewed beer, and canned vegetables using conveyor systems, rollers, and gravity slides that sent materials through the production process automatically, in a continuous stream. The idea had been used in flour milling for over a century. During the 1880s, inventors developed new machinery that made flow production possible in the manufacture of soap, cigarettes, matches, breakfast cereals, canned goods, and many other products. As a result, factories could process massive batches of raw materials.[27]

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[25] The treatment of the image changes from Robert Toll to Eric Lott to Annemarie Bean, reflecting a methodological shift in emphasis from Bakhtinian carnivalesque to Lacanian psychology.

[26] Jill Lane, "Becoming Chocolate, a Tale of Racial Translation," *Theatre Journal* 59, no. 3 (October 2007): 385.

[27] Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 6.

The first batch was simply called "self-rising flour," and inventor Rutt searched for an image to help promote it. It is not simply a rhetorical flourish to say that another raw material was processed in order to sell these products—that of African American culture itself.[28] Rutt found his image at a minstrel show that was playing in town, where a white man was performing the song "Aunt Jemima" in blackface, padding, and calico dress. He knew he had his logo.[29] The official histories stress the serendipity of this encounter, that it was half luck and half genius that brought Jemima to the pancake industry. But "Old Aunt Jemima" was published as sheet music in 1876,[30] and it was popular enough to have been recorded in 1895 by the African American vocal group The Standard Quartette.[31]

Why did the instant pancake mix require a logo at all? What purpose did it serve for the American consumer? The social need fulfilled by products with African American trademarks is a reaction to the industrial revolution as much as (if not more than) it is a continuation of the psycho-sexual desire posited by Lott or the sublimated racism exposed by Bogle. As Ernst Bloch acerbically wrote, "The commodity always still needs a label which praises it."[32] Similarly, Barbara Johnson's *Persons and Things* looks at the seductive, nearly necessary, relationship between advertising and anthropomorphism, the imbuing of an inanimate object with human qualities. She writes:

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[28] See David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 175.

[29] This story, taken from the Quaker Oats company's official history, is discussed in Manring, Kern-Foxworth, Turner, and elsewhere. Manring erroneously identifies African American minstrel Billy Kersands as the author of the song. Several songs about Aunt Jemima were later commissioned by the parent company as promotional items, including 1917s "Aunt Jemima Slide."

[30] George Dobson and James Grace, "Old Aunt Jemima" (Boston: John F. Perry and Co., 1876). *The Library of Congress: American Memory*, "Old Aunt Jemima," http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?aasm:1:./temp/~ammem_9a5k::displayType=2:m856sd=rpbaasm:m856sf=0548:@@@aas.

[31] The Standard Quartett toured with the successful *South Before the War* company in the 1890s, and also borrowed some of the lyrics from the Aunt Jemima song for their "serio-comic religious" recording of "Keep Movin.'" See Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890–1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 92–102.

[32] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986), 343.

> A speaking thing can sell itself; if the purchaser responds to the speech of the object, he or she feels uninfluenced by human manipulation and therefore somehow not duped. We are supposed not to notice how absurd it is to be addressed by the Maalox Max bottle, or Mr. Clean, or Mrs. Butterworth, or the Quaker Oats man, or Aunt Jemima, or the Elidel man, or the Aflac duck.[33]

Unlike the Maalox Man bottle, which speaks of its own ability to cure heartburn, Aunt Jemima is an invented character who praises the product—the pancake mix never talks. Aunt Jemima is given more freedom from the product; as a result, and this will be seen in the ad campaign that concludes this chapter, she is able to personify a particular ideal of racial harmony.

In the US, branding was a way of filling the gap created by the alienation of a customer from his or her product, an estrangement that intensified in the twentieth century. Strasser writes:

> New ways of relating to the objects of everyday life—the material culture of American society—developed along with this physical and economic landscape. During the decades around the turn of the century, branded, standardized products came to represent and embody the new networks and systems of production and distribution, the social relationships that brought people the things they used.... Formerly *customers*, purchasing the objects of daily life from familiar craftspeople and storekeepers, Americans became *consumers*.[34]

This network of distribution, the connecting of factory to marketplace by way of an evolving interstate railroad system, quickly began to incorporate national advertising campaigns and created the need for the advertising industry.

The live minstrel performer and his blackface routine had successfully been transferred onto the pancake bag (soon to be replaced by the more durable cardboard box), but this transition back and forth was far from over. To add legitimacy and authenticity, the icon had to be re-embodied. Rutt and Underwood gambled the advertising budget of the struggling company on a booth at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. They hired a woman to play Aunt Jemima, in what is quite probably the first instance in US history when a corporate trademark was performed live. According to M.M. Manring, "The purpose of a live appearance... was not to amuse with counterfeit of drag and blackface but to persuade with the presence of a 'real' slave woman."[35] The minstrel song and skit of a blackfaced white man had been converted into a pancake logo and then back into the body of an African American woman: a sequence of events that could be considered a parable for all black entertainers in the early twentieth century. The first of many women to portray Aunt Jemima was Nancy Green, a former slave who was working in the house of a Chicago judge at the time of the fair. Her employer recommended her to a friend who was part of the campaign. She entertained crowds at the house-sized flour barrel that was the company's exhibition space and told personal tales of her antebellum life while handing out samples of the product. The first fictional biography of Aunt Jemima was printed in pamphlet form for the fair, and the icon's mock Southern catchphrase "I'se in Town, Honey!" was first used as well.

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[33] Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19.
[34] Strasser, 15. Emphasis in original.

The creation of the Aunt Jemima icon in the late 1880s and the introduction of Nancy Green at the World's Fair was the necessary branding of a domestic product. It was reflective of the industrial revolution and a rapidly developing Machine-Age ideology. But the factory system was only one element of several simultaneous and mutually supportive innovations of the era that exponentially increased the speed and movement of goods, money, and information. These accelerating methods of circulation contributed to the market saturation of the Aunt Jemima image that would solidify the blackface mask's position in US culture. The blackface mask, resiliently moving from a Jacksonian democracy of the 1840s to a technocratic and bureaucratic democracy of the 1920s, becomes increasingly calcified in its cultural representations.

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[35] Manring, 74.

The factory system created an economy of scale, in which a company made its money on the number of units sold. But getting the products to market at a faster and more widely distributed rate required speedy and cheap transportation, which itself created conditions for a new strategy of profit-making based on bulk and speed. Echoing the predictive model of capitalist expansion of Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels, one advertising historian writes:

> Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the completion of the railroad and telegraph network set the stage for... the era of the national mass market, in which a small number of firms realized scale economies to an unprecedented degree by expanding their distribution from coast to coast and border to border. The profit strategy during this phase was to charge low prices, which permitted only small margins per unit but made possible greatly increased total profits because of high volume.[36]

Consumer goods need to be pushed into new areas and at a necessarily ratcheted-up pace and also required bigger markets to stock them. And is it any wonder that the first large-scale chain store in US history was a grocery store called A & P, short for Atlantic & Pacific?[37]

"Separated from the producer," one advertising historian writes, "consumers became more and more dependent on brand names to ensure real or perceived quality."[38] As the alienation of consumer from product totalized, branding was used to assuage that anxiety. Theodor Adorno sees this same phenomenon as reflective of an embedded paradox within capitalism, of ills created and then solved by the culture industry. Adorno accepts and steps beyond the irony of the mass-market product requiring a brand to make it more personable for the consumer. He credits the system with creating genuineness as an acceptable criteria for products—while making the mass-produced good the only fulfillment of such a criteria. In an example of quantity becoming quality, he notes:

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[36] Richard S. Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1990), 5.

[37] The first store opened in 1859, and in 1869 "the name Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company was adopted. By that time the company had begun to spread westward and undoubtedly felt that a more comprehensive title would reflect the scope of its operations more clearly." Godfrey M. Lebhar, *Chain Stores in America 1859–1962* (New York: Chain Store Publishing Corporation, 1963), 24–25.

[38] James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865–1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 97–98.

> The discovery of genuineness as a last bulwark of individualistic ethics is a reflection of industrial mass-production. Only when countless standardized commodities project, for the sake of profit, the illusion of being unique, does the idea take shape, as their antithesis yet in keeping with the same criteria, that the non-reproducible is the truly genuine.

The hollow core of the genuine then must be insistently repeated. As Adorno, in one of his darkly comic turns for phrase, sums it up: "The ungenuineness of the genuine stems from its need to claim, in a society dominated by exchange, to be what it stands for yet is never able to be."[39]

This general statement has its parallel in the US in the early twentieth century, that of the myth of racial authenticity on a social scale and the search for the genuineness of a personal racial identity.[40] Aunt Jemima's authenticity in the marketplace manifests itself in terms of racial oppression and sectional healing; her genuineness comes not just from her Southern slave roots but from her almost mystical ability to suture the social rifts of the Civil War. Her position in the mass-market economy made her perfectly placed for "Selling the Old South for the New Century."[41]

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Imagining Aunt Jemima

"The problem," as Emile Durkheim saw it, "is not to know by what right we can say that a given proposition is true or false.... What is important is to know what has made men believe that a representation conforms to reality."[42] By applying this model of beliefs and ideas to the circulation of commodities (that flow out to the market and are consumed by the public) and money (that flows back to the producer), the easy adaptability of blackface to this system in the US is made clear. The added element to this feedback loop of factory and consumer, essential to the industrialized marketplace, is the advertising campaign in the nationally distributed magazine.

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[39] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso Press, 2005), 155.

[40] See David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 222–23.

[41] Jo-Ann Morgan, "Mammy the Huckster: Selling the Old South for the New Century," *American Art* 9, no. 1 (1995): 86–109.

During the 1890s, Aunt Jemima—the image with its symbols and messages—was caught up in another mutually supporting and rapidly developing triumvirate in US society, one that itself was symbiotically related to the industrial developments of factory, transportation, and market: the ad agency, which created the images and messages themselves; the national magazine that circulated it to the US public; and the home, the destination of the ad and the place where it was consumed. There is an analogy between the two distributions of the products and the ads, where the producer (factory and agency) is supplemented by a method of circulation (train transportation and postal route) to more effectively deliver the product to the location of the consumer (the market and the home). In the former, the image of Aunt Jemima was printed on the pancake box; in the later, she was presented in ads as a way of coaxing the reader to purchase the product and bring it back to the home: eat and repeat.

This section ties together the advertising campaign with the circulating agent of the magazine. Their very identities are linked—the reason that costs were so low for these magazines was because of advertising revenue, and by the 1920s more than half of some prominent magazines were ads. Though I argue that companies would place ads in magazines that spoke to their sense of the ideal American household, there is a certain danger in reading ads as directly reflecting a popular milieu, considering the corporate subjectivity which creates them. Although, as summarized by cultural historian Erin Smith,

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[42] Quoted in Alex Callinicos, *Social Theory: A Historical Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 144.

> we do not know if audiences shared or adopted the attitudes put forth in advertisements, we do know that it was in the financial interests of advertisers to make *successful* appeals, appeals that culminated in a purchase. If the same kinds of appeals endured over a period of ten or twenty years, for example, it would seem reasonable to assume that whether or not readers agreed with the ideas, they found them compelling enough to buy the product.[43]

A more extreme conclusion to this relationship between magazines and ads is seen by Max Horkheimer and Adorno, who argue that "the images and texts of advertisements are, at a cursory glance, hardly distinguishable from the editorial section.... [T]he advertising pages rely on photographs and data so factual and lifelike that they represent the ideal of information to which the editorial section only aspires."[44] For Horkheimer and Adorno, the spectacle of the advertisements achieves most effectively what the magazine as a whole attempts to do: sell ideology.

The nationally distributed magazine helped create a racial belief system that fully supported the habitus of the middle-class family, engaging in the "play of homology," to quote Bourdieu. That is, "the structured space of discourses reproduces, in its own terms, the structured space of the newspapers and of the readerships for whom they are produced." As the *Saturday Evening Post* (used in this study analogous to the French newspapers *Le Figaro* and *L'Express* analyzed by Bourdieu) "is read more or less equally by all the dominant-class fractions," it "constitutes the neutral point" in how these fractions relate to each other.[45] The *Post* was one of the most prominent organs for the Aunt Jemima ad campaign and can also stand as an example of how magazines in general operated in the 1920s. A quick look at the magazine, its circulation, and the political thrust of its longtime editor George H. Lorimer demonstrates how the stories and messages that surrounded the Jemima ads complimented, even helped, create an overall meaning.

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[43] Erin Smith, "How the Other Half Read: Advertising, Working-Class Readers, and Pulp Magazines," *Book Culture* 3 (2000), 207. Emphasis in original.

[44] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 132.

[45] Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods," 87–89.

The *Saturday Evening Post* was "one of America's great mass magazines, perhaps the greatest" and by the 1920s it had an enormous and wide-ranging readership.[46] According to *A Short History of the Saturday Evening Post*, "With the end of the war, the Post soon again raised its banner line of the cover to 'More Than Two Million'" and the secondhand readership more than doubled that number: "The great editorial discovery of the early 1920's was that *women* read The Saturday Evening Post."[47] But, for the purposes of this study, the *Post* exists as more than just a benign delivery system for Aunt Jemima Pancake ads. As Jan Cohn writes, "Lorimer set out to create America in and through the pages of the *Saturday Evening Post*.... The 'culture of the *Post*' was the culture of the emerging world of business—business as it hovered between production and consumption and managed to live comfortably with the contradiction between traditional values and present realities."[48] With the increased sophistication of advertising agencies in the 1920s, a typical issue of the *Post* "continually reifi[ed] its particular vision of America" through "the entire construct of article, story, illustration, and advertising."[49]

The two other national magazines discussed here also promoted a similar ideal America, but they were defined by their female readership: *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. If placed on an ideological continuum, *Ladies' Home Journal* could be positioned halfway between the *Post* and *Good Housekeeping*. The *Post* had the broadest appeal of the three and was read by all members of the family. It also was the most forcefully engaged in political and social issues. At the other end of the spectrum, *Good Housekeeping* was, as its title suggests, almost completely focused on the domestic sphere. Articles stressed child rearing, cleaning tips, and recipes. *Ladies' Home Journal*, bridging the two, offered advice on the ways to run an orderly domicile yet also included articles about women in society: fashion, politics, and involvement in the war effort. All three of these publications reflected a progressive and progressing America in their articles, and this extended to and was supported by the hundreds of advertisements that appeared in each issue.

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[46] Jan Cohn, *Creating America: George Horace Lorimer and the Saturday Evening Post* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 3.

[47] Curtis Publishing Company, *A Short History of the Saturday Evening Post* (n.p.: Curtis Publishing Company, 1949), 30. Emphasis in original.

[48] Cohn, 5, 8.

[49] Ibid., 6–7. The ads were also important for keeping the price of the *Post* at a reasonable five cents.

These interwoven media images largely excluded representations of minorities or the working class.[50] The only place for African Americans in these magazines, either in articles or in ads, was as domestic servants. Because of this, the Aunt Jemima Pancake Flour campaign should be analyzed in conjunction with the other ads that surrounded it, both the products and how they were marketed. Aunt Jemima and other images of black domesticity were unremarkable in their placement and usage—pancake mix was merely one of a torrent of products ranging from record players to canned pineapple chunks. Aunt Jemima was one of a legion of people, animals, and anthropomorphized machines that sold them. But blacks were, exclusively, in a position of butlers, maids, and chefs. This points to a particular class anxiety involved as well in the Mammy figure—she represented Southern-ness, but also a Southern aristocracy who could afford servants.[51]

The other ads that accompanied Aunt Jemima reflected the magazine's intended audience. Out of the full-page ads in the January 1919 *Good Housekeeping*, fifteen were dedicated to food; six were for cleaning products; and three related to home furnishings, two of which were for record players. The *Ladies' Home Journal* of January 1920 had twenty-four ads for food, six for cleaning products, six for home furnishings or clothing, and several for automobiles and movie houses. A *Post* from around the same time had twelve food ads, but twenty-seven for cars or car parts such as spark plugs or tires. It had many ads for cleaning implements, but whereas most cleaning ads in *Good Housekeeping* were for soaps and cleansers, the *Post* featured modern gadgetry such as vacuum cleaners and dishwashers. In addition to describing these products, the message stressed how the consumption of these products saved something: space, money, or time. An example from the *Post* is an ad for Hoosier-brand kitchen cabinets, featuring the tagline, "I, too, have abolished slavery" and a graphic of a woman holding a picture of Abraham Lincoln. Describing the cabinets as a "work-reducing machine," the copy enthuses: "Drudgery has ceased to be [the housewife's] master. With its many wanted features and labor-saving inventions, the Hoosier has made their kitchen work easy and enjoyable."[52] The ironic reality is that new domestic products and foodstuffs also created repetitive and elaborate tasks for women to perform in the household.[53] In many of the ads featured in these magazines, with a pervasiveness nowadays seen as cliché, social expectations of immaculate hygiene and elaborate feasts were necessary to maintain the veneer of balance, betterment, and bliss.

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[50] Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), xvii.

[51] McElya, 68–69.

Aunt Jemima wasn't the only depiction of an African American in these magazines, but she was the most completely minstrelized. That is, she was the most visible and vocal out of the images. The Gold Dust Twins, two pickaninny children who hawked a household cleanser, were only shown as pictures on the box; they did not assist with any chores. The other frequent image in all three magazines was Rastus, the Cream of Wheat man. Dressed in a flued chef's hat and sporting a pleasant grin, the Cream of Wheat man is seen dispensing breakfast to eager and grateful white children. He rarely spoke. Cream of Wheat ads in the early 1920s often ran on the inside cover of the *Post*, in full color, mirroring the painterly techniques and subject matter of famous covers by Norman Rockwell and others. Sometimes the ads downplayed the connection to Rastus, and others didn't feature him at all. In one, an Aunt Jemima–type figure is holding a picture of Rastus while two white youngsters point. The caption reads "Mammy's Beau."[54] In another, a white child sits in a Cream of Wheat crate on wheels harnessed to a stooped, grey-haired black man. The boy has a whip in his hand and the caption exclaims, "Giddap, Uncle."[55] The whimsical innocence of the ads (masking an underlying cruelty and even sadism) suggest that they attempted to emulate the style of the magazine and thus be equated in the mind of the reader with the same idealized America.

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[52] *Saturday Evening Post*, February 1, 1919.

[53] See Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

Articles that represented African Americans, not surprisingly, fit stereotypes of backwardness and servitude. Articles like "Aunt Malindy's Cooking Secrets" gave out Southern recipes for biscuits and corn dodgers. The story which accompanies it is very similar to the Aunt Jemima mythology: "Aunt Malindy insisted that her picture be taken 'like white folks,' instead of in her cabin, as we wished to do."[56] *Good Housekeeping* ran a series of humorous dialect stories titled "Mirandy on..." such as "Mirandy on Advice to Bridegrooms" and "Mirandy on the Domestic Armistice." In the *Post,* Octavus Roy Cohen wrote a well-liked series of dialect stories about Florian Slappey, a black man from Birmingham who moves to Harlem and is embroiled in comic misadventures.[57] But Aunt Jemima, more than others, combined dialect and pleasant servitude in a most effective mix.

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[54] *Saturday Evening Post*, May 8, 1920. The humorous interaction and coupling of black advertising icons continued into the next decade. Lew Leslie's revue show *Blackbirds of 1930* included the skit "Aunt Jemima's Divorce Case": Jemima was married to the Cream of Wheat man, and the Armor Ham "Ham What Am!" chef was judge. See Robert Kimball and William Bolcom, *Reminiscing with Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 218–19.

[55] *Ladies' Home Journal*, December, 1921.

[56] *Good Housekeeping*, January, 1921.

The Aunt Jemima ad campaigns of the 1920s used emotional appeals of humor and sentimentality beyond that of the company's ads from previous decades, which had generally featured a crude caricature of the image. Her portraits from the first two decades of the twentieth-century are more two-dimensional. The icon is roughly sketched, she has a flat grin, and is invariably holding a tray of pancakes. Also there is little biographical discussion of Aunt Jemima in them, as if the picture conveys all the message necessary. This changed in the 1920s, with a more realistic visual style and deeper emotional resonance. One series of ads was a collection of humorous stories accompanied by a comic-strip sketchiness. They mostly centered on a white husband and wife, with the Aunt Jemima icon only featured on the box, not interacting with the other characters in the mini-dramas. "'Great Guns!'—You've Overslept!" begins the copy of one. "[W]ould have slept till noon if Ole Sol hadn't looked in the window. You paddle off to shave while 'the wife' streaks for the kitchen." After the wife gets the meal into her husband "with time to spare," Aunt Jemima Pancake Flour is declared "the breakfast that saved the day!"[58] The next month's ad starts with the "Boo-hoo!" of the housewife whose husband doesn't like her leathery flapjacks. But a successful trial—"the crucial moment: 'Will he like them?'"—leads her to declare, "AUNT JEMIMA for us e-ver-ry time!"[59] A third stars a young married couple and awkwardly incorporates slangy modern phraseology as the husband remarks, "My favorite music in the morning is the jazz of the mixing spoon in a bowl of Aunt

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[57] Cohn, 188. Several of these tales were later adapted for the movies and the stage. See Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1995).
[58] *Saturday Evening Post*, January 17, 1920.
[59] *Saturday Evening Post*, February 7, 1920.

Jemima."[60] It sympathizes with the financial constraints of the couple and reminds readers that the product is an "economical breakfast."

An interactive, dialogic performance occurs in a series of ads run in *Good Housekeeping* in 1922 and 1923 that all begin "Aunt Jemima Says." Each opens with a dialect aphorism by Jemima, such as, "My speriunce with men folks is—dey's mos' likable when dey's set down to a pipin' hot plate o' my pancakes."[61] As Henry Louis Gates writes, and this is a sentiment that will echo throughout these chapters, "Dialect signified both 'black difference' and that the figure of the black in literature existed primarily as object, not subject."[62] In the ads, Aunt Jemima's words are then explained and interpreted by the non-dialect ad copy—a relationship that Manring describes as analogous to endman and interlocutor.[63] The above Jemima quotation is followed by its repetition in standard English:

> There's something about a breakfast of Aunt Jemima Pancakes that has always made a hit with the men. It did way back in the Louisiana plantation days when Aunt Jemima herself used to cook them for Colonel Higbee. And now, many a clever wife realizes the best way to start the day right is to give her husband an Aunt Jemima breakfast.

Most Jemima ads reinforce a wife's position of servitude to her husband, but this ad includes an unintentionally ironic visual flourish. The piece contains two mirrored images, one of Jemima placing a plate of flapjacks in front of slave master Colonel Higbee and one of the 1920s housewife serving the same to her husband.

The peculiar logic of instant pancakes and the Aunt Jemima icon permits them to be tied to other images of cultural exoticism and US technical supremacy. An extreme example is another "Aunt Jemima Says" spot that begins, "Lawsy me now de Eskimo chillern want my pancakes so bad dey's got to have a aeroplane bring 'em."[64] The rest of the copy explains:

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[60] *Saturday Evening Post*, March 20, 1920.

[61] *Good Housekeeping*, December, 1922.

[62] Henry Louis Gates, jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 176.

[63] Manring, 138–39.

> Last March there was a shortage of Aunt Jemima Pancake Flour up at Moose Factory, a Hudson's Bay post that's shut off from the rest of the world through the long winter months of snow and ice.
>
> And the Eskimos and Indians who traded there, like millions of other people, would have nothing but Aunt Jemima Pancake Flour. This is how they got it—from far off Toronto.
>
> It was shipped by train as far as the railroad went. Then, for the 250-mile trip north over the trackless snow, it was loaded on an aeroplane shod with skis to land on the ice of the bay.
>
> And great was the joy of the Eskimo children when they learned what the strange bird from the South was bringing them!

The method of efficient circulation has not yet incorporated these indigenous people, and it is up to Aunt Jemima to find them. The ad portrays the Eskimos as pancake-loving primitives pushed just across the boundary of modern civilization. This sentiment is best captured by a poem, alongside the image of a curly-haired white girl raising a spoon to her lips, from an ad by a rival in the ready-made food market:

> Little Indian—Sioux or Crow,
> Little Frosty Esquimo,
> Little Turk or Japanee,
> Oh, don't you wish that you were me?
>
> You have curious things to eat
> I am fed on—CREAM OF WHEAT[65]

It is not hard to imagine what Said would make of the culinary Orientalizing in this ditty, how dominated cultures are defined by their longing for what sates the appetites of the US public. It should be noted that blacks are not named in the couplets, but have a presence in the ad—at the girl's elbow is a small image of Rastus on a box. The ad conveys a uniquely marginal place for blacks in the social hierarchy, one not entirely of US culture but not entirely outside it, either.

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[64] *Good Housekeeping*, January, 1923.
[65] *Saturday Evening Post*, June 5, 1920.

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Tayloring Aunt Jemima

Marginalization did not excuse African Americans or Aunt Jemima from participating in the modern world, even as they were used to sentimentalize a pre-industrial past. Horkheimer and Adorno identified this connection between mechanization, business, and culture, and their pronouncements hang over this section:

> Advertising and the culture industry are merging technically no less than economically. In both, the same thing appears in countless places, and the mechanical repetition of the same culture product is already that of the same propaganda slogan.[66]

The stress on saving time, money, and resources (both labor and raw materials) aligns these ads with the "efficiency craze" of the 1910s and 1920s, and equates the domestic sphere and especially the kitchen with the factory or machine. The place of minstrelsy and blackface in this alignment of home and industry is complicated. Is Aunt Jemima producer, worker, or engineer? Middle manager or griddle manager? And how did the move from hand-made to brand-made become the ideology of authenticity in the US? The direct messages of many ads emphasized convenience, and even the most conservative of advertising historians acknowledge the brand icon's necessary role in personalizing the mass-produced product—making it more, if not human, humanoid. In *Machine-Age Ideology*, John Jordan explains the importance of the engineer as management expert during the industrialization boom of the late–nineteenth century and the creation (even adulation) of social engineers in the early twentieth, as they attempted to apply structural factory models to US society at large. He writes:

> The engineers' self-understanding and the social adaptation of technical terms, *efficiency* in particular, helped establish the credibility and prestige that later reformers envied.... By World War I, engineering and society had become

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[66] Horkheimer and Adorno, 133.

> entwined in social theories, political languages, and new networks of technicians and reformers.[67]

Tying such notions to the idea of personal growth and self-help reached its peak around the time of World War I as well. The engineer became a powerful cultural symbol as the rhetoric of technology and industry became common within everyday parlance. Ads like those for the Hoover Cabinet used the language of scientific objectivity while extolling the virtues of the product, and so did Aunt Jemima. The man to encompass this multi-faceted idea of social engineering was Frederick Taylor, especially in his 1911 book *The Principles of Scientific Management*. In the introduction, Taylor lays out a vision of the future: "In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first.... The fundamental principles of scientific management are applicable to all kinds of human activities, from our simplest individual acts to the work of our great corporations"—including "the management of our homes."[68] One of the tenets of Taylorism, as it came to be known, was "logic dictated that a scientifically validated efficiency would supply answers to the perennial ambiguities of human society."[69] According to Jon McKenzie, "Taylor's mission was nothing less than to reconceptualize work itself by redefining and expanding the role of management in an unprecedented fashion"[70] Or, as Gilman Ostrander notes, "[U]ntil Frederick Winslow Taylor developed scientific management, it was not supposed that a man could be operated like a machine. Taylor went far toward proving that he could be."[71]

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[67] John M. Jordan, *Machine-Age Ideology: Social Engineering and American Liberalism, 1911–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 33. Emphasis in original.

[68] Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911; repr., Sioux Falls, SD: NuVision Publications, 2007), 8.

[69] Jordan, 52.

[70] Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 61.

[71] Gilman M. Ostrander, *American Civilization in the First Machine Age: 1890–1940* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 13.

Reconceptualizing work also meant reconceptualizing housework, and the individual judgment of the housewife was replaced by scientific efficiency at all levels of domestic upkeep: cleaning, cooking, and entertaining. The February 1922 *Ladies' Home Journal* featured an Aunt Jemima–less ad for the pancake mix. The full-page black-and-white ad includes an illustration of four white women in lab coats working in a generic factory setting; they are making pancakes. The copy valorizes their efforts:

> In the Aunt Jemima Test Kitchen where pancakes are made every 5 minutes—just to make sure that you will have perfect success every time you use the ready-mixed Aunt Jemima Pancake flour.
>
> Wonderful machines in the Aunt Jemima mills mix with the choicest of cereals, finely ground, the powdered milk and other ingredients of Aunt Jemima Pancake Flour.
>
> But the chutes that carry the flour from them do not go "bee line" to the packaging room. They lead through a corner of the test kitchen.
>
> Here, every five minutes, a little of the flour is taken out and women whisk up fresh batter for the final griddle test. Aunt Jemima Pancake Flour must meet this final test of uniformity and quality.[72]

The wonderful machines are given a final test for consistency, and it passes without comment that only white women are in charge of quality assurance. The ad highlights the "theme of control... within the idealized understanding of engineering" which was present in the political and social rhetoric of the day.[73] Just as the kitchen was becoming the factory, the factory could incorporate the kitchen. Even when the industrial sphere absorbs the kitchen, the assumed gender divide between house and work remains. And the women are, as a photo-negative of the slave Jemima, providing a human touch to the mechanized process. Women are not emancipated by technology, they are not being helped in conquering slavery; instead their servitude is mechanized.

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[72] *Ladies' Home Journal*, February, 1922.
[73] Jordan, 47.

This ad exposes some of the problems of Taylorism and social engineering in general, problems that were recognized even in the 1920s, and this is where Aunt Jemima (like the test-kitchen matrons) steps in. Uniformity, efficiency, and rationalism, as envisioned by these social engineers, was opposed to waste, emotion, and diversity—these latter terms nearly equated with each other and implicitly included ethnic, racial, and gender minorities. According to Jordan, "Some reformers' reliance on technical rationality and the experts who applied it was undoubtedly a response to the perceived dangers of mass democracy, as the fallacies of the eugenics movement would suggest. In addition, women recently granted suffrage threatened the power of a traditional elite."[74] The Taylor myth "portrayed efficiency as an all-American Christian virtue, advocated the improvement upon old notions of spiritual truth by the engineering method, and exhibited the unbounded hopefulness characteristic of a believer in human perfectibility."[75] The implication of such thinking was that the standard of perfectibility was a white middle-class patriarchy. Subsequent criticisms of the system are summed up by McKenzie: "Besides characterizing Taylorism as the 'machine' model, [later] organizational theorists have also argued that Scientific Management's stress on standardization inevitably creates a monocultural environment, one defined by a uniform set of values and 'ways of being and doing.'"[76] Aunt Jemima's ads combine minstrelsy, Taylorism, and industry; these being three "fields of organizational, cultural, and technological performance" that "form an immense performance site, one that potentially encompasses the spheres of human labor and leisure activities and the behaviors of all industrially and electronically produced technologies." Aunt

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[74] Ibid., 4. That the seeming objectivity of science and quantitative analysis could hide repressive and even racist biases is covered more fully elsewhere. See Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1981) and Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).
[75] Jordan, 54.
[76] McKenzie, 67.

Jemima, then, is an example and exemplar of the resulting "*onto-historical formation of power and knowledge*."[77]

With the conformative pressures of Taylorism and social engineering underlying advertisements ranging from the new Oldsmobile to minute tapioca, Aunt Jemima was uniquely positioned as an ideal representative. Herbert Marcuse, writing in the 1940s, refers back to Taylorism and its deficiencies:

> Technological rationality may easily be placed into the service of [hierarchical] control: in the form of "scientific management," it has become one of the most profitable means for streamlined autocracy....
>
> The idea of compliant efficiency perfectly illustrates the structure of technological rationality. Rationality is being transformed from a critical force into one of adjustment and compliance.... Reason has found its resting place in the system of standardized control, production and consumption.[78]

The Machine-Age ideology becomes a mechanized epistemology—individuals favorably saw themselves and their families as perfectible machines and their homes as efficient factories. And Aunt Jemima is one of the best cheerleaders of compliant efficiency in US history, second only to Mr. Zip.

A 1920 ad with a cartoony picture of Aunt Jemima carrying a precariously balanced stack of flapjacks many times her height is accompanied by a direct address to the reader:

> "lawzee!" mekkin' pancakes is th' mos' impawtines thing ah does, than which dere aint no better, effen ah does say so! Jes mah flour and water on de griddle and—whuf! dey's done honey. *Grab em*![79]

The combination, in this ad and others, of the Aunt Jemima image and the objectifying (to say nothing of infantilizing) dialect turns the brand into an automaton. As the ad says, "mekkin' pancakes is th' mos' impawtines thing ah does."

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[77] Ibid., 12, 18. Emphasis in original.

[78] Hebert Marcuse, "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum Press, 2002), 146.

[79] *Saturday Evening Post*, April 10, 1920.

Aunt Jemima was metaphorically mechanized, but so too was the white American consumer of the product. A spot from the summer of 1920 is full of Boy Scouts "with hundred-horse-power outdoor appetites," and a winter-themed ad titled "Fine Fuel for Young Engines!" begins: "Those young human engines with their healthy, hundred horse-power appetites—how they do take a plate of Aunt Jemima Pancakes!"[80] The food product is strengthening them up so they can frolic in the snow. And those white children are treated as combustion engines.

The pre–Machine Age is often contrasted with the current era, with a certain wistful ambivalence. Two ads, run in successive months in *Ladies' Home Journal*, focus first on "the Poor Little Bride of 1860" and later on how "Poor Aunt Jemima had to Mix Everything Herself." In the former, the antebellum bride is doomed to failure as a cook and a wife despite having watched Aunt Jemima in the kitchen, but the copy assures the reader that "*Nowadays* little brides have no such trouble!.... All the ingredients in just the proportions Aunt Jemima herself worked out."[81] In the latter ad, it is Aunt Jemima who is the downtrodden victim, as she does not have access to the type of technology able to save her from the toil of a complicated pancake recipe: "What a contrast between the old method of hand-mixing pancake batter and the present Aunt Jemima way!"[82] Pre-modern methods are deemed inferior, even as they are celebrated for their authenticity. In the Machine Age the kitchen can be run as smoothly as the factory to which father is trundling off, if the housewife practices compliant efficiency. Seen in this light, the instruction "just add water" takes on the dual meaning as a convenience (simply add water) and a directive (only add water).

An interesting theme running through many of these ads is the performativity of making pancakes: the observing, the repeating, the presentation. The story of the unfortunate 1860 newlywed is a narrativization of what Joseph Roach terms "kinesthetic imagination" operating "in the performance of everyday life." These "movements and gestures" that "descend like heirlooms"[83] are mismanaged by the white woman in the ad. Just as a complicated recipe is replaced by calibrated ingredients, the preparatory steps once learned from Aunt Jemima are replaced by stage directions. "As simple as A B C!" declares many an ad, notating the stirring, cooking, and serving.

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[80] *Saturday Evening Post*, July 31, 1920.
[81] *Ladies' Home Journal*, February, 1920.
[82] *Ladies' Home Journal*, March, 1920.

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Realizing Aunt Jemima

In 1920 and 1921, a new series of ads was introduced by the J.W. Thompson advertising agency of New York, an account run by executive James Webb Young with illustrations by N.C. Wyeth. Many ran only once in the pages of the *Saturday Evening Post*. They greatly expanded on the "biographical" details of Aunt Jemima's "life," and in the process mixed together existing fictional accounts of Jemima, invented stories, and facts from the invented icon's history. The series of ads was unique because no other brand had such an elaborate story to accompany and justify its existence. Through this ad campaign, the company was best able to assuage the alienating effects of mass production and obscure the dehumanizing aspects of social engineering prevalent in both the kitchen and the factory.

Several critics, most notably Manring and Lauren Berlant, have engaged with this back-story. For Manring, who devotes two chapters of *Slave in a Box* to Young and Wyeth, the campaign allowed the female consumer to enact a combination of play-acting and othering: "The tableaux presented in James Webb Young's advertisements for the pancake mix invited real, living white housewives to join in the fantasy of Colonel Higbee's plantation, figuratively to buy into the woman known as Aunt Jemima."[84] Manring later hypothesizes about the necessity of setting the campaign in an imagined past: "What helped the Aunt Jemima campaign avoid lapsing into absurdity as it rewrote history was its sense of reality.... A veneer of reality was essential to selling a romantic South and keeping the dream world alive for decades."[85] To explain the paradox of the invented past saved from absurdity by a "sense of reality," to analyze not a rewritten but a produced history, Berlant uses the terms amnesia, nostalgia, and sentimentality.

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[83] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 27, 82.

The success of the mass-produced and widely circulating cultural objects Berlant analyzes—Aunt Jemima, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Imitation of Life*, *Show Boat*—is based on the exclusion of the painful "legacies of slavery, migration, urbanization, and industrialization" in the US.[86] Amnesia and nostalgia are both highly individual and subjective terms of history-making, and Berlant carefully uses the construction of the past to dissect a national social identity. Amnesia is an erasure, an act of forgetting and non-memory that in its most clinical definition is induced by physical or emotional trauma. Aunt Jemima helps "to produce the kinds of historical amnesia necessary for confidence in the American future" by creating an ahistorical, apolitical domestic sphere in which the Civil War and subsequent decades of racial unrest never happened[87]—becoming, in Suzan-Lori Parks's words, "The Great Hole of History."[88]

Nostalgia was at one time defined as a sickness, a longing for home. Berlant writes, "The 'promise' of Aunt Jemima... went much farther than household convenience: her condensation of racial nostalgia, white national memory, and progressive history was a symptomatic, if not important, vehicle for post–Civil War national consolidation."[89] So the overdetermined, overloaded brand icon of Aunt Jemima—repressed national guilt issued its imprimatur—both produces and is produced by amnesia and creates a nostalgic longing for a consolidated identity. The paradoxically overlapping notions of amnesia and nostalgia within capitalist consumer culture explain why the Aunt Jemima image was so powerful for the US public. The Young and Wyeth campaign, as an ambitious attempt to give the image depth, exemplifies these notions.

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[84] Manring, 12.
[85] Ibid., 112.
[86] Lauren Berlant, "Pax Americana: The Case of *Show Boat*," in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 72.
[87] Berlant, "National Brands, National Body: *Imitation of Life*," in *The Female Complaint*, 122.
[88] Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995).

Berlant notes that, "Amnesias, like so many other lacks, often appear to us in spectacular forms, forms radiant with the wish they ill express, fetishes."[90] She builds upon a conceptual understanding of the fetish outlined by Slavoj Žižek, where he combines Marx's economic definition of the term with the totemic use of it by Freud to create a site of synthetic and displaced sexual pleasure. For Žižek in a general sense, as for Berlant analyzing the US, the fetish is a marketable emblem of psychical assuagement in a society where "the relations of domination and servitude are *repressed*."[91] The story that fills the vacuum is a sentimentalized national ideal. Berlant considers sentimentality "unfinished business." As a hyper-emotional and female-coded narrative form, "sentimental texts must mask the aspiration they always embody to generate a public sphere of opinion and culture making."[92] That is, the trauma of exploration, racism, and slavery must be disavowed for them to enter the public discursive sphere. Aunt Jemima's existence, her "life," is an example of what Berlant, echoing Žižek, calls the "sublime object of white sentimentality"[93]: More than amnesia or a longing for anything, it creates a new past that allows the present to align itself with an idealized and commercialized future.

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[89] Berlant, "National Brands, National Body," in *The Female Complaint*, 122.

[90] Berlant, "Pax Americana: The Case of *Show Boat*," in *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, ed. Deidre Lynch and William B. Warner (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 404.

[91] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso Press, 1989), 26. Emphasis in original.

[92] Berlant, "Pax Americana: The Case of *Show Boat*," in *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, 399.

[93] Berlant, "Pax Americana," in *The Female Complaint*, 69.

The Aunt Jemima *Bildungsroman* portrayed in the Young and Wyeth campaign incorporates minstrelized themes of black life, melodramatic boilerplate, and fictions taken from the first biographical pamphlet written about the icon in 1893. It was a series of vignettes run chronologically and almost consecutively in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The stories they tell of Jemima illustrate her legitimacy as pancake queen of the antebellum South, follow her through the decision to sell the recipe, and even tell of her later work for the Missouri mill that bought it. The ads that detail Jemima's upbringing are all set on the Louisiana plantation of Colonel Higbee, the first entitled "How Aunt Jemima Saved the Colonel's Mustache and his reputation as a Host."[94] Both facial hair and hospitality are key to elegiac sentimentalized versions of antebellum Southern culture (later exploited by another fake colonel named Sanders to legitimize his secret blend of herbs and spices), and both are rescued from ruin by Jemima and her cooking. Aunt Jemima does a lot of rescuing. In the ad copy, her mother comes down with "a mis'ry" which throws a promised breakfast into question. The day is saved by eighteen-year-old Jemima's "unusual skill in the kitchen." Other antebellum tales included in the campaign are the story of Jemima comforting the survivors of a riverboat that sinks, and of "the Last Christmas on the Old Plantation" where merriment dispels the "shadow of the fast-approaching struggle between North and South."[95] During "the misfortunes of war back in the days of '64," Aunt Jemima gives pancake sustenance to two Confederate soldiers trapped behind Northern lines: "The General... honestly believed it was that wonderful pancake breakfast which put the 'power' into him and his orderly to reach their lines the next night."[96] This same general, the attentive reader is told, returns to the cabin twenty years later (aboard a riverboat with the appellate Rob't E. Lee) to pay his respects—bringing with him representatives of the Northern mill factory who eventually persuade the ex-slave to sell her recipe.[97] The ads helped sustain the idea of Southern aristocracy, serving "as guide to that lost paradise where white men were gallant, women were unburdened by the kitchen, and children played happily around cheerful black servants who would never leave."[98] Colonel Higbee and the plantation lifestyle do not survive the war, but Southern honor and Northern industry keep its legacy going through pancake flour; Aunt Jemima legitimizes the mass production which in turn perpetuates her.

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[94] *Saturday Evening Post*, September 25, 1920.
[95] *Saturday Evening Post*, October 23, 1920; *Good Housekeeping*, December, 1919.
[96] *Saturday Evening Post*, November 20, 1920.

Jemima doesn't disappear after selling her birthright (which is pottage) for a mess of pottage. She goes to work in Missouri. And here sentimentality and engineering—underlying not just all the ads but the ethos of the company itself—really combine. In "Aunt Jemima Bids Goodbye to the Old Plantation," the trademark takes her "first railroad trip" (the method of delivery through which the pancake mix was reaching the marketplace beginning in the 1890s) to the factory in the North. The copy explains her emotional state, one that paradoxically laments the passing of antebellum rustic life and celebrates industrialization as an extension of it. "Grieved though she must have been to bid that last goodbye, she was happy, too. A new opportunity of service was open to her. If from her recipe a ready-prepared flour could be made, thousands then could enjoy her pancakes as the Colonel's guests had done." Once at the mill, the full power of engineering skills are utilized: "A way had to be found to mix by machinery the ingredients of Aunt Jemima's pancake batter, to mix them exactly according to her recipe. Equipment had to be *built*; it couldn't be bought."[99] The ad also includes some meta-branding: a picture of Aunt Jemima sizing up one of the pancake boxes. The trademark passing judgment on the trademark as a white industrialist looks on.

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[97] *Saturday Evening Post*, December 18, 1920.
[98] Manring, 112.
[99] *Saturday Evening Post*, January 15, 1921. Emphasis in original.

The final ad in the series is the culmination of many different elements from both the campaign and the Aunt Jemima mythos, and it turns the real history of the product upon itself. Following the paths of so many African Americans during the Great Migration, Jemima's journey continues north and ends in Chicago. The ad recounts her first performance in the public eye. Titled "At the World's Fair in '93 Aunt Jemima was a Sensation," the icon's story ends at the moment of her greatest triumph, and at the place where both Southern sentimentality and mass culture found an ideal balance.[100] In the picture accompanying the copy, Aunt Jemima is shown standing on a platform mixing a bowl of batter, framed by stacks of Aunt Jemima Pancake Flour boxes—Berlant's "Jemimesis"[101] acknowledged and made part of the story. Beneath her are crowds of "white folks" clamoring for flapjacks. The ad copy summarizes the elements of Jemima's back-story, from her time on Colonel Higbee's plantation to her work for the Missouri mill, and it ends by alluding to her passing, both beyond the pale and into immortality. "At the great World's Fair in '93 they saw Aunt Jemima in person; today we cannot. But what she did lives on—that and her smile." In the context of this chapter and this study, that final promise has ominous and even malicious overtones. The real/fake original trademark is killed, but her objectified copy "lives" on as a smiling and easily replicable automaton seen on the many boxes of pancake flour that fill the ad. Efficiency, engineering, and mass production had found the perfect image to embody their advantages of ease and accessibility while eliding any lingering anxieties.

The final ad trades on amnesia, nostalgia, and sentimentality, conflating the facts of the Chicago World's Fair with the Jemima mythology. That this ad and this series appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* is particularly appropriate—as its editor-in-chief's "ideology [was] constructed out of traditional values, an interpretation of the present, and a vision of the future."[102] At the World's Fair, "Pre-modern, agricultural America culminated its transformation into the last phase of becoming modern, urban, industrial America on the shores of Lake Michigan"[103] and the triumph was not of Aunt Jemima but rather of the ready-mix pancake flour company that gained its first national exposure.

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[100] *Saturday Evening Post*, February 12, 1921.
[101] Berlant, "National Brands, National Body," in *The Female Complaint*, 119.

The most obvious willed amnesia of the ad is the replacement of actor and former slave Nancy Green with the trademark. In a stunningly emblematic act of national branding, national embodiment, and national erasure, Green figuratively and literally disappears underneath the mask of the pancake icon. As Berlant notes, "The capitalist public sphere absorbs the erotic investments of bodies in proximity, of contact through public exchange, and even of information culture, which emerges... as the new history of the nation, seen through its commodities."[104] And with the elision of Green and Jemima, even the subsumption of Green under Jemima, slavery is abolished. The pleasant history of a personified commodity replaces the painful history of a person as commodity.

An unintentional irony of the World's Fair ad is that the reader *could* have seen Aunt Jemima in person—Nancy Green was still alive and performing as the company's representative. But her shelf-life was much shorter than the brand's; she died in 1923 after she was run over by a car in her Chicago neighborhood. Not surprisingly, Green's obituary in at least one newspaper "blended the facts of [her] life with the fiction of Aunt Jemima's."[105]

This chapter has focused on Aunt Jemima as a shining example of the complex use of historical reinvention within a particular narrative message, with amnesic nostalgia a key factor.

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[102] Cohn, 6.

[103] Christopher Robert Reed, *"All the World is Here!": The Black Presence at White City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), xxi.

[104] Berlant, "National Brands, National Body," in *The Female Complaint*, 116.

[105] Manring, 77. For a cataloguing of the obituaries, see McElya, 28–31.

The chapter also explored how such a message reached a US audience and the importance that the circulation of the image played in its impact. The explicit use of the minstrel tradition is muted in the ads, but the two symbiotically supported each other. The creation of the Jemima myth would have been impossible without the minstrel tradition, and the social beliefs of racial division derived from minstrelsy would have been outdated without the pancake icon.

Chapter Three

"A Circle Around Only a Limited Territory": Arthur Leroy Kaser and Mail-Order Minstrelsy

In the introduction to *Happy-Go-Lucky Minstrels*, Arthur Leroy Kaser confidently places his work in a continuum of blackface enterprises:

> The minstrel show as a lucrative form of entertainment has time and again proved its worth. When properly presented the minstrel show never fails to please the most fastidious audience. It is a form of entertainment wherein the show may be remoulded to a certain extent to fit the available talent. In most other forms of stage presentations talent must be sought to fit the rôles. There are many minstrel books upon the market but the amateur director is somewhat skeptical of their respective merits, due to the repetitious contents of the different books. In the writer's opinion the minstrel show will never die. It might undergo changes in order to keep up with the fickle fancies of the modern folk, but it will never die.[1]

This quotation points toward many of the elements and pressures that comprised the amateur minstrel industry: there is money to be made from a critical audience; there are non-professional directors and their non-professional actors, whose limited abilities must be taken into consideration; there is a glutted marketplace of mail-order catalogues and scripts; and there is the minstrel show itself—ever adaptable, ever constant.

Over the course of his lifetime, Arthur Kaser wrote four hundred and sixty-three plays, from *Hiram Blows In: A Monologue* in 1920 to *Too Many Aunt Harriets; A Farce in One Act* in 1954. He wrote under sixty pseudonyms, ranging alphabetically from Jack Archer to Jane Wheeler. He generated nearly sixteen hundred pages of published material, including gag books and vaudeville specialties, monologues and radio plays, farces and "rube" skits, and a great many minstrel scripts. All of his plays were comedies and most featured at least one character speaking in dialect: Irish, Jewish, "Dutch,"[2] and other ethnic inflections that could be written phonetically for humorous effect. But black dialect was his favorite. Black and blackface characters were a staple of Kaser's repertoire, and over the decades he wrote minstrel shows in increasingly bizarre settings. Created when the professional minstrel show was on the wane, these plays catered to a market whose size has yet to be sufficiently approximated. Non-professional community organizations were the primary purchasers, whose members would put on comedies or variety shows for fun and profit. Kaser was intuitively cognizant of the way to write for this type of organization, and they responded: Kaser was, undoubtedly, the best-selling minstrel playwright in the history of the amateur theatrical industry.

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[1] Arthur Kaser, *Happy-Go-Lucky Minstrels: Minstrel Crossfire, First Part, Afterpiece, Monologues, Talking Acts for Two, Crossfire Fillers, Conundrums, Rhymes and Jingles, Quips and Slips* (New York: Fitzgerald Publishing Corporation, 1929), 5.

The structure of this chapter mirrors the previous one by mapping three points in the creation and distribution of a particular cultural product, and analyzing its relationship to the consumer. After discussing the methodological framework and inspiration for the analysis, it looks at the life and career of Arthur Kaser, the history of the amateur theatrical publishing houses he began working for, and the scripts he made between 1920 and 1923. Kaser's thirty-five years as a playwright notwithstanding, this chapter details what he wrote at the very beginning of his career, because these first scripts demonstrate many of the common themes and dramaturgical tricks to which he returned obsessively. They also connect Kaser to the 1920s issues of technology, distribution, and racial identity covered in the rest of this study.

The use of blackface in Kaser's plays is the chapter's main focus. The racial impersonation found in his work is remarkable in its way of speaking to and for the groups that wanted to perform beneath the blackface mask: it provided people with a way of stepping outside themselves and unself-consciously laughing at local mores. As a rural playwright in the 1920s writing for rural audiences, he wrote for the person alienated from a traditional sense of community by technological innovations—even as that same person embraced an individualized, Republican, pro-business national identity. Kaser was an artist working for a national clientele but his plays were designed to celebrate a community's uniqueness. As community identity was being pulled in two directions by the contrasting ideals of nationalization on the one hand and self-determining individualization on the other, class divisions and distinctions were becoming frustratingly rigidified. Blackface acted as a perfect foil for displaced class antagonisms. The social rituals of community building (as well as building ethnic and racial solidarity) could be revived by the amateur minstrel show as a way of communing back to an earlier time—to roots and origins, as imaginary as they were. Kaser trafficked in a form of double nostalgia: his plays hearkened back to a less technologically driven era, and they also were nostalgic about the minstrel show itself as a clean, simple, direct form of white entertainment.

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[2] The "Dutch" dialect indicated a general East European or Scandinavian accent.

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Arthur Kaser as Producer

This chapter discusses the amateur playwright, the companies that published such scripts, and the scripts themselves. It draws upon cultural materialism, and takes as inspiration specific examples and case studies by theorists who have a strong conception of, and belief in, the interrelated roles of the artist and artwork within society, even when they are not dealing specifically with theatre or theatrical presentations. In dialectical terms, this chapter looks at the author in society and the author and society—something handled deftly by many Frankfurt School writers. Theodor Adorno writes, "Works of art... have their own roots in existence; their medium is not pure mind, but the mind that enters into reality and, by virtue of such movement, is able to maintain the unity of what is divided."[3] Discussing these scripts as the products of one person's labor also involves the assumed and imagined audience. Kaser knew himself as an author in a vast marketplace, and his self-understanding is crucial to a reading of his texts and career.

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[3] Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Verso Press, 1981), 71–72.

The chapter sketches Arthur Kaser's work habits as a playwright, but its project is less a psychological examination than a look at the "author as producer" who inserts his or her works of art "into the living social context."[4] Both Adorno and Walter Benjamin, in various ways, write about artists who themselves express an unease, either through the form or content of their artworks, with modernism. Especially important to Benjamin, in a way that mirrors his own feelings of alienation, are those artists most affected by and critical of modern societies. Or, in the case of Adorno, individuals who completely convey through their works a dialectical understanding of and anger with the industrial age's social trappings. Frequently, they are speaking about the same artists, such as Baudelaire, Brecht, and Kafka. In several memorable articles, Benjamin looks at specific authors and how their given circumstances informed their role as cultural producers. Kafka, for example, is

> confronted with that reality of ours which realizes itself theoretically... in modern physics, and practically in the technology of modern warfare. What I mean to say is that this reality can ritually no longer be experienced by an *individual*, and that Kafka's world, frequently of such playfulness and interlaced with angels, is the exact complement of his era which is preparing to do away with the inhabitants of this planet on a considerable scale.[5]

Benjamin, himself no stranger to angels, sees them dancing on the tip of Kafka's pen. Similarly, Adorno focuses on the author as producer in some of his essays, though he has some very divergent ideas about the role of the author in creating an ideology or of the critic in challenging it.[6] In his own essay about Kafka, Adorno states:

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[4] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum Press, 1982), 256.

[5] Walter Benjamin, "Some Reflections of Kafka," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 142–43.

[6] Adorno "was extremely critical of what he took to be the anarchist romanticism of Benjamin and Brecht." Andrew Arato, introduction to "Esthetic Theory and Cultural Criticism," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 216.

> Individuation has become such a burden for men and has remained so precarious, that they are mortally frightened whenever its veil is raised a little.... Yet there are also images of what is coming, men manufactured on the assembly-line, mechanically reproduced copies, Huxleyian Epsilons. The social origin of the individual ultimately reveals itself as the power to annihilate him. Kafka's work is an attempt to absorb this.[7]

There is no playfulness here, only attempted absorption or self-reconciliation. Both Benjamin and Adorno see in Kafka an individual who intuits the powers of worldwide annihilation. Benjamin describes him as a shaman of humanity; Adorno, as a prophet of doom. Like Kafka, Kaser also recognizes the celerity and alienation of modernity, but writes in a way to assuage such mortal frights.

Adorno's discussions of mass-culture lump products and genres together, as opposed to his critiques of individuals from more refined realms of art. For example, when discussing music, Adorno can write of the genius of Schoenberg or the proto-fascism of Wagner, but jazz is merely jazz. For him, tinny dance music is a perfect articulation of the mass-market commodity, and hence is unchained from any authorship. In his 1936 essay "On Jazz," an article that he hoped would be published alongside of Benjamin's famous "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Adorno writes, "Predominant, however, is the law which is that of the market as much as it is that of myths: the illusion must constantly remain the same while at the same time constantly simulating the 'new.'"[8] As will be explored later, Kaser too was dictated in his writing by the law of the market, and he displaced any moral obligation of his work upon such invisible hands.

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[7] Theodor Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1967), 253. "Huxleyan Epsilons" refers to the genetically engineered working class in Aldous Huxley's dystopian science-fiction novel *Brave New World* (1932).

[8] Theodor Adorno, "On Jazz," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Jamie Owen Daniel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 493n5, 478.

There are many reasons to analyze the individual life and cultural products of someone so fully invested in the culture industry, even in a marginalized corner like amateur theatricals. As Pierre Bourdieu puts it, "To understand the practices of writers and artists, and not least their products, entails understanding that they are the result of the meeting of two histories: the history of the positions they occupy and the history of their dispositions."[9] And though I am more inclined to address Kaser and his work in Adornian terms of absorption and deflection, I cannot ignore the better angels of his nature. Benjamin writes of the place of the storyteller in the community, who creates and helps establish identity; an art form displaced by printing and the novel.[10] Kaser is able to speak to that community, and in particular to its economic fears and cultural-technological tensions, through the medium of the amateur script and the trope of racial impersonation.

Beyond examining Kaser as author and storyteller, this chapter analyzes a category of literature and a branch of the publishing and theatre industries that defines itself by the intended purchasers, what Benjamin calls its consuming class. In an essay titled "Chambermaids' Romances of the Past Century," a short piece full of energy and whimsy, he describes the innovation of exploring literature not by genre but by class:

> Chambermaids' romances? Since when are works of literature categorized according to the class that consumes them? Unfortunately, they are not—or all too seldom. Yet how much more illuminating this would be than hackneyed aesthetic appreciations! Nevertheless, such a categorization would pose problems. Above all, because we so rarely obtain any insight into the relations of production.[11]

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[9] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 61.

[10] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations*, 83–109.

[11] Walter Benjamin, "Chambermaids' Romances of the Past Century," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 243.

Recognizing the problem of relating artwork to methods of production and circulation, this chapter includes a discussion of the publishing houses which printed the scripts. But Benjamin continues in his analysis of mass-produced fictions that were sold door-to-door directly to servants in middle- and upper-class houses—thus placing the books directly in the hands of the working class and directly into the domestic sphere of the home. Judging these "documents" as objects, collections of disintegrating paper and cheap binding, he concludes the essay with a crucial observation that will reverberate throughout this chapter:

> We are still clumsy in our efforts to approach these clumsy works. We feel strange to take seriously books that were never part of a "library." But let us not forget that books were originally objects of use—indeed, a means of subsistence. These were devoured.[12]

The plays of Arthur Kaser, indeed all the works of the self-defined amateur play industry, were objects for use. They were tools for the sake of furthering and strengthening an ideology. They were also means of subsistence, providing sustenance for both performers and audiences.

The relationship between community, class, and print culture is deftly handled by historians Benedict Anderson and Michael Denning. Anderson's path-breaking *Imagined Communities* is still a vital starting point for discussing the formation and continuation of identity, and if used carefully his theorizations can be applied to US regional awareness even though his canvas is geographically much larger. Anderson analyzes how the crucible of colonial power created national identities in disparate areas around the globe, for a "linking [of] fraternity, power and time."[13] But these terms can be used differently in other contexts. They can be a notional way of explaining those stresses faced by communities within a colonialist nation, those that were being pressured by the expansions of capitalism: how fraternity was being atomized by power over time.

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[12] Ibid., 247–48.

[13] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso Press, 1991), 36.

For Anderson, the "point of departure is that... nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind"[14]—and this idea of cultural artifacts will be picked up by Denning to help define class identity. Key to the concept of "cultural roots" is print-capitalism, "which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways."[15] The necessity of print to a sense of community, class, and even racial ontology in the US is analyzed by Denning's *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*. His sophisticated elaboration of Benjamin's "Chambermaids' Romances" essay focuses on the pulp fictions of the late–nineteenth century. Analogous to my study here, Denning's book looks at the construction of class and asks "two principal questions: what can be learned *about* these popular narratives, their production and consumption, and their place and function within working class cultures; and, what can be learned *from* them, as symbolic actions, about working class culture and ideology."[16] Numerous facets of Denning's analysis, from his discussion of distribution methods to his close readings of specific stories, are echoed in this chapter. For example, an inspiration for my reading of Kaser's early plays is Denning's observation on the dime novel as escapist fiction:

> These narratives are the dream-work of the social, condensing (compressing a number of dream-thoughts into one image) and displacing (transferring energies invested in one image to another) the wishes, anxieties, and intractable antinomies of social life in a class society.[17]

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[14] Ibid., 4.
[15] Ibid., 36.
[16] Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso Press, 1989), 3. Emphasis in original.
[17] Ibid., 81.

In the realm of amateur theatricals, I will be looking at how the antinomies of social life are displaced onto the embodied blackface characters of the minstrel show.

Racism concerns both Anderson and Denning, lending a legitimacy to an analysis of Kaser above and beyond the more basic reason that so few historians have examined the amateur theatrical industry. Denning concedes the unique importance of blackface racial impersonation by noting, "The dime novel remains firmly within the racist parameters of the nineteenth-century producer culture, lacking even the minstrel show's carnivalesque staging of the boundaries of race. If the dime novels' accents are those of the mechanic, its color is white."[18] Or, according to Anderson,

> The fact of the matter is that nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations.... The dreams of racism actually have their origin in ideologies of *class*, rather than in those of nation: above all in claims to divinity among rulers and to "blue" or "white" blood and "breeding" among aristocracies.[19]

Anderson here highlights a particular irony in the anti-colonial nationalisms he studies—how they replicate a racialized class hierarchy copied from their colonial precursor. But this pirated systemization fails to take into account how racism can transcend class divisions as a way of displacing class antinomies, how racist epistemology can stitch together a nationalist ontology—Žižek's quilting in practice. In a concrete example of this structuring, as Jill Lane explains in *Blackface Cuba, 1840–1895,* "[b]y the explosive year of 1868, then, blackface operated as a significant counterfeit currency whose entertainment 'value' helped to forge (in both senses, to make and to fake) an 'authentic' Cuban national community during the era of anticolonial struggle."[20] This study gives the particular communal entertainment value of minstrelsy a specific US reading.

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[18] Ibid., 211.
[19] Anderson, 149. Emphasis in original.

The social tension being described is a community in the throes of an emergent modernism—with minstrelsy of the modern period a cherished pre-modernist relic. I am inspired to make this claim thanks to both the definition of modernism found in Fredric Jameson and also by the use of Jameson by Neil Lazarus. Speaking of the aesthetic modernism of Joyce, Proust, and Eliot in the concluding chapter of *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson writes:

> If, for example, modernization has something to do with industrial progress, rationalization, reorganization of production and administration along more efficient lines, electricity, the assembly line, parliamentary democracy, and cheap newspapers—then we will have to conclude that at least one strand of artistic modernism is anti-modern and comes into being in violent and muffled protest against modernization, now grasped as technological progress in the largest sense.[21]

As Lazarus continues, the "categorical opposition that underpins [this artistic modernism is] between an exalted 'high culture' and a degraded 'mass culture'.... For from the outset, modernism tended to view mass culture as its spectral other."[22] Building off this, minstrelsy could, and did, represent both mass culture denigration and primitivist rejuvenation.[23]

But modernism exists, for Jameson, at a time in the historical continuum before capitalism became a completely systematized social, economic, and cultural model:

> Modernism must thus be seen as uniquely corresponding to an uneven moment of social development, or to what Ernst Bloch called the "simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous"... the coexistence of realities from radically different moments

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[20] Jill Lane, *Blackface Cuba, 1840–1895* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 61.

[21] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 304.

[22] Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 151.

[23] Primitivism was a key aesthetic element for both white and black artists in the US in the 1920s, across all disciplines. See Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995).

> of history—handicrafts alongside the great cartels, peasant fields with the Krupp factories or the Ford plant in the distance.[24]

So what can be analyzed in amateur theatricals is one way rural communities attempted to comprehend "the experience of the machine."[25] Or, as Lazarus puts it, how capitalism's "*intense* saturation of social relations... writes itself upon social practice in general."[26] Kaser was a storyteller for a particular type of community, and his plays were handicrafts and toolkits, cultural products that proudly displayed the fingerprints of those who worked on them. These homemade productions can be thought of in contrast to the professional touring shows examined in the next chapter—the unironically named "vaudeville machine."

Amateur is a word that meant something very particular to Kaser because of his background and personal experiences. Amateurs were people who possibly had never seen a minstrel show, and who were unschooled in the dramatic arts. But Kaser also thought of amateurs in terms of class. Kaser's son told me in an interview, "Well, all the people who bought his plays, acted in his plays, and saw his plays, were people who were working fourteen, sixteen hours a day, you know. And they certainly didn't have time to invest in an elaborate production."[27] His plays were for people who worked—either making machines in the Ford plants or farming in the shadow of them.

Is there a class bias in the plays of Kaser, have they the same accent as the dime novel? Certainly the signifiers of wealth are subject to ridicule, in the form of material effects such as cars and jewelry or less tangible cultural capital such as expansive knowledge or a sophisticated vocabulary. The aspirations of upward mobility are satirized. And most of the explicit discussions about money (the lack thereof or the wanting of more) are between grubbing and wheedling blackface characters. But class antagonisms, even class suspicions, are replaced by geographic anxieties. These anxieties were not regional, as North and South are harmoniously intertwined in the plays. But the urban space, the city, is contrasted with the rural. The metropolis is the place of speed, technology, and also wealth; things incomprehensible to the characters with which the audience is meant to identify.

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[24] Jameson, 307. The Krupp company operated steel and weapons factories in Germany in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
[25] Ibid., 305.
[26] Lazarus, 16. Emphasis in original.
[27] David Kaser, interview with author, May 2004.

Amateur scripts played an important role in helping towns and villages understand the external forces of modernity which were rapidly undermining the identity foundations of their community. In the appropriation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Arthur Leroy Kaser in his 1922 *The Filming of "Uncle Tom's Cabin,"* amateur scripts perform the "cultural work historical fiction of the present typically does";[28] they shape the past into a story that legitimizes the best aspects of the present. And the relation between minstrelsy of earlier decades and the amateur scripts of Kaser is analogous to the move from Stowe's novel to *Show Boat* detailed by Lauren Berlant, especially the connection between nostalgia and "Americana." Both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and professional minstrelsy were nostalgia objects by the 1920s. Edna Ferber's *Show Boat*, like Kaser's amateur theatricals, "aim[ed] directly at the field of nostalgic entertainment itself, locating in the banality of 'Americana' the ethical and political crisis of modernity."[29] People in the 1920s felt a compounded nostalgia for simpler times and simpler entertainments. The performances of amateur minstrel shows became a pageantry of Americana, "the essentializing trivia of national culture."[30] If there is, to return to Jameson's definition of modernism, a "coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history," then these plays attempt to correct this socially destabilizing imbalance.

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[28] Lauren Berlant, "Pax Americana: The Case of *Show Boat*," in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 76.
[29] Ibid., 78.
[30] Ibid., 79.

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Historicizing Amateur Minstrelsy

Despite an existence nearly concurrent with professional blackface entertainment, histories of minstrelsy almost completely ignore the amateur theatrical's route from playwright to publishing house to community production. This disregard is similar to that by newspapers at the time, whose aesthetic condemnation of these entertainments was based on an understanding that their non-professionalism rendered them unworthy of anything other than a short patronizing mention—dime novels were treated the same way. But panning the rivers of ink on US minstrelsy for references to amateur theatricals reveals a close relationship between the professional and non-professional realms. It also indicates that audience members had a strong desire to participate in the act of racial impersonation; some of whom, like Arthur Kaser, then created their own minstrel shows.

The earliest histories of minstrelsy pay scant attention to the amateur stage, focusing almost entirely on the professional white men that established and popularized the form. Edward LeRoy Rice's 1911 *Monarchs of Minstrelsy: From "Daddy" Rice to Date* is a list of biographical sketches of professional minstrel performers, each around one to two paragraphs long.[31] In the midst of all the famous companies, popular songs, and personal details, Rice occasionally mentions a performer who got his start on the amateur stage. One is Charley Gardner, "known as 'Hop Light Loo' Gardner, from the fact that he originated the black-face song and dance of that name for the first time at an amateur minstrel performance in Augusta, Ga.; this was in the late

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[31] Though the 366-page book covers all eras, only three of the individuals surveyed are black: Master Juba and Japanese Tommy (both pre–Civil War), and Bert Williams.

'50s."[32] So amateur minstrelsy existed even in the antebellum era, and occasionally performers made the transition to the professional stage. (This path will be replicated by Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden in the next chapter.) The Horatio Alger–esque story usually told, however, is of a plucky youngster apprenticing to a professional troupe and eventually graduating to endman or inside man status.[33]

I should note here a particular, possibly obvious, omission. At no time did I uncover a playwright of amateur minstrelsy who identified him- or herself as black, nor an amateur minstrel show that was not explicitly or implicitly written for whites. Nor have I read any anecdotes or stories by African American blackface performers that included a start on an amateur stage. Judging by the memoirs of black entertainers Tom Fletcher and Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham, individuals attached themselves to professionals and worked their way to prominence, like many of their white counterparts.[34]

The relationship between publishing and minstrelsy is rarely covered directly by historians, though the published effects of minstrelsy such as sheet music, joke books, and afterpiece routines are often the basis for their analysis. From the earliest days of blackface performance, published material was sold to an eager public wanting to preserve some of the excitement of the live event. According to W.T. Lhamon's edited collection of T.D. Rice's plays, the first version of the song "The Original Jim Crow" was a stand-alone broadsheet published in 1832, soon after Rice debuted his blackface routine, and by 1844 "De Original Jim Crow" was included in a songster of minstrel melodies.[35] Musicologist William J. Mahar's analysis of antebellum minstrelsy relies heavily upon playbills and printed versions of song lyrics. Antebellum songsters were collections of popular tunes from the professional stage, many of which were "endorsed" by companies or individual performers. Mahar focuses his study on the messages of the print materials, and neither examines the publishing companies nor speculates as to who was buying them.[36] Eric Lott, however, gives a cogent overview of these early publishers and the success of their enterprises:

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[32] Edward LeRoy Rice, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy: From "Daddy" Rice to Date* (New York: Kenny Publishing Company, 1911), 130.

[33] See Rice's own story at the beginning of *Monarchs of Minstrelsy*; or Ralph Keeler, "Three Years as a Negro Minstrel," *Atlantic Monthly* 24, no. 141 (1869): 71–85.

[34] See Tom Fletcher, *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business* (1954; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1984) and Dewey Markham, *Here Come the Judge!*, with William A. Levinson (United States of America: Popular Library, 1969).

> "Mass" entertainment publishers (Dick and Fitzgerald in New York, T.B. Peterson and Turner and Fisher in Philadelphia) yearly cranked out dozens of dime songbooks in the names of famous minstrel stars or companies.... [T]hese books, usually only printed lyrics without music—little lyric volumes of mass-produced racist caricature—evidently allowed fans of blackface to sing the works at home to tunes they knew by heart from the theater, and were therefore advertisement, a symbol of product loyalty, as much as entertainment. Nor did the sheet-music business lag behind.[37]

He notes that some of the printed songs were never performed, speculating that "to some extent the songbooks constituted an independent realm of literary production" at the periphery of the dime-novel industry.[38]

Music and song publishing seemingly came first, followed later by the printing of minstrel skits, joke books, and endpieces. Gary Engle collected a representative sample of skits under the title *This Grotesque Essence: Plays from the American Minstrel Stage*. All of the scripts reprinted are from the 1870s and 1880s and most originated on the professional stage. Engle makes a curious conceptual leap, stating that they were published for amateur companies and not the reading public. He writes:

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[35] W. T. Lhamon, jr., ed. *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 421n3, 423n30.

[36] William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

[37] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 171.

[38] Ibid., 267n37.

> Shortly after the Civil War amateur minstrelsy became so popular that several mail order firms began competing to fill the amateur demand for minstrel literature.... Fortunately, many of the acting editions churned out to fill the mail order catalogs were transcriptions of material from minstrelsy's earlier days.[39]

He fails to mention the burgeoning "How to..." industry of the same era,[40] or that many of the technical effects and elaborate costuming in the scripts he reprints would have been beyond the abilities or budgets of amateurs—concerns directly addressed in the plays of Arthur Kaser.

Engle was inspired to make the assertion about amateur minstrelsy by George Wittke's 1930 book *Tambo and Bones*, one of the first historical overviews of the minstrel show. Wittke finds amateur minstrelsy's beginnings during Reconstruction:

> [The] craze for amateur minstrels which still makes this form of entertainment the favorite vehicle for the histrionic talents of church organizations, young business men's clubs, Rotarians, ladies' auxiliaries, and firemen's protective associations, became apparent soon after the close of the Civil War.[41]

Wittke's anger at the histrionic amateurs is undisguised. As his book is a nostalgic paean to the golden years and glory days of blackface, the final nail in the coffin of "negro delineators" was the hubris of the non-professional: "[T]he amateur craze for minstrel performances, based on the false assumption that any group can produce a minstrel program, undoubtedly helped to kill minstrelsy as a professional form of amusement." For Wittke, "The future of minstrelsy seems to lie in the lap of Hollywood" and the expert talent which emigrated there.[42] Wittke never speculates as to why this craze, as he repeatedly calls it, existed or persisted, or what social need non-professional minstrelsy addressed.

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[39] Gary D. Engle, ed. *This Grotesque Essence: Plays from the American Minstrel Stage* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), xxi.

[40] See George Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1930), 147n11.

[41] Ibid., 65. Without attribution, Engle paraphrases Wittke while throwing in an allusion to D.W. Griffith and removing women's participation: "Minstrelsy had its roots in the decades surrounding the birth of this nation; and it died in the amateur productions of church organizations, young businessmen's clubs, Rotarians, and firemen's protective leagues in the first half of the twentieth century." See Engle, xiv.

[42] Wittke, 125, 134.

At the same time Wittke was writing, Dailey Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth compiled their own overview of minstrelsy. It takes an opposite attitude toward the amateur, celebrating the non-professional for maintaining an interest in the form. They even include "a working model" of a minstrel show, cobbled together from nineteenth-century joke books and songsters, "for those who might like to know exactly how the lines of an old-fashioned minstrel show actually sounded, as well as those who may wish to try their hand at an amateur revival of this practical and still popular form of entertainment."[43] While Wittke denigrates non-professionalism, Paskman and Spaeth celebrate amateurism for wearing the mantle of "old-fashioned" minstrelsy.

Two relatively recent studies of African Americans in popular culture have badly used amateur minstrelsy—one to denigrate and the other to celebrate the idea of cross-racial mixing in the US. For Joseph Boskin, amateur minstrelsy luridly highlights the manichean dualism between blacks and whites in the cultural products of the early twentieth century and the blanket racism of the country. With a tinge of hysteria, he writes: "By the turn of the century practically every city, town, and rural community had amateur minstrel groups, aided by the publication of hundreds of low-cost minstrel books containing full productions." Boskin quotes from Kaser's 1933 play *The Chain Gang Minstrels*, misspelling the author's name in the endnotes.[44] John Strausbaugh, in his frequently misguided *Black Like You*, presents an overview similar to Boskin about the representations of African American life in mass culture. Like so many others, he pronounces twentieth-century minstrelsy a walking corpse: "[L]ong after it died as professional entertainment, putting on an amateur minstrel show remained a popular—if increasingly furtive and guilty—pastime for White Americans into the 1970s."[45] The overall thrust of his argument, contrary to Boskin whom he paraphrases in his discussion of amateur scripts, is whites' ahistoric desire to sample African American hipness. Strausbaugh also reduces US race relations to a black and white binarism, but sees US culture as a conciliatory hybrid, something opposite to Boskin's examination of the same phenomenon. Both Boskin and Strausbaugh try to impose sweeping general theories of race relations upon two centuries of US culture, and ignore anything that does not fit their simplistic models with a lazy quietism.

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[43] Dailey Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth, *"Gentlemen, Be Seated!": A Parade of the Old-Time Minstrels* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1928), 7, 97.

[44] Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 85, 234n54.

A pair of recent articles have presented intimate portraits of amateur minstrelsy, taking a more sociological approach by limiting their analysis to case studies of rural communities. The conclusions of both describe a mixture of nostalgia and apprehension in the performances. Charles Hamm reported on the annual minstrel show in Tunbridge, Vermont for his article "The Last Minstrel Show?" Focusing on the music—a mixture of Stephen Foster, Tin Pan Alley, and relatively contemporary tunes like "Rockin' Robin"—Hamm concludes that "the various pieces performed in this show form a stylistic cluster, unified by their relationship to or compatibility with nineteenth-century Anglo-American styles and the absence of African-American elements."[46] The other analysis of amateur minstrelsy is Howard Sacks's "Cork and Community: Postwar Blackface Minstrelsy in the Rural Midwest." The town in question is Mount Vernon, Ohio, and its minstrel shows of the 1950s. Linking sociology to local identity, Sacks writes, "Much of the humor defined a community boundary that symbolically united participants and distinguished them from outsiders."[47] Kaser traded in this type of humor as well, much more than professional touring companies where jokes were based on national themes, elaborate paronomasia, or political tensions. In a related instance of both community building and small-town nostalgia, the Mount Vernon minstrel shows "served as a defense mechanism against overwhelming socioeconomic and cultural change,"[48] much like the works of Kaser.

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[45] John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult and Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 145.

[46] Charles Hamm, "The Last Minstrel Show?" in *Putting Popular Music in its Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 360.

[47] Howard Sacks, "Cork and Community: Postwar Blackface Minstrelsy in the Rural Midwest," *Theatre Survey* 41, no. 2 (November 2000), 31.

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Amateur Minstrelsy's Community

Because this chapter aims at describing the national scope of the amateur publishing industry and Kaser's work, and is not a more focused account of one town's minstrel performances, it is important at this point to define generally the type of community Kaser had in mind as he wrote the plays. A crucial book for establishing this definition is Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd's 1929 *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*. The sociological study nonpareil of this type of US community, it is also "the most detailed, comprehensive, and influential study of class formations in the 1920s."[49] Later in the chapter I will analyze the ways Kaser reached his audience, but for now it is necessary to know how an average-sized Midwestern town functioned and structured itself, and from what sources its self-identity derived.

Middletown is actually Muncie, Indiana, a town only a hundred miles away from where Kaser grew up. And the Lynds' study was being conducted at the time he was writing the first of his scripts. As its pseudonym implies, the town was selected for its "middle-of-the-road quality" in numerous demographic categories.[50] The "main considerations" for the selection of the particular location was that "the city be as representative as possible of contemporary life" and have "a certain amount of compactness and homogeneity" to it (7, 8). The population of the city was to be between 25,000 to 50,000; the temperateness of the region was considered; and the central qualification was that "the city should, if possible, be in that common-denominator of America, the Middle West" (7–8).

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[48] Ibid., 46.

[49] David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 118.

[50] Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929), 9. Future references will be made in the text.

The material collected for the study is an artful blend of census data, directed questionnaires, in-person interviews, and citations from local newspapers. Within the social and geographic boundaries of Middletown, the book examines six interlocking "main-trunk activities": "getting a living; making a home; training the young; using leisure in various forms of play, art, and so on; engaging in religious practices; engaging in community activities" (4). *Middletown* uses 1890 as the baseline for judging the amount and degree of change within the community during the process of modernization. As the Lynds write in one of their many memorable sentences, "this narrow strip of thirty-five years [between 1890 and 1925] comprehends for hundreds of American communities the industrial revolution that has descended upon villages and towns metamorphosing them into a thing of Rotary clubs, central trade councils, and Chamber of Commerce contests for 'bigger and better' cities" (5–6). Arthur Kaser was born in 1890, and witnessed this (Kafkaesque?) metamorphosis first hand.

Incredibly, the Lynds specifically avoided race, racial plurality, or racial change when selecting the representative town:

> In a difficult study of this sort it seemed a distinct advantage to deal with a homogenous native-born population, even though such a population is unusual in an American industrial city. Thus, instead of being forced to handle two major variables, racial change and cultural change, the field staff was enabled to concentrate upon cultural change. The study thus became one of interplay of a relatively constant native stock and its changing environment. (8)

They considered racial change as a type, even *the* type, of social change which would have confused their findings. Despite seeking out a balanced and representative US town, white homogeneity was the only "unusual" element they wanted. Why? Because *Middletown* is an objective (that is, object-centered) sociological study[51] about class divide that tracks this rift in all other areas of cultural and community life, a multi-ethnic city would have confused the linearity of their analysis. The reasons behind this pass unspoken by the Lynds, but I believe it has to do with racial cultural activities that could not be placed on a hierarchy, as well as the racist solidarity that would bind whites together beyond class distinction—Žižek's quilting on a community level. The fact that the Lynds believe their study can be used as a template for other mono-racial communities supports this contention.

What *Middletown* does capture are the challenges facing the (all-white) cultural and political identity of a mid-sized American community at a moment when the "age of the technocrat had dawned and America was to display its advantages to the world."[52] As the Lynds put it, "The aim of the field investigation recorded in the following pages was to study synchronously the interwoven trends that are the life of a small American city" (3). Possibly the most overwhelming social tension examined in the book is how the community is besieged by mass-culture products that irrevocably alter the social fabric of Middletown. The city becomes increasingly subjected to external laws of cultural domination that change its value system and even the way community members interact: "The rise of large-scale advertising, popular magazines, movies, radio, and other channels of increased cultural diffusion from without are rapidly changing habits of thought as to what things are essential to living and multiplying optional occasions for spending money" (81–82). These innovations of advertising and film also extend to music. Note in the following how the authors seamlessly move from the phenomenon of technology to its larger social impact:

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[51] For the relevance of its objective as opposed to subjective analysis, see Savran, 119–20.

[52] Peter Fearon, *War, Prosperity and Depression: The U.S. Economy 1917–45* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987), 51.

> Mechanical inventions such as the phonograph and radio are further bringing to Middletown more contacts with more kinds of music than ever before. Thirty-five years ago diffusion of musical knowledge was entirely in the handicraft stage; today it has entered a machine stage. (244)

Benjamin compares the traces of storytelling to the fingerprints left on a handmade pot,[53] here another handicraft has become mechanized. The Lynds catalogue attempts to maintain a certain individuality and uniqueness within Muncie, and it is to this desire that Kaser's plays effectively speak.

The conclusions of the Lynds' microcosmic analysis are supported by Peter Fearon's macro-economic study of the interwar years, *War, Prosperity and Depression: The U.S. Economy 1917–45*. He outlines the rapidly increasing wealth of farmers during World War I along with a correlative purchasing power and appetite for new manufactured consumer goods. After the war:

> The "New Era" was not perfect, however. The largest group which did not regard it with unrestrained enthusiasm was that of farmers. Affluent during the war, but disgruntled in peace, millions of Americans were tied to the farm in the decade of the city.[54]

The excitement of the city, along with higher wages and jobs for women, led to an urban migration, especially by the young. The siren call of big-city life plagued rural and farming communities, something recognized and exploited by Kaser. Fearon continues:

> Many workers viewed the 1920s as an era of job uncertainty; they were anxious about the pace of technological advance which could render them jobless even if skilled, and frustrated by the seasonal fluctuations in many trades. The remorseless march of machinery was identified by many as a source of misfortune.[55]

The effect of this upheaval can be summed up with the following expansive, yet personal, observation by the Lynds:

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[53] Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 92.
[54] Fearon, 25.
[55] Ibid., 63.

> We are coming to realize, moreover, that we today are probably living in one of the eras of greatest rapidity of change in the history of human institutions. New tools and techniques are being developed with stupendous celerity, while in the wake of these technical developments increasingly frequent and strong culture waves sweep over us from without, drenching us with the material and non-material habits of other centers. (5)

Such realizations would not be out of place in an essay by Benjamin or Adorno. As a background to Arthur Kaser's experiences and writings, the uncertainty, speed, and movement as detailed by Fearon and the Lynds must be given their due. His work's success is unthinkable without these ever present tensions.

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Gag Man for the Amateur

Amateur theatre is Middletown's theatre; the people that performed in the shows did not consider themselves to be actors and the plays themselves spoke to their particular worldview. By this same token, Arthur Kaser is Middletown's playwright. Due to his background and exposure to the theatre world, Kaser perfectly represented and articulated Middletown's ideological frame in his playscripts. More than this, Kaser had a very clear understanding of the amateur publishing business and his role in the industry. There is more than a little to admire about Kaser, a solitary creator who thought of his artistic output as an artisan would his handicrafts. He had little knowledge of where the plays went after he sold them, and he had little desire to know who was speaking his words. Like the Middletown in which he lived, Kaser's life is a compelling story, both quotidian and complicated. This section examines his biography and his relationship to the industry he typifies.[56]

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[56] Much of my information on Arthur Kaser was provided by his son David, a retired professor of library science. In 1958 he wrote the one existing article about Arthur, a list of his plays along with a brief biographical sketch. David also wrote about his extended family in his autobiography, *Just Lucky, I Guess: My Adventurous Life as a Hoosier Librarian* (New York: Vantage Press, 2000). Further insights and anecdotes were given through a series of phone and in-person interviews I conducted with both David and his sister Barbara. Funny, erudite, and still incredibly respectful of his father's legacy, David made this chapter possible.

Kaser never considered himself to be a playwright. In his own understanding of the word, "playwright" connoted an elite dandyism or urban sophistication to be treated with caution. Despite a passing awareness of Shakespeare, he read no plays. He had a job, and this was it. Writing was a part of himself that he shared with his family but kept partially hidden from his neighbors and casual acquaintances. As his son David shared with me in one of our several conversations:

> Nobody in our neighborhood could understand what Dad did for a living. Everybody else went off and did something, and here was Dad, moseying around the house at all hours of the day and night, the years went by, and he still managed to have enough money to pay his bills, and when they asked the neighbor kids, do you know what Mr. Kaser does for a living? And we finally found out that the kids always had one answer, they said, yes, he's a typist.[57]

Kaser was mostly anonymous to the buying public due to his numerous pseudonyms, and he almost never saw his plays performed. Nobody in his community considered playwriting to be an actual profession (unlike typist), and he did not correct them.

Kaser's tutelage at the periphery of professional theatre and at the center of community theatre worked to his advantage when he began writing. It was in LaPorte, Indiana, that Kaser had his first, lasting exposure to live theatre. According to David's autobiography:

> For several years from the time Dad was ten, he also worked as a "candy butcher" at the local vaudeville theater, Hall's Opera House. Resplendent in a uniform bedecked with braided epaulets and brass buttons, he hawked his confections during scene changes and between acts, but more important he also got to watch its wide range of variety entertainment for free![58]

The type of skits that passed through the theatre included "[m]ind readers and Dutch comics, trained pigeons and soft-shoe dancers, blackface skits and magic acts, minstrels and Irish monologists."[59] They all made an impression on Kaser, and his own work reflected the broad characterizations and stock situations of vaudeville. Kaser later started performing with local theatre troupes. He played various types, but "the American Negro, coming to the vaudeville stage from the older and venerable minstrel tradition, interested Art very much, and he was probably his best as a 'burnt-cork' comic."[60] He performed intermittently with the local amateur company for the next ten years (interrupted by his war service). He decided that the scripts he wrote were better than the ones available for purchase through the amateur catalogues, and eventually sent them in for consideration. He had his first script published by T.S. Denison and Company in 1920.[61] Two short pieces were published that first year, but

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[57] David Kaser, interview with author, May 2004.

[58] David Kaser, *Just Lucky, I Guess*, 19.

[59] David Kaser, "Arthur L. Kaser: Gag Man for the Amateur," *Books at Brown* 18, no. 3 (March 1958): 94.

> [h]e followed that with three additional brief works totaling twenty-two pages in 1921 and six items totaling eighty-one pages in 1922. In 1923 he produced eight works, including his first two longer books.... [I]t soon became clear to him that he had found what would today be called a comfortable niche market, if he wanted to fill it.[62]

In the mid-1920s Kaser began writing full-time. He never moved from, and only sometimes left, the Midwest after that.

Kaser had a streak of independence in keeping with his Middletown roots. He was a "dyed-in-the-wool Republican," according to David, who "just liked the old-fashioned, work hard, live on your own resources.... He was for small government."[63] This jibes with the dominant attitude of the people of Middletown—not only the party loyalty fated from birth but also the dominance of the Republican Party extending back to the 1880s.[64] Kaser was especially vituperative toward Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal policies. David talked at length about his father's ambivalent feelings when they finally got electricity at the family farm; it was a New Deal program that brought it. In addition to his political stance and his community ties, both of which found expression in his work, Kaser was enamored with time-and-motion studies and applied them to his life and his writing; he never threw anything away, just stored it for later use. This combination of political conservatism, business acumen, and rural self-identity shaped the how and the why of Kaser's plays. Kaser may have seen little of his work produced and was himself a reluctant performer in adulthood, but I believe that he saw himself as his own ideal reader-performer.

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[60] Ibid., 95.
[61] David Kaser, *Just Lucky, I Guess*, 20; Kaser, interview with author, May 2004.
[62] David Kaser, *Just Lucky, I Guess*, 21.
[63] Ibid.
[64] See Lynd, 414–17.

There was little recollection from his children of formal performing, though he was known to goof around with his family. Also, Kaser never really participated in community groups. According to his daughter Barbara:

> He didn't care about traveling, he didn't care about going any place unless it was an errand or something. He was just kind of a homebody. And didn't really get involved in anything. In the community or the church or anything like that... But he wasn't a joiner. I just remember that. It seemed like so many men were into these lodges and clubs and things. But that didn't interest him. So there wasn't a lot of contact with other guys, really. That I can remember.[65]

Such sentiments were echoed by David. Ironically, the lodge groups he shunned were the primary purchasers of his plays.

Kaser's only opportunity to judge an audience's reaction to his work was from his family. In an illuminating anecdote, David described to me:

> Every evening, at the supper table, he would, over his second cup of coffee, we'd all sit there and he'd read us everything. I have a brother and a sister and my mother, there were four of us, and we would sit there and he would read everything he'd written since the previous supper. And we were his first audience. And our stony silence or enthusiastic huzzahs, whichever it turned out to be, was help to him. We helped him decide what was of some moment and what was without some moment. But, again, he would go back and rework things, as I said I don't think he ever threw anything away, he'd just put it aside and come back and redo it to fit something else some other time.[66]

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[65] Barbara Standford, interview with author, May 2006.

[66] David Kaser, interview with author, May 2004.

This slight, even touching, scene encapsulates much of Kaser's work habits, and how he positioned himself as an artist. After a day of work, he brought his documents to be test-marketed in the ideal setting: the dinner table, the domestic sphere, the focal point of all Middletown's inhabitants. Unlike the overt political engagement that characterized the work of professional minstrelsy, his works spoke to and about domestic life, with jokes intended for every member of the family. If he pleased this audience, he was sure to please his national audience.

At one point in my first conversation with David, I speculated that an embarrassment with his father's dialect plays was the reason his enormous body of work had been ignored for so long. He evasively replied:

> Well, let me explain what I mean. It would be in disfavor if it were known. But he disappeared from the writing scene before that concern hit the market much. And it would have broken his heart. Because he was a very sensitive man. And he didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings, or anything like that. He was just fulfilling the pattern that he had grown up with. And as I said it must, it was still selling, so why would he think of changing.[67]

And here is the crux of Arthur Kaser's understanding of himself as artist and artisan, playwright and worker. He was sensitive in responding to the market and, as that was the only gauge for defining the quality of his work, there was no need to change. But Kaser's social insularity and fealty to market forces allowed him to embrace the basest and most retrograde stereotypes available. Kaser's writing existed, for him, in a moral vacuum. I am neither branding Kaser a promoter of hate nor am I excusing him from the racism of his work. The market demanded it.

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Amateur Publishing Houses

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[67] Ibid.

Kaser was not the only playwright to contribute to amateur publishing houses, but he was one of the most prolific. His work is more than representative: it shows what the amateur theatrical industry wanted, and tried, to produce through its printing and distribution and what kind of consumer base it could sustain. During the early 1920s, his work habits were less regimented and his output slight. He wrote a handful of scripts a year, probably routines that he had put together with the amateur company in Indiana, and he was dealing exclusively with two publishing houses: T.S. Denison and Walter H. Baker.

Amateur play publishers occupy a tiny place in histories of the industry. *A History of Book Publishing in the United States* names only a handful, such as Dramatic Publishing of Chicago, which started catering to their market in the mid-nineteenth century.[68] Because their traces are scant in histories and the effects of the companies (such as ledgers) have disappeared, this section stitches together an overview of the industry from disparate sources such as catalogues, interviews, payment records, and dissertations. It centers around two separate companies that eventually merged in the 1940s: the T.S. Denison Company of Chicago and Northwestern Press of Minneapolis. Both companies were founded by men (always men) who were themselves not part of the publishing business when they began. Calling them amateurs is a label I am not comfortable in applying, but they certainly operated outside mainstream commercial theatres or publishing houses.

Thomas Stewart Denison founded his company in 1876, with a stock that consisted of a few of his own works and some pirated imports. His beginning is reminiscent of how Kaser would break into the industry fifty years later. According to a *Chicago Daily News* article on the company from the 1930s:

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[68] John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, vol. 2, *The Expansion of an Industry 1865–1919* (New York: R.R. Bowker, 1975), 274, 451.

> Thomas S. Denison started Denison & Co. in one room and with one play in 1876. He had come to Chicago from DeKalb [Illinois], where he had been school principal. Previously Denison... had conducted a public school at Marengo, Ill. Time came when he wanted to train his pupils as amateur actors and present a play. Those available were ponderously moving, stuffy "reprints" of stage successes in England. They were ill adapted to the crude amateur facilities of sixty years ago. Stage directions were either lacking or "too professional."[69]

He wrote dozens of plays after that, and most of the company's initial titles came from him. For years, the publishing house was a one-man operation.

Denison's plays follow a certain model: they're simple in staging and character, whimsical, have one interior setting, and few scenes. They are also, like Kaser's work, topical without being political—they reflect various social fears of the time. For example, his 1880 play *Hard Cider* is about two old friends who scoff at both the temperance movement and the negative intoxicating effects of cider and wine; they make drunken fools of themselves and in the final tableau the whole family signs a temperance pledge.[70] Denison's 1895 *Patsy O'Wang: An Irish Farce with a Chinese Mix-Up* is an extraordinary document about race and identity, and it capitalizes on the era's anti-Chinese sentiment. Much of the comedy of the piece centers on the title character, born of an Irish father and a Chinese mother. When he drinks green tea he speaks in a stereotyped Asian dialect and acts like a bumbling servant, and when he drinks whiskey he is transformed into a brogue-lilted, brawling Son of Erin. The play concludes with Patsy rejecting his Chinese "half" and singing:

> And in this free Ameriky I'll have a word to say
> I'm goin' into politics, I'll drink no more green tay.[71]

In *The Great Doughnut Corporation* of 1903, Denison exposes the follies of unchecked business speculation.[72] The Denison company expanded up through the first decade of the twentieth century. Near the end of his life Denison stopped writing plays or novels and instead published a series of bizarre, pseudo-scientific books on linguistics, all attempting to establish a connection between the Nahuatl language in Meso-America and "Aryan phonology."[73] Though only related to *Patsy O'Wang* by authorial proximity, these later works have at their core a sense of racial essentialism and European dominance.

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[69] Gene Morgan, "Mellerdramas of Long Ago Moving to Modern Quarters," *Chicago Daily News*, August, 27, 1937.
[70] T.S. Denison, *Hard Cider: A Temperance Sketch* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1880).
[71] T.S. Denison, *Patsy O'Wang: An Irish Farce with a Chinese Mix-Up* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1895), 29.

After Denison died in 1915, Ebin Holmes Norris, who began working for the company in 1892, became his successor and continued publishing similarly themed works for the next thirty years. Norris's widow sold the company to Larry Brings and Northwestern Press in the early 1940s. The beginnings of Northwestern Press are similar to those of the Denison company, and as the two later merged, one can witness in its trajectory the demise of the amateur publishing industry—or, more appropriately, its dissolution.

In two interviews,[74] I spoke with Keith Brings about amateur publishing in the US, from its beginnings to its end. He was in a unique position to offer insight into this industry: his father, Larry Brings, founded Northwestern Press in 1925, the company bought T.S. Denison, and Keith worked at the company from the time after his military service in 1946 until his retirement. Larry Brings never wrote any plays, but he had a background similar to Dension's that also led him to the industry. According to Keith:

> He was a professor at the University of Minnesota. He taught speech there. And he was always interested in the theatre. He had done a lot of theatre work himself. And he just happened to run into some people that knew someone that had written a play and such, you know how that goes. He read it and liked it and published it.[75]

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[72] T.S. Denison, *The Great Doughnut Corporation: A Farce* (Chicago, T.S. Denison and Co., 1903).

[73] T.S. Denison, *Mexican in Aryan Phonology* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1907); T.S. Denison, *The Primitive Aryans of America* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1908); T.S. Denison, *A Mexican-Aryan Comparative Vocabulary* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1909); T.S. Denison, *Morphology of the Mexican Verb* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1910); T.S. Denison, *Mexican-Aryan Sibilants* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1912).

[74] May 18, 2008; November 25, 2008.

[75] Keith Brings, interview with author, May 18, 2008.

The industry began to wane in the 1960s, a shift Keith blamed on the widespread availability of television. The company was sold to the *Chicago Tribune* in the 1980s, which combined it with other small publishing houses and then sold this conglomeration to McGraw-Hill. This publishing house quickly unloaded the whole mass onto a supply company called School Specialty. And through these alchemical business dealings the names of Denison, Northwestern, and others disappeared. This, in quick, broad strokes, has been the fate of the amateur publishing industry.[76]

Because the companies were dismantled, an analysis of their ledgers and business dealings is impossible, though bits of information remain. For example, in 1928 Kaser sold Fitzgerald Publishing Company two manuscripts for seventy-five dollars (about $750 today), "Happy Harmony Minstrels" and "The Happy-Go-Lucky Minstrel Book," which were combined together and published as *Happy-Go-Lucky Minstrels* in 1929. The cost of the manuscript, coupled with the plates and the editing, came to $275.46 ($2750 today).[77] Also, David provided me with his father's hand-written and typed balance sheets from the 1930s and 1940s. Certain years are missing and some of the entries are confusing, but these documents present additional insight into the workings of the amateur theatrical publishing world. Of the plays purchased by Denison in the early 1930s, the company paid thirty dollars (three hundred dollars today) for the three character, twelve-page-long *Shoot*, *Brother*, *Shoot* and seventy-five dollars ($750 today) for the seven character, forty-five-page *Cotton Town Minstrels*. Denison paid twenty dollars each (two hundred dollars today) for the two monologues they printed at the time, suggesting that there was a sliding pay scale based on length and number of characters.[78] In 1937, Samuel French bought *Minstrel Breezes* for a hundred dollars (a thousand dollars today). In all of these cases, Kaser retained no control over the material after he signed the contract. They were "outright purchases."[79] Judging from his logbooks from the early 1930s, Kaser usually submitted his scripts to Samuel French first, though *Minstrel Breezes* was the only one they ever bought.

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[76] There is an appropriate irony to how Brings was found. The Denison publishing company name disappeared after it was bought out by the *Chicago Tribune*. The only residual company that retains the Denison name is Denison Direct—a "junk mail" company operating in the Minneapolis area that was initially created as an off-shoot to the publishing house. By contacting the president of Denison Direct, I was put in touch with Brings. Thanks to Roxane Heinze-Bradshaw for finding Denison Direct.

[77] Internal memo, May 26, 1928. Samuel French Archives.

The companies got what they paid for, as Kaser was extremely popular throughout his career. When beginning my examination of amateur minstrelsy, I feared that it would be difficult to concretely say who were Kaser's purchasers or determine if Kaser himself was actually performed. Then I found Frank Davidson's remarkable 1952 dissertation, titled "The Rise, Development, Decline and Influence of the American Minstrel Show." The author writes, "Today the minstrel show is a popular indoor sport for amateurs. It is a leading source of money-making for all kinds of organizations."[80] As part of his examination, Davidson sent a questionnaire to the existing amateur publishing houses, "In an effort to find out what demand there is today for minstrel material, and the type of organization that still presents the minstrel show.... Fourteen of the nineteen companies answered the questionnaire; of the fourteen, only three no longer handle this type of entertainment material." The questions asked are as follows:

> 1. How much demand does your company have for minstrel show material?
> a. Much b. Medium c. Little
>
> 2. Would you say that you filled as many as five hundred orders a year for this type of material?
> Less than one hundred? One hundred? Three hundred? More than five hundred?
>
> 3. Which of the following is most in demand?

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[78] Author's collection.

[79] Samuel French Editorial Department to Arthur Kaser, December 17, 1936. Samuel French Archives.

[80] Frank Costellow Davidson, "The Rise, Development, Decline and Influence of the American Minstrel Show" (PhD diss., New York University, 1952), 206.

a. Complete minstrel shows b. Jokes c. Songs

4. Which of the following organizations seem to stage most minstrel shows today?
a. High Schools b. Colleges c. Kiwanis, Rotary and similar organizations d. Women's clubs e. Church groups f. other (women's groups, men's clubs, community business and recreational clubs)

5. If possible, please name your most popular minstrel show book, or material.[81]

The responses are revealing. Minstrelsy is still in demand. Complete minstrel shows are asked for in considerably larger numbers than individual parts of the shows. Kiwanis, Rotary, and other clubs staged the most shows, with church groups second and high schools third. These were precisely the organizations that Kaser had catered to since the early 1920s. And these organizations, founded, as the Lynds write, to restore and maintain local community identity in the wake of industrial cultural modernism, performed minstrel shows as a pleasing counterpart to their mission.

The most astonishing revelation, though, are the answers to the fifth question, in which the companies listed the most popular titles in their collections. Eight out of the fifteen plays named—over fifty percent—were written by Arthur Kaser. These range from his 1927 *Minstrel Laughs* to his 1944 *Banner Victory Minstrel Book* (co-written with Leslie Carter). And the eight plays were published by seven different publishing houses.[82] Even at the very end of his career and at the end of his life, Kaser still had a huge impact on the type of minstrelsy that was being performed in the US. And the fact that he could remain so successful as an amateur's playwright for decades means that he had an amazing ability to write for this type of performer and audience.

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[81] Ibid., 208–9.
[82] Ibid., 210.

National Wishbooks

A crucial element connecting Kaser and the publishing companies to the US public is the method of distribution, itself an emergent form in the twentieth century. The companies did not sell their wares in stores, they sold the plays through catalogues sent to individuals and organizations most eager to buy amateur theatricals. The phenomenon of the mail-order catalogue is particularly pertinent in relation to the themes developed by Anderson. For the United States in the early twentieth century, the exemplar of print-capitalism that helped to create a sense of imagined community was not the novel or the newspaper. Rather, it is the Sears, Roebuck catalogue, the "national wishbook," which

> occupies a unique place in American life. It is more than an instrument of business, although it was designed and is maintained solely as an instrument of business. It has become the best-known book in the United States, a part of American folklore, and, passing strange for a tool of business, it has also become the object of widespread affection.[83]

Author David Cohn detects nothing amiss in a tool for business as national folklore, and does not pursue the implications of such a combination.

In a key chapter of *Imagined Communities,* Anderson examines the connection between the cultural roots of nationalism and "print-capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profound new ways." In the nineteenth century, print-capitalism's "ephemeral popularity" and synchronized distribution took the form of the novel and the newspaper.[84] The newspaper created an imaginary linkage between readers in which "each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion."[85] The catalogue industry in the US typified the extension of this process into the twentieth century, and the Sears, Roebuck catalogue stands as an exaggerated version of how mail-order publishing companies targeted and catered to the rural population while shaping a national identity.

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[83] David L. Cohn, *The Good Old Days: A History of American Morals and Manners as Seen Through the Sears, Roebuck Catalogs 1905 to the Present* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), xxix.
[84] Anderson, 36, 34.

Sears, Roebuck and Company was founded in the 1880s and existed exclusively as a mail-order business until 1925. In its heyday, the catalogue was well over a thousand pages long, weighed several pounds, and over a million copies were sent out to US families. The company sold almost everything: from baby clothes to tombstones, penny nails to pre-made houses. It was available to everyone, but was utilized most fully by the rural population of the country. The company's boom years were at the beginning of the twentieth century, for two interrelated reasons:

> The parcel post became one of the two firm underpinnings which provided the strong market that saw the "golden age" of mail order emerge within the period 1908–25. Hard upon the passage of parcel-post legislation followed another strong sustaining force, the tremendous rise in farm income accompanying the years of World War I.[86]

The national economy depended on swift distribution:

> The development of an economy characterized by a high degree of specialization of labor and mass-production methods brought with it an increasingly complex distributive organization. To a large extent, the dramatic cost reduction which has typified modern manufacturing was achieved largely at the expense of higher proportionate costs of distribution.[87]

As a result, "mail-order houses... helped 'nationalize' American dress and habits" during the 1910s and 1920s only to be usurped in this respect with the advent of the movies.[88] The golden age of the catalogue, its time of economic supremacy, ended in the 1920s with the widespread availability of a new machine for personalized distribution: the automobile.[89]

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[85] Ibid., 35.
[86] Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counters: A History of Sears, Roebuck and Company* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1950), 187.
[87] Ibid., 2.
[88] Ibid., 310.

Denison began before Sears, and even in 1876 he was utilizing in miniature what would be the business model for the company: "He began sending out a tiny catalogue of plays to a list of former college associates who had become school teachers."[90] The targeting of this consumer base was echoed by Keith Brings, discussing Northwestern Press sixty years later: "We just bombarded [high schools] with our catalogues. And at that time you were able to get the names of the, these drama coaches, we used to get their names and send them a catalogue. And then we would send out special flyers every month telling them about new material we were bringing out and so we kept them well informed."[91]

From the turn of the century, it was apparent to Denison that he could sell other accoutrements like wigs and make-up along with amateur scripts. Blackface comedies were big sellers. This is evident from the title of the 1904 edition: *Denison's Descriptive Catalogue of Amateur, Standard and Ethiopian Plays: Dialogues, Speakers, Tableaux, Readings, Entertainment Books, Jokes, Hand Books, Etc.*[92] Several elements of the sixty-page catalogue are noteworthy, particularly in the context of this study and its focus on minstrelsy. The section of blackface scripts (categorized as "Ethiopian Drama") begins with this short description:

> These plays are all short, and very funny. The female characters should [be] assumed by males in most cases. Where something thoroughly comical [is] wanted, they are just the thing. Little or no stage apparatus is required. The number of darkies is given in those plays in which white characters occur.

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[89] Cohn, 170.

[90] Morgan, "Mellerdramas of Long Ago."

[91] Keith Brings, interview with author, May 2008.

[92] *Denison's Descriptive Catalogue of Amateur, Standard and Ethiopian Plays: Dialogues, Speakers, Tableaux, Readings, Entertainment Books, Jokes, Hand Books, Etc* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1904).

Like almost all of the scripts in the catalogue, they are priced at fifteen cents each. Two of the plays riff on Shakespeare: *Hamlet the Dainty* and *Othello and Darsdemoney*. Another, *Prof. Black's Funnygraph*, described as a "Nigger burlesque on the phonograph," performs the standard function of the solo stump speech from the minstrel show: to mock while soothing feelings of anxiety about new technologies or ways of thinking. The Ethiopian Dramas described in the catalogue have at most one or two black servants who cause havoc and mayhem for the white characters. And in several of the plays, the "blackness" of the characters is optional. No complete minstrel shows were being sold by Denison in 1904, a telling omission considering their later dominance in amateur blackface theatricals. At the turn of the twentieth century, minstrel shows were still so present in US culture that it was largely unnecessary to reproduce them.

The 1904 catalogue also includes, next to the play descriptions, testimonials from people who had staged them. The point was to promote their acceptability for potential buyers. These endorsements list the names of the towns that were performing Denison-published scripts—an otherwise elusive bit of information. The cities where the testimonials come from are: Helena, Arkansas; Effingham, Grand Ridge, Minier, Towanda, and Wyanet, Illinois; Coatesville and Danville, Indiana; Cantril and Lynnville, Iowa; Louisville and Newport, Kentucky; Springfield, Massachusetts; Lawrence and Marlette, Michigan; Le Sueur and Milaca, Minnesota; Livingston, Montana; Amsterdam, Honeoye, and Spring Valley, New York; Cleveland and De Graft, Ohio; Sweetwater, Tennessee; and Madison, Wisconsin. As could be expected from a Chicago-based company, Illinois has the most towns, and they radiate out from there, with two each in Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio. Cross-referencing the locations with the 1900

US Census data offers some revealing population numbers.[93] Though two of the cities have populations over a hundred thousand, the majority of the locations are classified as villages. Eighteen of the locations have fewer than four thousand citizens, and four have less than four hundred. By contrast, Middletown (Muncie, Indiana) had a population of twenty-one thousand, and the town Kaser grew up in, South Bend, Indiana, had thirty-five thousand people at the turn of the century. Denison was catering to some extremely small, rural communities. Looking forward to 1920, few of these villages experienced the population spikes that hit towns and cities, and instead remained relatively stagnant.[94] Both Muncie and South Bend doubled in size over that twenty-year period, but Grand Ridge, Illinois's population went from 392 to 389. Eight of the villages actually decreased in population. Though some intriguing patterns can be drawn from a statistical examination of these locations, I am loath to give too much weight to this information: this is not an exhaustive list of villages and towns; it is taken from a catalogue twenty years before the main focus of this study; and it reflects people who were buying any Denison play, not just the "Ethiopian Dramas." What can be taken from this cursory analysis is that Denison scripts were popular in very rural areas of the Midwest and East,[95] and that Middletown, though representing the medium in terms of nationwide population, was actually near the high end of communities toward which these works appealed.

The company expanded its offerings in the twentieth century. Consider the difference in content from the 1904 catalogue to the 1930 edition.[96] The latter is a bulky 178 pages and includes hundreds of two-sentence descriptions of plays. The amount of supplemental theatrical material in greatly expanded and the sections on the minstrel show are much more elaborate. Every step of the process is mapped out. The extended material includes sheet music, some with lyrics written by Kaser. (Kaser did not write music to the songs; some were composed by others and some were set to traditional melodies.) But as another way to help the amateur producer, these were not just minstrel songs being sold individually. The catalogue packaged them together as thematically consistent "Song Programs": "One of the most important points in arranging a minstrel show is to get not only the best possible songs, but the best possible *combination* of songs, and then to program them in the most effective *sequence*." The following programs had been "carefully tested": the Old Virginia Song Program, Ladies' Song Program, Louisiana Song Program, Carolina Song Program, and Old Kentucky Song Program.[97] To continue with the properly constructed minstrel show, the song programs were subject to quality control, like in the Aunt Jemima test kitchen. The catalogue also featured "Superfine Minstrel Black," superior in smoothness and nicely perfumed, as well as wigs sold individually or in half- and full-dozen packages.[98] To assist in making the event a success, Denison's Minstrel Window Cards and Denison's Minstrel Posters were available for purchase, to be placed in high traffic areas.[99]

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[93] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing, 1900,* http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs /decennial/1900.htm (accessed June 1, 2009).

[94] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing, 1920,* http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/ decennial/ 1920.htm (accessed June 1, 2009).

[95] An intriguing omission from this list is any location in the West, with the exception of Livingston, Montana. These communities may well have been served by more proximate publishing houses.

[96] By the 1950s, Denison/Northwestern was distributing smaller specialty catalogues like the sixty-four page mailing titled "Everything for Your Minstrel Show." Many Arthur Kaser scripts are listed, all the way back to his *Alabama Minstrel First Part* of 1922.

In the section devoted to "Ready-Made Minstrel First Parts," the catalogue states:

> A choice of ten complete routines, expertly arranged and ready to use, for the convenience of inexperienced amateur minstrel directors and others seeking a modern, properly constructed first-part. Instead of being a volume of miscellaneous cross-fire from which to pick and choose, each book gives an exact procedure to be followed in staging a sure-fire first part—complete dialogue and full instructions for action and stage business from rise of curtain to grand finale.

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[97] Ibid., 161. Emphasis in original.

[98] Ibid., 162–63.

[99] Ibid., 132.

> These books will prove a salvation for the many amateur minstrel troupes which lack the personal counsel and guidance of an experienced director. Thoroughly professional in style, yet entirely practical for amateurs, they give big opportunity for localized jokes.[100]

"[E]xact procedures" and "full instructions" lead to the proper construction of a minstrel show—just add amateurs.

The Denison Company, like all the others, found their plays through either solicitation or their in-house cadre of regular playwrights. The limitations placed on the works reflect what the publishers felt their purchasers could conceivably handle in staging a live performance. The Denison Company was explicit in what it believed non-professionals were capable of staging. It even published an advice book in 1922 titled *Do's and Don't's for the Playwright: A Manual for the Writer of Plays for Amateurs*, which states:

> [S]ince the business of publishing plays specifically intended for amateur abilities is steadily increasing it becomes necessary for the playwright desirous of meeting this demand to inform himself not only of the usual matters which are an essential part of every dramatist's equipment, but particularly of those which concern the amateur and his abilities and limitations.[101]

The rhetoric of commerce (business, demand) and industry (manual, equipment) was not randomly chosen for this advice book, and it clearly encourages prospective scribes to think of themselves as piece-wage Denison workers. These Do's and Don't's are not meant for individuals penning a local show, but people writing for the T.S. Denison Company. The catalogues also encouraged new playwrights to contact them with script ideas. The 1930 edition states:

> We are always in the market for original three-act comedies, comedy-dramas, and farces by experienced playwrights. The themes should be clean, unhackneyed, and up to date, with plenty of action, snappy situations, and strong climaxes. A

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[100] *1930 T.S. Denison Catalogue* (Chicago, T.S. Denison and Co., 1930), 129.

[101] Fanny Cannon, *Do's and Don't's for the Playwright: A Manual for the Writer of Plays for Amateurs* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1922), 8.

> vigorous plot, developed in a vein of breezy humor, and with an abundance of smart comedy lines, makes an ideal play for amateurs.

The description then shifts from the acceptable themes to the restrictions: "The setting should be limited to one easy interior, if possible, preferably American, and the majority of the characters should be of native stock. The cast should be fairly evenly balanced as to sex."[102] These parameters are amazingly similar to the criteria listed by the Lynds in choosing the location for their *Middletown* study.

The response to such open submissions could be overwhelming. Keith Brings said that in the 1940s the company was "bombarded with plays." Many of the manuscripts were written by high-school teachers (like Denison once was). As Keith explained it,

> A lot of these people were drama teachers in the school. And you know years ago they used to, the principal would appoint one of the teachers to put on a school play. They put a lot of hours in, they never got paid for it. It was just another thing they had to do. And here again that's another thing, as the schools progressed, these teachers said, you know, I should get a little more for spending all this time and it takes a lot of time. So they had little revolts here and there from teachers. Didn't want to give all this time. I certainly don't blame them.[103]

Many of these were unpublishably bad, though all were given a reading by Denison and Northwestern staff members. Still, it is worth noting that even this anonymous horde of amateur scribes thought of their plays as work, and wanted to be compensated for it.

Kaser was not the only author publishing blackface plays with Denison in the 1920s, but all the minstrelized shows exhibit a certain consistency or familiarity. Another 1921 work published by Denison was Ward Stratton's *When Cork is King*, a collection of jokes for the opening section of a minstrel show, stump speeches for the middle, and skits for the conclusion (songs suggested by the author could be purchased through Denison). The jokes are a collection of bad puns and "take my wife, please"–style marriage humor that only occasionally references race:

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[102] *1930 T.S. Denison Catalogue*, 69.

[103] Keith Brings, interview with author, May 2008.

> Inter: I hear that — (*negro prize fighter*) is economizing these days.
> End: Yes, sah; they tell me he's using his cold cream for shoe polish.[104]

The exchange is curious in that the ersatz race make-up of the minstrel show is alluded to—cold cream becomes shoe polish and shoe polish is the signification of blackness. Surprising for a book titled *When Cork is King*, blackface is a perfunctory or even optional detail. In the "fast talking skit for two men" called "Pipp and Pepp," Stratton includes a note saying, "*This skit may be played equally well either blackface or white*."[105] The reason for this may be the setting for the "Pipp and Pepp" skit, which is unique for the whole volume: "A City Street." For Stratton, the rapid-fire idiocy of two characters discussing automobiles and horse flies is endemic of a slick urban-ness. Stratton believes in an essential racial difference between black and white, but the city brought the mannerisms of the races closer together. A similar ambivalence about blackface is found in some of Kaser's early works.

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Arthur Kaser's Limited Territory

At the end of *Middletown*, the Lynds cogently summarize the stresses felt by these mid-sized communities:

> Whether one is temperamentally well disposed towards social change or resistant to it, however, the fact remains that Middletown's life exhibits at almost every point either some change or some stress arising from failure to change.... Living under such circumstances consists first of all in maintaining some sort of equilibrium. (498)

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[104] Ward Stratton, *When Cork is King* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1921), 24.
[105] Ibid., 111.

Kaser's work attempted to re-establish a type of equilibrium, sometimes rather explicitly. As he enthuses at the beginning of one of his best-selling publications,[106] written in 1923:

> *Good Toasts and Funny Stories* is offered with the intention of brightening the lives of those who look upon the world with gloom-searching eyes, and of keeping bright the lives of those who look upon the universe with eye optimistic. It has taken in and drawn a circle around only a limited territory, but in that circle are the things that are nearest us: namely, Patriotism, Home, Love, Man, Woman, and Wit.[107]

And this territory must be carefully guarded. More than entertainments, Kaser's plays are remarkably consistent in their efforts to police these boundaries.

Arthur Kaser wrote nineteen scripts between 1920 and 1923. His first efforts were *Hiram Blows In* and *Vait a Minute*. In 1921 he published his first two blackface sketches, *The Black Vamp* and *The Mysterious Suitcase*, as well as *I'm a Nut*. He wrote his first minstrel show, *Alabama Minstrel First Part*, in 1922. Published that same year was *The Filming of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"*; *Levi's Troubles*; *No Sense, Nohow*; *Stage Struck*; and *The Turnipville Station Agent*. In 1923 he was even more productive, publishing *A Black Recruit*, *Do Your Worst!*, *Good Toasts and Funny Stories*, *A Henpecked Coon*, and *Lend Me Fo' Bits* with Denison. He also for the first time published with a different company; Walter H. Baker Company of Boston bought and distributed *In Old Virginny*, *Vaudeville Doubles*, and *Vaudeville Turns*. Even this cursory listing of the titles indicates some of the underpinnings of Kaser's work, the various common themes that he returned to throughout his career: racial impersonation and dialect comedy, marital strife, technology, and the magic and mystery of the professional stage. Before moving on to the blackface and minstrel shows that were of especial importance to Kaser, a discussion of his other works also showcase his abilities.

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[106] According to David Kaser in "Gag Man for the Amateur," 95.

[107] Arthur Kaser, *Good Toasts and Funny Stories* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1923), 5.

Kaser's prefaces prepared the readers for staging the play through instructions, encouragement, and general warnings. He anticipated both a lack of stagecraft and a certain trepidation about performing publicly: in front of an audience, and especially an audience that already knew the actors through everyday interactions in the community. An author's note from *Do Your Worst!* states: "This is a burlesque melodrama, and contains no sense. This comedy comes from the characters playing it very seriously. Rehearse it as though it were a Shakespearean drama until it ceases to be funny to the actors themselves."[108] The Shakespeare comparison is also made in the "Hint to the Director" that accompanies *The Filming of "Uncle Tom's Cabin."* Kaser writes:

> Before the play is publicly produced every character should be letter perfect and the stage business brought to such a point that there will be no possible chance of an awkward interruption. One gets much more enjoyment from an auto ride over a road that is smooth and level than one does on a road that is full of bumps and chuck holes.[109]

Kaser also fills his plays with stage directions describing characters and sets. He constantly uses the word "typical": Pete is a "typical stage rube," Jim is a "typical matinee idol," the characters in *The Black Vamp* wear "typical Southern Negro Dress."[110] Kaser is unsure if the performer knows about blocking or rehearsing a stage comedy, but he is confident they have a good familiarity of the stereotypes of the day, both of the stage and of the screen.

The first two plays that Kaser sold to Denison in 1920 were not blackface shows, but they offer examples in miniature of Kaser's playwriting style. One is *Hiram Blows In*, a six-page monologue. The title character, Hiram Corntop from Squash Corners, recounts to the audience his recent trip to a nearby metropolitan area, and, though the audience is invited to laugh at

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[108] Arthur Kaser, *Do Your Worst!: A One-Act Burlodrama* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1923), 3.

[109] Arthur Kaser, *The Filming of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1922), 4. Future references will be made in the text.

[110] Arthur Kaser, *The Turnipville Station Agent: A Vaudeville Sketch* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1922), 2; Arthur Kaser, *Do Your Worst!*, 3; Arthur Kaser, *The Black Vamp* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1922), 2.

Hiram for some of his foibles, it is a good-natured humor. Lines like, "I looked at so many tall buildin's the inside of my mouth got all sunburned" and "Part of the time I was lost and the other part of the time I didn't know where I was," describe his wonderment of the urban environment and its vastness, almost foreignness.[111] It is best to stay in your familiar and safe rural community, the play implies. The other play that year was his first foray into ethnic dialect humor: two Jewish friends meeting on the street to have a rambling discussion about money, suicide, and trained fleas.[112]

Throughout these works, Kaser consistently parodies the mores and mannerisms of the professional stage and film worlds. He could do so because of the availability of such information for the audience (parody fails if no one catches the reference), and he did it to reaffirm the status of the rural and the amateur. *Do Your Worst!* is a farcical send-up of the excesses of melodrama, with a villain trying to force a pretty young woman to marry him. *The Turnipville Station Agent* is a two-character encounter between the eponymous agent and an actress stuck in a rural town awaiting a train. The title character defines an actor as "one of them 'ere hifulutin' gals what sings and dances and raises Cain."[113] The hostility toward the professional stage is evident and the film industry is ridiculed as well.

Kaser uses minstrelsy and blackface conventions to critique the various social tensions of Middletown. Blackface was at the service of its denizens to create an ideal sense of "Americana" within the uncomfortable uniformity of America. The blackface mask reflected the author's, performer's, and audience's conception of racial difference because the play would be ineffectual without knowing the "typical" mannerisms of African Americans. Similar to *When Cork is King*, the plays of Kaser occasionally refer to the race of the performers, but not often. The characters' desires and drives are all benignly stereotypical and are the backdrop for the humor. Frequent references to razors, liquor, chickens, poverty, and abusive wives are retreadings of professional minstrel shows from days gone by. The participatory aesthetics of amateur minstrelsy and the amateur minstrel script extend beyond the performance to the assumed attitudes of the actor even before donning burnt cork.

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[111] Arthur Kaser, *Hiram Blows In: A Monologue* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1920), 4, 3.
[112] Arthur Kaser, *Vait a Minute: Talking Act* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1920).
[113] Arthur Kaser, *Turnipville*, 6.

The *Alabama Minstrel First Part* faithfully repeats all the minstrel tropes. The humor includes eye-rolling puns ("I feel like seven days... weak."), malapropisms ("Didn't you ever read that beautiful scintillating poem by Shake-a-beer?"), and song lyrics:

> I've got a girl
> Whose mouth is so wide,
> That I'm scared to kiss her,
> I might fall inside.[114]

Gender panic of this type carries over to some of the other early works by Kaser, and nary a play is complete without some reference to rolling pins. Such aggressively misogynistic comedy becomes the central feature of two of these early works: *A Henpecked Coon* and *The Black Vamp*. *Henpecked* is a standalone monologue piece, appropriate for the olio section of a minstrel show or in a variety showcase, in which the husband/narrator has an abusive spouse known for her corpulence: "She am so big I 'most got 'rested fo' bigamy."[115] *The Black Vamp* is a much more complicated play in terms of the intersection of blackface racial designators and stereotyped gender behavior. It begins with Sam being thrown out of home by his wife Rosebud. His friend Phil schemes to make Rosebud jealous by dressing up as a woman and pretending to seduce Sam. Phil explains the intended effect of his drag performance:

> When Ah gets back yo' an' me will make lub to each odder an' den yo' wife will get jellied an' call fo' yo' to come an' kiss yo' sweet mommy. Now, don't fo'get,

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[114] Arthur Kaser, *Alabama Minstrel First Part: A Complete Routine for the Circle* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1922), 7, 7, 21.

[115] Arthur Kaser, *A Henpecked Coon: Darky Monologue* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1923), 6.

> when Ah comes back Ah'm goin' to say to yo', "Does yo' lub yo' lil chocolate drop?" an' den yo' must put yo' arms 'round mah neck and lub me lots. Ah can stand it ef yo' can.[116]

At the end of the piece, Phil's wife runs onstage in a blanket to cuss out her husband for taking her only dress and Sam is reunited with Rosebud.

What sets the play apart from wench or prima donna acts historicized by Lott, Annemarie Bean, and others, is that the drag performance is explained within the logic of the story. By the 1920s the demarcations of either wench and prima donna were breaking down. On the one hand, the Aunt Jemima icon has been transformed from a man in drag into a pleasant former-slave; on the other hand, as in *The Black Vamp*, the transvestitism is made explicit in the story and is given a frame to explain it. In one of the best jokes of the play, Phil defines the character he is going to portray by saying, "A vamp am a woman wot ain't."[117] The double reading of this by audience and characters (it confuses Sam) is that is a vamp is a woman that is actually a man in disguise and a vamp is a woman that doesn't act lady-like because she is sexually aggressive. Kaser's cross-dressed figure has characteristics of both the wench and the prima donna—the performance is an unconvincing caricature yet it is successful at fooling Rosebud. When Phil first enters in disguise he "*tries to imitate an oriental dancer. If suitable music can be had he does an oriental dance in an exaggerated burlesque manner, coming close to Sam enticingly*."[118] The gender wordplay that occurs when Rosebud discovers Sam's near-infidelity with Phil is dizzying:

> Rosebud (*coming from house*): Looka hyer, Sam, who am dis hyer woman, eh?
>
> Sam (*frightened*): Honey, dat am de woman wot ain't. She am always where she ain't oughter be when she ain't supposed to be.
>
> Rosebud (*starting toward Phil, who backs away*): Ah'll make her wot she ain't.[119]

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[116] Arthur Kaser, *The Black Vamp: A Blackface Act* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1921), 5.
[117] Ibid., 4.
[118] Ibid., 5.
[119] Ibid., 6.

In Kaser's work there are two necessary social understandings: the clear division between genders and the clear division between black and white races. But women can participate in the fun; the two characters in Kaser's 1924 blackface play *They're in Again* are "buxom 'cullud ladies,' attired in typical street clothes" who "can be played by women or by men in female attire."[120] Underlying all this, though, is the firm understanding that all the participants—performers and audience members alike—are white.

As seen in *Hiram Blows In*, Kaser's sympathies are with the rural and small-town community, the benefits of which are contrasted with the large urban centers with their speed and anonymity. Blackface becomes a way, and this is definitely related to Berlant's conception of nostalgia and amnesia, of identifying this difference and salvifying anxieties. An early work that demonstrates this is *In Old Virginny*. The play is divided in two: one scene is set in 1923 and the other in a magnolia-scented antebellum past. The first half is about Phil, an aviator who crashes his plane near the place where Mabel is painting the Virginia landscape. Phil is Northern, urban, and urbane—more familiar with the opposite sex, more familiar with technology, and unfamiliar with the countryside he finds himself in. Mabel represents the feminized South: a lover of Virginia, an amateur painter, and a gentle nurturer. They fall in love in their first moments together, another example of the North and South healing their differences. The end of the first scene and the transition into the second is an explicit example of double nostalgia being effected within the performance. Phil decides to take a nap on the spot—a clunky bit of dramaturgy, but Kaser is eager to get to the plantation scene. As he drifts off to sleep, Mabel recites a poem while the "*orchestra plays 'Dixie' very softly*":

Yes, my friend, you're in ole Virginny;

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[120] Arthur Kaser, *They're in Again: Blackface Talking Act for Two Females* (Chicago: T.S. Denison and Co., 1924), 3.

> The state I'll ne'er outgrow—
> The land of cotton, that will ne'er be forgotten—
> As the home of Old Black Joe.[121]

Ole Virginny is a place of antebellum blissfulness and pre–Civil War minstrel songs. Then Mabel summarizes the stories of her father:

> He tells of good old Ephrain
> Who used to sit and croon
> While the young folks sang and capered
> 'Neath the big round Southern moon.
> And from these tales that daddy tells
> I can see them dancing to and fro
> In the evening by the moonlight,
> Long, long ago.[122]

The rest of *In Old Virginny* is the dream of the Northern male, but one planted in his subconscious by the pleasant rhymes of his regional and gender opposite.

The plantation scene happens on "good old" Ephrain's birthday, but Kaser draws subtle parallels between the two halves: scene one ends with Phil drifting off to slumber and scene two opens with Ephrain deep asleep and about to be awoken by a group of pickaninny children. The stories summarized by Mabel in the end of scene one were told to her by her father; he makes an appearance in the second half as the benevolent plantation owner. The scene is an anomaly in Kaser's body of work, as he rarely wrote blackface skits set in the past. Almost always his blackface characters are either part of a scripted minstrel show or are involved in plays set in the present. So the reason, and need, for the framing device is significant for understanding his conception of minstrelsy and blackface. He is helping to rewrite the past to help justify and ameliorate the present.

Plantation scenes traditionally were a stereotyped collection of entertainments showing a happy contented slave population with a carefree life and the play includes ballads and dance routines and banjo solos. Another classic trope extending back to at least *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the loyal and childlike slave. In honor of his birthday, Massa John grants Ephrain his freedom. Ephrain pleads:

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[121] Arthur Kaser, *In Old Virginny* (Boston: Walter H. Baker Company, 1923), 10.
[122] Ibid., 11.

> Please, Massa John, Ephrain doan want to be sot free. Yo' is a pow'ful good massa to us po' niggahs, Massa John, an' Ah jes' wants to be wit yo'. What dis ole niggah gwine to do ef he am sot free?[123]

He is assured a place on the plantation free from toil, and the company ends the scene with a final enthusiastic dance.

The intrusion of technology (the airplane crash) is kept just offstage of *In Old Virginny*. But technological innovations and its impact in Middletown life was a particular obsession of Kaser's. He is constantly returning to it in his work. Early on it is the automobile and the movies and the radio. Later he turns to nuclear physics and space travel—and always he has characters, mostly blackface characters, express wonderment and befuddlement at the scientific and cultural discoveries of the twentieth century. These are combined in one of Kaser's most remarkable works, *The Filming of "Uncle Tom's Cabin."*

***

Arthur Kaser's Uncle Tom

Tracing the impact of Stowe's novel on US and world cultures is a mammoth undertaking and outside the purview of this study. Its history on the stage, in film, or in other cultural permutations such as music, literature, and advertising all helped extend the life of the story and its characters into (and beyond) the 1920s.[124] This ubiquity meant that Kaser could easily parody the source text and later revisions. Black characters from the novel such as Uncle Tom, Sam, and Topsy were at least partially inspired by minstrelsy, a connection intensified in the transfer back to the stage. Adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by George Aiken and Henry Conway became major successes in the 1850s, and touring companies were profitable and plentiful well into the 1920s.[125]

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[123] Ibid., 16.

[124] For a good overview of the books' early stage life, see Bruce McConachie, "Out of the Kitchen and Into the Marketplace: Normalizing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the Antebellum Stage," *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 3 (1991): 5–28; and Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit: Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: S.F. Vanni, 1947). For examples in other media, see Lott, Berlant, or Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th ed. (1973; repr., New York: Continuum Press, 2003).

Lott notes that such success and easy connections to minstrelsy meant the "theatrical world was soon crowded with off-shoots, parodies, thefts, and rebuttals of every imaginable kind."[126] He also notes that "dramatizations of *Uncle Tom* foregrounded not only sectional conflict but also the blackface forms that had shadowed it" and "[s]ectional debate henceforth became theatrical ritual, part of the experience of *Uncle Tom*."[127] In the twentieth century, and with Kaser's play, the boundary of this ritualized sectional conflict was not the Mason-Dixon line, it was the urban and rural divide.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was first filmed in the early years of the twentieth century. In 1903 Edwin Porter turned it into one of the first narrative films ever made, and the first to feature portrayals of blacks. As noted by Henry Sampson and others, and this is a pattern that continued in later movies (notably *Birth of a Nation* in 1915), the principal black characters in the Porter version are played by whites in blackface and the unnamed extras are African Americans.[128] Michael Rogin provides a nice overview of the film and its place in cultural history:

> Nothing that happens in [1903's] *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (with the possible exception of slaves picking cotton) had not already happened in stage productions of the play. Porter filmed a series of staged tableaux, with minimal action in each scene and no continuity between scenes. He counted on audience familiarity with the

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[125] Birdoff, 385–86.

[126] Lott, 214–15.

[127] Ibid., 211, 223.

[128] Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films,* 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1995), 122.

> plot and the characters to fill in the blanks; the intertitles simply announce which well-known set piece is about to be shown.[129]

He also notes "seven more silent film versions would follow Porter's in the next quarter century."[130] Coming somewhere in the midst of all these film permutations and stage revivals, Kaser's play counts upon a familiarity with the story and highlights the more famous moments. But the play is more than a parody of the melodramatic and sentimental excesses of the source text, it also satirizes Hollywood excesses and the technology of film itself. As James Cherry notes in "Melodrama, Parody, and the Transformations of an American Genre":

> Certainly the attacks found in *The Filming of Uncle Tom's Cabin*—the grotesque reversals of character and the concentration on mocking the memorably melodramatic episodes of Aiken's version—take place many years after both the publication of Stowe's novel and the inception of melodrama as an established form. The fact that *The Filming of Uncle Tom's Cabin* is not a parody of a stage production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but of a film production of the play is significant. This parody does not simply attack the extremes of melodrama and the creakiness of the story, but also stands as a cultural document of the initial reaction to a new medium.[131]

The reaction from the Middletown playwright was one of deep distrust.

Kaser wrote *The Filming of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"* seventy years after the first stage production and twenty years after the first film version. The plot follows a production company under the inept leadership of "typical stage Hebrew" Levi Shootzum as it attempts to film a version of Stowe's classic (3). One of the divergences from Porter is that the various tableaux—the whipping of Uncle Tom, the death of Eva, Eliza's escape across the ice—are not presented in sequential order. Things are, one could say, rather fractured. After a series of mishaps, the shoot devolves into chaos. Then the curtain comes down.

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[129] Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 74.

[130] Ibid., 76.

[131] James M. Cherry, "Melodrama, Parody, and the Transformation of an American Genre" (PhD diss., City University of New York Graduate Center, 2005), 103–4.

The various characterizations are similar to those seen in other Kaser plays, with some additional, sophisticated thematic antipodes created for the enjoyment of the Middletown audience. Most of the comedy comes from the dichotomy between the mannerisms and characteristics of the performers and the well-known icons they are portraying. As Levi says in his opening speech: "Eferyting vot ain't, iss, und eferyting vot iss, ain't" (6). The stage directions describe the bloodhound that pursues Eliza as a "very small pup, the smaller the better, attached to an extraordinarily heavy rope, the rope being way out of proportion to the size of the pup." And this type of incongruity exists for all the performers. But the specific ways they are unsuitable are what makes the play a cultural artifact *of* and *for* the disappearing Middletown. Little Eva is a "tough soubrette character" and "very stout," meaning that the efforts to hoist her to heaven on a rope are met with some comedic business. Similarly, Eliza's stage directions read: "Mulatto makeup. Corpulent. Wears kimono and sunbonnet"—all the more to highlight the hilarity of her jumping on soap boxes labeled "Ice." Several pages of comic business are spent filming the scene of Simon Legree whipping Uncle Tom to death. "Very sissified in manner and costume," begins the description of Legree. "Little black mustache. Wears monocle. Riding costume. Carries toy whip. A typical 'dude'" (3). The villainous, evil Legree is played by the most effete member in the cast, who, as they are filming, declares, "My deah boy, it pains me to strike you thusly (*raising whip*), but you have disobeyed my wishes in the matteh, and I, therefore, strike you thusly. (*Brings whip down lightly on Uncle Tom's back. Uncle Tom cowers*)" (9). The audience sees the reality of the situation as contrasted with the dictates of the story and the artifice of film. Legree is too weak to hurt anyone, but Tom must die to maintain the sentimentalized pathos of the melodrama.

Uncle Tom is a fascinating and complex creation because Kaser sets him in opposition to both Stowe's iconic character and the Middletown audience. The actor playing Uncle Tom is introduced on the title page as "More at Home with Shakespeare" (2), solidifying the cultural hierarchy prevalent in popular culture at the time,[132] and is later described as: "Very dignified and pompous in speech and manner. Blackface makeup, with gray negro wig. Immaculately attired in full dress, with large imitation diamond stud, and jewelry galore" (3). Obviously Uncle Tom should not have jewelry galore. He is monied and elitist and is treated with suspicion by the film crew. Tom arrives at the set in "his Cadillacker" to meet with the director Levi and his cameraman Red, both of whom have been speaking in dialect—Jewish and Irish/Scottish, respectively:

> Uncle Tom (*with elaborate gestures*): This is the happiest moment of my life. It has long been my ambition, and I have yearned and yearned for the time when I should be cast as the lovable Uncle Tom, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's wonderful masterpiece, and be recorded in the realm of the great cinema world.
>
> Levi (*nudging Red*): Vot's he talking about?
>
> Red: I don't know; ask him. He's cuckoo. (7)

The pomposity of the actor is not only contrasted with his character but is also unintelligible to Levi and Red, and by extension the small-town crowd for which they speak.

Also noteworthy is that Tom, like Topsy and the other blackfaced actors, is already in make-up at the beginning of the scene. Despite not witnessing the actors in the process of their racial transformation, the humor derives partially from the understanding that they are not black. The character's blackness is obviously false, and the lack of dialect by Tom highlights his difference from the other people in the play. His clipped diction is an indication that, unlike the "darkies" in *A Henpecked Coon* and others, he is not supposed to be a stand-in for African

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[132] See Lawrence Levine, "William Shakespeare in America," in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Americans—the figure is only funny if he has the framing device of the "ham" actor with the jewelry and the car and the Shakespearian pedigree. The actor is able to play black due to the manipulative technology of the movie camera—what he is not able to do is act like a typical citizen of Middletown.

The film industry is represented by Jewish director Levi, a stereotype capitalizing on the anti-Semitic paranoia about Hollywood in the 1920s.[133] He is ostensibly in charge but is also the most scatterbrained, and is frequently on the receiving end of both verbal jokes and slapstick humor:

> Levi: If you vas half so shmart as you vas, you vouldn't be as shmart as I tink you vas. (*All laugh. Levi becomes excited*.) Dot's right, laugh und show your gold teeths! But remember dis. "He vot laths laughs laughs laths—He vot laughs laths laths—" shut up! If dis picture vas a failure, you all get fired! De sun vill go down today—
>
> Legree: My deah sir, it does that every day. (14)

Levi is, in the rubric of the minstrel show, the interlocutor of the event.

The Filming of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" has certain thematic connections to *Do Your Worst!*, in that both are parodying the hyperbolic-ness of a sentimentalized entertainment form—movies on the one hand and the stage melodrama on the other. But melodrama is mildly chided and eventually celebrated (the conclusion of *Do Your Worst!* is exactly as happy as its source material) and the film shoot ends in anarchy.

Building on Lott's reading of stage versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a place where the antebellum conflicts of Northern and Southern states expressed their uneasy tensions, *The Filming of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"* updates this to the 1920s dichotomy of the urban and the rural. The character that sums up the sectional conflict ritualized in the piece is Red, the working-class cameraman of the shoot. There are no "rube" or rural characters in the play, but Red's mechanic accent articulates the hypocrisy of the situation. He is a "big-city tough" with a "[h]ard-boiled manner" (3), whose position is established at the very beginning of the play:

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[133] Rogin, 88–89.

> Levi (*calls loudly from off left*): Hey, Red, hurry up mit de cam*ee*ra. De sun vill come up und de sun will go down before de picture vas took.... Hey, Red, vot you tink I am paying you two dollars a day for, eh? Loafing? Dot iss all you do. Loafing, loafing, loafing. I vill be a bankrupt.
>
> *Red enters from the left, with camera.*
>
> Red (*toughly*): Whatcher bellerin' about? If you don't like de way I'm totin' dis shootin' machine, you know wot you kin do. (6)

As the low-wage-earning laborer, Red is the only non-artist in the play and the one best suited to express the complaints of the Middletown crowd. In fact, and this is a very telling detail on the part of Kaser, he is the only character who directly addresses the audience, which he does to expose the pomposity of those around him:

> Legree: By jove, what a tempeh the maiden does possess, don'tcher know[....]
>
> Red (*to audience, mocking Legree*): "By jove, wot a tempeh." And he's s'posed to by a vilyum! (9)

And:

> Uncle Tom: Come, ladies and gentlemen, let us proceed. I have an important engagement at six o'clock to meet the mayor at five o'clock and if I am not present at four o'clock he will be sorely disappointed, for he told me to be there sharply at three o'clock.
>
> Red (*to audience*): Sufferin' catfish! And at seven o'clock he was so hungry he ate o'clock. (14)

So it is Red that, in spite of his "big-city" attitude, doles out the witticisms and the asides—he is granted this because of his knowing position as the lowest man in the organization.

The play ends not with the completion of the movie, but with its ruination. The final, elaborate, almost Wagnerian, stage direction reads:

> *Red lights match so that he can examine the interior of camera.... Match comes in contact with flashlight sheet in camera and there is a quick flash. Simultaneous with the flash, a shotgun is fired off stage. Females scream. All let go of rope. Topsy and Levi embrace, Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe embrace, Legree and Eliza embrace. Of course Little Eva falls. Red tumbles backward. All business must instantly follow the flash, followed by—Very Quick Curtain.* (16)

The coupling tableau moves from the dramaturgically consistent (Tom and Chloe) to the comedic (Legree and Eliza) to the bizarre (Topsy and Levi), and the overweight Eva falls from heaven. But the final conflagration is instigated by Red the technician, who burns the film stock and renders moot the efforts of all the rest. Middletown has its revenge on Hollywood.

Kaser continually returned to the alienating effects of technology; there was always something new to ridicule. The remarkable thing about his use of blackface is how consistent it is over the course of thirty years—the blackface characters were always able to explain away new differences and assuage new fears. Kaser was, to return to the quotation that opened this chapter, "keep[ing] up with the fickle fancies of the modern folk." The final minstrel show Kaser ever wrote is indicative of the changing times and the author's unwillingness to change with them, and of the form's adaptability and constancy: 1950's *The Stratosphere Minstrels*. It is a full minstrel show, complete with endmen, interlocutor, jokes, songs, and dances—and it is set on a spaceship. After an interaction with some singing and dancing Martians, the "ultra-modern stratosphere ship"[134] begins its bumpy and dangerous return to Earth. As one of the endmen exclaims during the descent:

> Things am happenin' too fast. I wanna go home. I's gwine git in trouble sho' nough. She say to me, "Man, where you been so long?" I say, "I's been up to de moon. I went way up there to see de stars." Do she believe dat? She do not. She

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[134] Arthur Kaser, *The Stratosphere Minstrels: A Complete, Fast Moving, Up and Going Minstrel Show* (Boston: Baker's Plays, 1950), 4.

> just fix me up so I sees plenty o' stars wifout leavin' home. I wanna go home now.[135]

Extra loud crash.

The longing for home has always been at the center of nostalgia. Arthur Kaser's plays are, each of them, expressions of home, the construction of home, and the longing for home. What Kaser articulated was a stable, balanced community—something longed for by US towns in the midst of many social upheavals. And eager amateurs around the country performed and embodied this longing, were able to publicly express this to an audience that felt the same thing, through the minstrel show.

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[135] Ibid., 17. Narratively and thematically similar, Jill Lane concludes *Blackface Cuba* with a description of an 1888 *teatro bufo* play *Del parque a la luna* (From the park to the moon). See Lane, 228–35.

Chapter Four
"On the Time": Blackface Travels the Nation

In the late nineteenth century Walt Whitman marveled at a new form of transportation that was helping connect distant locations across the United States:

> I see over my own continent the Pacific railroad surmounting every barrier,
> I hear the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-whistle....
> Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel,
> Tying the Eastern to the Western sea.[1]

Surmounting barriers is both a mental and a physical goal, and Whitman includes the railroad in his grand (even utopian) vision for the great American social experiment. The railroad leads to equality and understanding, and ties together oceans of people as much as oceans.

In the early 1920s train travel was the essential method of movement for entertainers. At that time, Charles Burnett, the white president of the black professional vaudeville circuit called the Theatre Owners' Booking Association, offered a folksy aphorism on racial separation that inverts Whitman's harmonization: "East is East and West is West, and never the twain may meet, and it is thus with the races."[2] Burnett's belief system, shared by many in the entertainment profession at the time, overlays the subjects of this chapter.

The focus here is on three theatrical circuits of the 1920s: the combined Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits of Big Time professional vaudeville; the Theatre Owners' Booking Association (TOBA); and the Joe Bren Theatrical Company, which catered to white amateurs. Each delivered entertainment directly to a waiting and expectant public and each relied on blackface and minstrelsy as an integral, inextricable element of their promised escapism. The three circulated blackface in a more expensive and less efficient manner from those discussed in earlier chapters—live bodies were shipped, not pancake boxes. Still, they supported racial divisions similar to and in tandem with the logic of Aunt Jemima and Arthur Kaser.

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[1] Walt Whitman, "Passage to India," in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 532–33.
[2] J.A. Jackson, "The T.O.B.A. Election," *Billboard*, February 4, 1922.

To play on a circuit, to work on a chain, to travel on a wheel, to be on the time—all of these were euphemisms for the new method of conducting vaudeville business that developed in the early twentieth century. And these metaphors for the business connote unimpeded flow and continuation. Contrasting these three circuits demonstrates how live blackface could operate for different publics simultaneously: from small towns to big cities, from New York to San Francisco. And despite its inefficiency relative to the production chains discussed in the previous two chapters, the theatrical circuit was another potent way racial divisions coursed through social strata in all areas of the country.

These three examples were carefully chosen to best discuss the combination of blackface and variety shows in the 1920s. All are very different circuits whose managers and entertainment employees had very little interaction with one another, but they all had a similar business model that balanced circulation and consolidation. Because of this emphasis on travel and conglomeration, the chapter does not examine other touring entertainment forms such as the circus, the side show, the tent show, or the medicine show, which also used blackface and traversed the US, but did so in a more individualized way.[3] Overlooked, too, is the professional minstrel show, which still limped along as a distinct performance genre, inhabiting the back pages of *Billboard* and *Variety*. Its time had passed. Both the white and black professional vaudeville circuits habitually borrowed from the robust minstrel past and decrepit minstrel present by employing blackfaced entertainers on most every bill. Such a skit tended to be a solo act or duo, with comedic patter and song. The trade papers weekly ran photos and listings of teams: Berrien and Knight performed "Blacker than Ink" on the Big Time and Easton and Stewart performed the blackface comedy for Tom Sullivan's "Monte Carlo Girls" on the TOBA, to give two small examples.[4] Nevertheless, as seen in the newspaper articles previewing or reviewing these shows, there is a confusion with the categories of performance as the lines between minstrelsy, vaudeville, and musical comedy overlap or are joined by a hyphen.

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[3] For a year-by-year look at several tent and side shows, such as the Rabbit Foot Minstrels and the Florida Cotton Blossoms, see Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

The categorical confusion was projected onto the bodies of performers like Berrien and Easton, and because of this, the liveness of the performance now becomes integral to the discussion. How did liveness change the meaning of the blackface that was presented? And how did performers and promoters capitalize on the more direct connection to the traditional minstrel form? This chapter looks at people as a particular kind of circulating commodity, not the anthropomorphized or printed. The problems of cost, wages, and transport become more pressing and the opponents of cost-saving methods more vocal. These entertainers were engaged very directly with race and not just racial impersonation, a change that cannot be overemphasized. Race as a social category was used by all the performance circuits and their personnel in ways different from the blackface discussed in previous chapters. Keith and Albee were highly conscious of it, as were the owners of the black vaudeville circuits, as were all the performers.

Blackface confuses the racial division between black and white especially during the amateur performances of the Joe Bren Company. The amateur theatricals were, as can be expected from the discussion of Arthur Kaser's plays, steeped in nostalgia for the old-time minstrel show and all the associations that accompanied it. The professionals, on the other hand, were walking a fine line between tradition and innovation, something that was especially intense for black performers. This difference indicates a large categorical divide between professional and amateur in terms of audience expectation and what could be anticipated from the shows. If professionals did not present new material, they were called cheats or thieves; amateurs, though, based their work in comfortable stereotype.

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[4] *Billboard*, June 11, 1921; *Billboard*, October 11, 1921.

This chapter begins with a brief mention of train travel's importance to these entertainers; after that, the three circuits are investigated in turn. This schematic approach has been made for two reasons. One, because the circuits had little direct interaction. Two, this approach illustrates the various consistencies that these circuits shared in spite of their autonomy from each other. Certain motifs recur throughout the sections, not only related to the fact of blackface. For example, clubs and other fraternal organizations were created to counteract some of the destabilization of the circuits. Theatrical organizations to be mentioned range from the White Rats to the Colored Vaudeville Benevolent Association; all were attempts to create communities at the intersection of racial and professional concerns. At the level of the amateur theatricals, minstrel events were sponsored by local branches of national clubs such as the Shriners and Elks. One commonality among all these clubs is that they capitalize on a desire for a strong identity collectively created. And here is seen a frustrating theme for describing these circuits: Unlike Whitman's fluid sense of a national identity combining for common purpose, barriers were not surmounted—rather, they were used for the sake of bargaining and business.

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Stuck in the Turnstile

The importance of railroad travel for the business of vaudeville was so central that a discussion of the circuits must start with it. In March 1921 the *New York Clipper*, a vital newspaper for the entertainment industry, reprinted an editorial cartoon from the *New York Tribune*. Titled "Stuck in the Turnstile," it illustrated the impact that railway rate increases, recently instituted by the Interstate Commerce Commission after a lengthy debate, were having on business.[5] Jammed into a turnstile labeled "Operating Costs" is a corpulent woman, mouth agape and clutching packages, purse, and umbrella. She is an allegory for "Railroad Rates." As a result of her interference, dozens of people stand helplessly by, unable to reach the locomotive. One elderly couple is labeled "Farm Produce"; a traveling salesman in carrying "Sample Cases"; and a glum group of flamboyantly attired individuals is identified as "Road Shows." The cartoon groups together agricultural goods, industrial commerce, and entertainment as equally affected by the increases and illustrates how badly the rates affected their profit margins. The costs of transportation obsessed the employees of any theatre event: black shows and white, "legitimate" theatre and vaudeville, musical comedies and tab shows, and beyond.

In the year before the Interstate Commerce Commission's ruling, the *Clipper* ran a series of articles detailing the probable effects of a rate increase and the (ultimately futile) attempts to have it reversed or secure exceptions for the entertainment industry. In July 1920 the paper opined, "The proposed 20% increase in railroad passenger and freight rates hits harder at the theatrical business than any other."[6] And a month later, the paper was able to report, "Freight rates will be advanced about one-third, passenger fares 20 per cent and Pullman charges 50 per cent. As a result managers say the number of productions on tour this season will be considerably less than that of seasons heretofore."[7] Musical theatre troupes were never formed, traveled with short staff, or were abandoned quickly, as was the case of the "black face" comedy *Come Seven* by Octavo Roy Cohen, based on his racist Southern tales which ran in the *Saturday Evening Post* alongside Aunt Jemima advertisements.[8] Additionally, around the time of the

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[5] "Stuck in the Turnstile," *New York Clipper*, March 12, 1921.
[6] "Award to Railroad Men Hits Show Business Hard," *New York Clipper*, July 28, 1920.
[7] "New Railroad Rate Boost Scaring Road Managers," *New York Clipper*, August 4, 1920.
[8] "Shows Closing on Road; High Costs Cut Profit," *New York Clipper*, October 6, 1920.

"Stuck in the Turnstile" cartoon, the paper reported "Motion Pictures to Replace Touring Companies" due to the inexpense of movies and near-guarantee of a profitable return.[9] The *Clipper* articles focused on musical comedies and the efforts of Actors' Equity to relieve the companies' burden, but the worries expressed reflected the issues facing vaudeville as well.

Vaudevillians were in a more precarious position than the touring industry, because they were dealing with the rate increases, declining attendance, and monopolizing circuits but had no organization to speak for them—neither white nor black performers ever created an effective union. This was partly because, legally speaking, they were transporting *nothing*. In 1919 the remnants of the white vaudeville union, in its last effort at asserting some sort of legitimacy, convinced the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to investigate the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits under federal anti-trust laws for "using unfair methods of competition in interstate commerce."[10] The circuits responded by ignoring the charges of monopoly and instead arguing that performers were not commodities and hence not covered by the statutes. As Arthur Wertheim notes, "Under the Clayton Anti-Trust Act (1914) the labor of a person was not a commodity or article of commerce; therefore, [the owners argued that] the work of vaudevillians was exempt from anti-trust legislation. The transportation of baggage, scenery, and other property was only incidental to giving a stage appearance."[11] In 1921 the FTC ruled that performers possessed no tangible commodity. As a result there was nothing that could be used as the basis for seeking redress in the courts. Nor was striking ever effective: there were always more acts and workers than spots on the bill, and thus plenty of scabs to step in during times of trouble. White vaudeville performers had little ground to stand on.

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[9] "Motion Pictures to Replace Touring Companies," *New York Clipper*, April 20, 1921.
[10] Arthur Frank Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big Time and Its Performers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), 234.
[11] Ibid., 235.

Black performers felt such problems even more acutely, in that labor woes were compounded by the general opprobrium of society. This becomes clear in an 1921 article written by TOBA manager Sam Reevin, in which he complains about the troublesome situation theatre owners find themselves in when forming a vaudeville bill. Considering the attitude displayed toward the performers here, he remarkably beggars for sympathy:

> A proprietor or manager of any mercantile establishment knowing the requirements of his business may make periodic trips to the marketing centers where he selects and purchases his wares. He knows his town and he knows just what his trade requires and wants.... The manager of a theater is deprived entirely of this privilege, of selecting his wares, which he in turn must sell to the public.... [H]e finds that he is just as helpless as a baby as far as his wares are concerned.[12]

Analogizing performers as packaged goods is indicative of the owners' patronizing attitude.

But they were not trading in pancake mix or play scripts. A more apt way of thinking about all vaudevillians is as "piece-wage" laborers, due to the nature of the business and the lack of redress. Marx describes piece wages as "the most fruitful source of reductions in wages, and of frauds committed by the capitalists. This is because they provide an exact measure of the intensity of labour."[13] Itinerant performers were paid for the acts, skits, and routines completed in front of the paying audience. A last-minute cancellation, a delayed or missed train, an accident or sickness—all meant a lost paycheck. They were part of an industry without the benefit of regular hours; they were independent workers without the benefit of setting their own price. They were caught brutally inside a combine.

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The Combine

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[12] Sam Reevin, "Well Known and Popular Manager of the T.O.B.A. Writes Views," *Chicago Defender*, August 6, 1921.

[13] Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 694.

The first two decades of the twentieth century was the era of the theatrical circuits in the United States, with consolidation and expansion happening at all levels of live entertainment from Chautauqua to burlesque.[14] Big Time vaudeville's consolidation exemplifies the model adapted by the other entertainment forms. This section looks at the development of the two large, mainstream vaudeville circuits in the US: the Keith-Albee Circuit in the East and the Orpheum Circuit in the West. Together, they were called the Combine—without a hint of irony, despite one theatre owner urging performers to think of themselves as a "commodity" such as "wheat or grain."[15]

The story of the Combine as a business perfectly harmonizes with the country's more general push toward industrialization. The people running them were able to buy up or force out competition while the performers attempted (unsuccessfully) to assert their rights. As encapsulated by Wertheim, vaudeville fit the tempo of the era:

> The velocity of a vaudeville playbill mirrored the rapid pace of life that was intensifying at the turn of the twentieth century. Mechanization and technological breakthroughs such as electric street cars and the first automobiles were accelerating everyday life. Moving assembly lines boosted production; the telephone and typewriter revolutionized communications; cash registers and adding machines expedited business transactions; and time studies and scientific management enhanced output.[16]

This list is convincing, though because vaudeville was shipping people, it had to rely on the sluggishness of the railroad for transportation.

The railroad was not only an aid to the circuits but also the impetus for the creation of the Orpheum Circuit. The Orpheum Theatre in San Francisco, a large and profitable house in a boom town, needed new talent from the East. Traveling to California was long and costly, so to

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[14] For an excellent overview of the "incorporation and excorporation" of burlesque, see Robert C. Allen, "The Institutionalization of Burlesque," in *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 157–93.

[15] Quoted in Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals, and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895–1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2004), 52.

[16] Wertheim, 164.

"give their performers more engagements before reaching California, [President and Financier Morris] Meyerfeld believed that the Orpheum needed to establish theaters between the Pacific Coast and the Midwest.... This was especially critical given the long distances between cities west of the Mississippi."[17] But B.F. Keith and Meyerfeld passed the costs on to the performers, which was a major cut into their salaries:

> In addition to salary problems and commission fees, vaudevillians faced other considerable expenses such as railroad transportation, costumes, scenery, equipment, publicity, and lodgings. Railroad transportation was the most costly expense. Performers on the Keith Circuit had to buy their own railway tickets, while the Orpheum initially paid transportation for its performers due to the long jumps between engagements.... [B]y 1914 the circuit eliminated paying all transportation costs.[18]

These travel costs, now heaped exclusively upon the performers, were of major concern and applied enormous pressure to troupes hoping to turn a profit.

At the same time as the Orpheum, Keith and his assistant Edward Albee were engaged in a cutthroat business of vaudeville monopolization on the Eastern seaboard, a phenomenon Wertheim compares to other business consolidations:

> The syndicate's formation paralleled a wave of industrial and business consolidations in the country. The theatrical trust dominated the legitimate theater business much like Standard Oil, American Telephone and Telegraph, and United States Steel monopolized its industries. These industrial concentrations stemmed from the need to control competition, streamline and regulate production and distribution, and increase profit margins. Both the legitimate and vaudeville theater owners shared similar motives except that their business involved the production of a consumer leisure-time product—stage entertainment.[19]

Under this cost-cutting and nationally oriented system, the previous generation of impresarios like Tony Pastor, whose fiefdom was the New York City area, were muscled out of the business. Pastor was a craftsman in the age of mass production.

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[17] Ibid., 58.
[18] Ibid., 174.
[19] Ibid., 97.

Wertheim's business-model analysis of Big Time extends as far as comparing the products of vaudeville to that of other industries, which he does without pursuing the implications:

> The control of mass markets by consumer-product companies using chains also offered a model for Albee and his peers to follow. Department stores (Sears-Roebuck), variety stores (Woolworth and Kresge), and grocery stores (A & P and Grand Union) developed from a need to create an efficient mass-marketing system using hundreds of outlets throughout the country.... By offering standardized products, reducing overhead costs, and maximizing sales, national chains eliminated local competitors and gained control of markets. If manufactured goods could be distributed nationwide via chains, vaudeville playbills could also be assembled in a central booking agency and offered at theaters across the country.[20]

Andrew Erdman's *Blue Vaudeville* matches this outlook, calling vaudeville "entertainment's first national, branded product," but he also notes that the movement toward standardization led to the conceptualization of a much bigger trademark: "[B]y the time of vaudeville's rise to national popularity in the 1890s, it was possible to conceive of 'America,' rather than a specific city, state, or region, as a potential market."[21] With one national marketplace, the Combine set out to nationalize taste.

The method of booking an act and constructing a bill was increasingly standardized and centralized. Any lewd or suggestive material within an act was censored, though this was only laxly enforced, as Erdman tracks throughout *Blue Vaudeville*. Despite these methods of controlling acts, the industry owners did not directly create the products they circulated. There was, I argue, no need: owners and agents knew what to expect from an acrobatic act or horse routine, what effect they would have on audience interest and enthusiasm, and where to place them to create a balanced bill. The blackface performers of the vaudeville stage understood what their job was in pleasing an audience: low situational comedy and malapropic humor. There was self-standardization to the acts and to the very shape of the industry—an actuarial calibration of enjoyment.

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[20] Ibid., 97–98.

[21] Erdman, 7, 63.

Big Time vaudeville marketed itself as a place of cleanliness and family-friendly respectability. Both Erdman and Robert Allen theorize upon the industry's attempts at such entertainment sanitization. Allen calls it a rhetorical feint that masks a shift in ideology: "The terminological shift from variety to vaudeville signifies not so much a change in performance structure as changes in the form's institutional structure, social orientation, and audience."[22] Allen's Bakhtinian methodology in his analysis of burlesque leads him to some stunning conclusions regarding its move to vaudeville and industrialization. He writes:

> Burlesque was structured around the body of the burlesque performer, its size and display foregrounding sexual difference and marking it as the body of the low other. Without the performer's body, there was no burlesque. Vaudeville had no body. The eight to twelve acts that constituted the standard vaudeville bill were less a fragmented vaudeville body than they were interchangeable parts in vaudeville's performance machine.[23]

Referring to vaudeville acts and performers as cogs and wheels is a pat metaphor that unfortunately obscures the realities and racisms of Big Time. Professional vaudeville had a body, and its skin tone was undoubtedly white.

The reason for the existence of the TOBA and its black vaudeville predecessors was the multi-fold segregation of the mainstream industry. Few blacks were allowed to perform on the circuits, at most one act with a routine in the minstrel mode. The houses were at best segregated and sometimes completely exclusionary,[24] and the prejudice extended to the performers' fraternal organizations such as the White Rats and the Stage Hands Union.[25] Race was a factor in the business dealings between owners and entertainers, and was part of the interactions between performers. As is painfully clear in reading through the articles from the trade papers, everybody was conscious of a racial divide between black and white, and it flared into a vitriolic racism at moments of anger or conflict.

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[22] Allen, 179.
[23] Ibid., 189.
[24] Wertheim, 177–78.
[25] Errol G. Hill and James Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 207. The White Rats existed as a quasi-union for white vaudeville performers to argue with management over working conditions, and the Stage Hands Union represented the backstage personnel.

Big Time's cleanliness marketing leads Erdman to conclude that "it was not so much immorality, per se, that Keith was trying to dodge, as it was the 'taint' of the working class."[26] Erdman appropriately uses the metaphor of stain or contagion in describing how the working class was viewed by the owners. As noted in chapter two's discussion of Aunt Jemima, the standardization and industrialization of US society into the twentieth century necessarily precipitated claims of cleanliness. Allen and Erdman conceive of this industrialization/standardization/cleanliness as working in tandem with, alongside of, a new bourgeois mentality. Both standardization and sterilization were defining characteristics of a bourgeois middle-class identity at economic, industrial, and social levels. Thus, Big Time vaudeville was more than capitalizing on industrialization and more than responding to an emergent middle-class. It was creating the market and conditions for such behaviors.

Class hierarchy mirrors racial hierarchy, which sets up a very powerful connection between Big Time vaudeville houses and the organizations that hired the Joe Bren Theatrical Company to assist in staging amateur minstrel shows. Big Time vaudeville built bourgeois entertainment palaces that segregated or excluded blacks from the audience as they denigrated them on the stage. The Joe Bren Company was sponsored by white white-collar business clubs whose organization, initiations, and rituals allowed members to play at middle-class respectability. Blackface performances accentuated these racial and class standings, which was at odds with the use of minstrel make-up on the TOBA.

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[26] Erdman, 12.

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The Circuit Circus of Black Vaudeville

The several antecedents of the TOBA as a circuit of black theatres deserve to be fully explained, as they all fed into what eventually became the monopoly organization and have been largely ignored in histories of African American theatre and entertainment. This section marches through several years of shifting allegiances between African American vaudeville houses for two reasons: first, to correct the historical record about the circuits that existed before the creation and later dominance of the TOBA; second, to highlight the rocky yet inexorable drive toward consolidation, which stopped in the mid-1920s once the point of saturation had been reached in the segregated industry.[27]

The earliest precedent to the TOBA is, in fact, an organization also called the Theatre Owners' Booking Association, founded by Memphis-based businessman A. Barrasso in 1907. It seems to have either dissolved or fallen dormant in the 1910s because newspaper accounts refer to it as a new organization in the 1920s.[28] Another rivulet that fed into the TOBA was the first real African American chain, founded by Sherman Dudley in the 1910s and referred to simply as the Dudley Circuit.

Dudley's background as a performer placed him in a good position to know, understand, and appreciate the conditions of black entertainers and the perils of travel, especially in the South. He was born in Texas and his first shows were organized there. At the beginning of the twentieth century, he toured with, wrote for, and starred in several productions with the Smart Set Company. The shows he developed with them were the basis for his prominence in the African American theatrical world: *The Black Politician* (1905), *His Honor the Barber* (1909), and *Dr. Beans from Boston* (1912). With these successful shows he popularized his signature "Dudley and His Mule" routine. And he performed in blackface. Shortly after finishing the run of *Dr. Beans*, he quit performing to focus on developing and running a theatrical circuit for black performers and black audiences.[29]

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[27] The debates among the organizations never mentioned joining white houses to create a mixed-race circuit.

[28] "New Combine of Southern Negro Houses is Announced," *Billboard*, January 1, 1921.

The Dudley Circuit prospered on its own between 1912 and 1919 in the East, Midwest, and South. Like Keith-Albee and Orpheum, Dudley began by gathering existing independent houses and later built theatres specifically for the circuit. In 1919, conglomeration became necessary. As Athelia Knight writes, "[W]hile continuing to operate his own circuit, Dudley joined forces with white theater-men Sam Reevin and Martin Klein to form a new circuit, the United Vaudeville Circuit, Inc., so that he could give his performers a full season of forty weeks."[30] Dudley and the newly christened United Circuit were intermingled with another organization that handled vaudeville entertainments in similar parts of the country. Knight continues, "The three managers of United also had stock in, and were active with, the Southern Consolidated Vaudeville Circuit" with Dudley handling its Eastern bookings. Because of the overlap, there was a movement toward more formal consolidation, which was undermined by the hysterical racism of Charles Bailey, owner of the 81 Theatre in Atlanta:

> This cooperative venture was dissolved in 1920 after a stormy meeting.... [T]he argument arose over who was to serve as president of the organization. When Reevin nominated Dudley for the office of president of Consolidated Southern, Charles Bailey "flew into a rage at this action and offered his franchise and stock for sale.".... At the next meeting, Dudley nominated Bailey for president; Bailey won, and it appeared that matters had been settled.[31]

Things were not settled, as the two organizations were now uncooperative rivals. For the next six months, a controversy raged between United and Southern Consolidated Circuit (SCC).

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[29] Nowhere in my research did I find evidence of a white performer on a black circuit.
[30] Athelia Knight, "He Paved the Way for T.O.B.A.," *The Black Perspective in Music* 15, no. 2 (1987): 164–65.
[31] Ibid., 165.

What could a performer do when caught between the two organizations? For an answer I turn to a fascinating letter from Eddie Green published in the *Indianapolis Freeman*. As described in the letter, his company's convoluted season involves telegrams sent and received, money demanded and IOUs wired, long and costly jumps, and an overriding sense of insecurity. All of this was endemic of the problems performers faced. In the piece, Green tells columnist Sylvester Russell of his switch from the SCC to United and back again. His tone is almost confessional:

> Mr. Russell,
> Dear Sir:
>
> As long as you have known me and as many talks as we have had together, on what is good and what the performer should and how he should act. I should think that you would first get my version on this so-called, contract jumping before you openly, or otherwise attempt to criticize me.
>
> I signed a contract to work 10 weeks on the Consolidated time (Cummings), and while playing at Alexandria, La., I met Mr. Klein, who talked to me and called himself persuading me to jump the Consolidated time, and I told him about the contract, and he said, "That aint worth a D—." so I signed his contracts and even sent in a set of photos by him. I was supposed to go to New Orleans, and then jump to the United time at Memphis.
>
> In New Orleans, I sat down and gave the matter serious thought, and here is what I thought. Mr. Klein took me on his time and promised me good salaries and short jumps. My first jump was from Baltimore to Cleveland, $16 a piece, one week there, and then to Indianapolis, $9, and while there he sent Mr. Stone an "I.O.U." against me for $20, that he claimed I owed him for booking, a little over a year ago and every performer in the country knows that this town was independent and the manager of this house can tell you that I booked myself in there, but I did not kick and I told Mr. Stone the circumstances and I told him to take out the money. Mr. Stone liked the show so well that before I left he handed me 20 [*sic*], and congratulated the entire company. Mr. Klein then jumped me to St. Louis, $9 more, and from there to Tulsa, Okla., $13.50 each, and when I got there I found that I was getting a much less salary than before, but I just kept my peace and said nothing.
>
> After the Oklahoma dates, under the genial Mrs. Williams, I was jumped to Shreveport, La., $13.32 each and was told that I had Alexandria and New Orleans, to follow. When I arrived there, I found that Mr. Klein was not booking either of these towns and there I was, down there with no place to go. So I wired Mr. Klein as to where I went from there. He replied, "Don't do anything until you hear from me," so, like the Sherman-Games Co., which was left in that town ahead of me, I waited until my better judgment told me that I was a fool. Then I

> signed the Consolidated contracts. I never heard from Mr. Klein, so I and my people could be in Shreveport 'till this day.
>
> On the other hand, the Consolidated gave me more money, and really gave me short jumps and in New Orleans, when I wired Mr. Cummings that my show was having trouble, he came over there and personally helped me straighten it out. While Mr. Klein sent me a telegram (colect [*sic*] $1.65) telling me what I had better do or suffer the consequences in answer to my wire to him that I could not take the date.
>
> Now do you blame me for staying where I was, or do you think because I didn't do Mr. Klein's bidding that I should be called a contract jumper?
>
> Yours respectfully,
> EDDIE GREEN[32]

In the fight between the United and SCC, United presented itself through the person of Sherman Dudley: his background, his plain dealing, and, implicitly, his blackness. As an African American, United inferred through its advertising, he would have the interests of African American performers at heart. Articles debating the United/SCC split were printed in the *Freeman* almost immediately. The first testimonial, by one J.W. Booster, reads, "To tell the truth, when the writer saw that S.H. Dudley's name had been erased as president of Southern Consolidated and another given the position, I said then, 'goodbye, Consolidated.'"[33] Two weeks later, the *Freeman* featured another testimonial, this time by Lew W. Henry of the Lyceum Theater in Cincinnati. To the habitual reader of the *Freeman* entertainment page, he writes:

> Well, I have known Dudley for years and when we organized the first colored circuit, I was his general manager and know a lot of good traits of Dudley that if the acts only knew they would appreciate him more. As it is I say that I have [never] heard an act say anything real mean of him, and to the contrary, I believe you will hear all good acts boost his methods of doing business.... All acts and managers should support anything bearing Dudley's name, as I cannot figure where he would lead you wrong.[34]

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[32] Eddie Green, "Eddie Green Answers Mr. Russell," *Indianapolis Freeman*, June 19, 1920. The Mr. Cummings mentioned in the letter is E.L. Cummings, the white owner of the Belmont Theatre in Pensacola, Florida, and one of the managers of the SCC.

[33] J.W. Booster, "News of New Circuit Spreads like Wildfire," *Indianapolis Freeman*, January 31, 1920. This whole piece may be fake, as I have never run across a J.W. Booster in earlier or later articles or on show rosters.

[34] Lew W. Henry, "Dudley Fights for the Acts. A Hint to the Wise from One who Knows," *Indianapolis Freeman*, January 17, 1920.

This sentiment was echoed in the company's advertisements, soliciting acts and managers to join them. It includes a "word to the acts" that asks, "Who has fought your battles, regardless of what the outcome would be? (Your Uncle Dud.) He always has and always will. This is why our new circuit was formed."[35] The focus on Dudley and his character, which stemmed from his race and experience, would continue for the remaining months of the organization's existence.

Both United and the SCC claimed better salaries and shorter jumps. So Dudley's race, particularly after his ignoble dismissal from the SCC, was the real element that separated the two circuits. The focus on race is painfully apparent in two nasty letters published in the *Freeman* in late March and early June of 1920. The pair of vituperative missives, one by Dudley lambasting a fellow black performer and the other a response, are all the more shocking given the newspaper's usual conviviality. The mocking tone, allusions to slavery, and use of characters from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are especially striking. Here is Dudley's message, in full:

> The White Man's "Nigger."
>
> To the surprise of the writer I find there still remains one of the old type of the slavery-time Negro who believes in cutting the throat of another Negro when told to do so by a white man. I really thought at this enlightened age that this type of negro had become extinct.
>
> There is a certain performer, well known to us all, who has gone to my territory to devastate the monument that all race lovers should commemorate and should be history in the theatrical world as I was the first successful Negro circuit we ever had.
>
> I worked hard night and day, lost time and money to build the Dudley Circuit. I admit competition is the trade of life and if this Uncle Tom had any interest or held any stock in the organization for which he is working I could consider it a legitimate business move but he is simply hired by Master Simon LeGree to go out and kill all Negroes therefore he struck his first blow at me. What narrow-mindedness in poor old Uncle Tom when I withdrew from the Consolidated fighting for the rights of the performers.
>
> It is true that all my partners are white but I am an equal owner in my enterprise while poor Uncle Tom is still struggling and sharpening his axe to cut down every Negro with executive ability at a small salary of whatever Simon sees fit to give him.

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[35] *Indianapolis Freeman*, January 24, 1920.

> Uncle Tom made his flying trip through Virginia returning to the big house to tell what he had achieved. I can say at this writing that he did nothing. He was successful in getting a house in Newport News to book because it was a cast-off from the Dudley Circuit that I refused to book any longer; he also booked a theatre in Baltimore that I could not book on account of having three theatres in the same section and have another in course of erection capitalized by Negroes.
>
> There is a lot of camouflaging about certain circuits who are using colored men's names but I doubt if there is any colored man in the business that owns any part of a booking exchange except myself who is the sole owner of the Dudley Circuit and an equal owner of the Dudley Klein and Reevin United Vaudeville Circuit.
>
> I wonder if Uncle Tom ever stopped to think that some day he has to die. What color of pall bearers will he have. I suppose that Simon told him he would attend to all of that and would bury him in a golden casket. This type of Negro is a menace, a detriment to the race. The sooner the profession is rid of this sort, success is assured not only in the theatrical business but in other walks of life.
>
> I wish the Freeman to publish this letter two consecutive weeks as Uncle Tom's master might destroy it before Tom gets to see it or perhaps he may not give him a nickel to purchase one.
>
> I want to thank the profession who has stuck to me and the United Circuit and I assure you that you will have nothing to regret as we are today in better position to take care of you than ever before. I realize that there have been a few knockers but the boosters have overshadowed them and as a result all the good acts and companies are with the Dudley Klein and Reevin United Vaudeville Circuit, while poor Uncle Tom is struggling through life awaiting orders from Master Simon.
>
> I would be pleased to read in the columns of the Freeman what Uncle Tom has to say for himself but sign your name in full so that the profession might know who this enemy to the profession is.
>
> Yours very truly,
> S. H. Dudley.[36]

The *Freeman* ran the letter for two consecutive weeks, as Dudley requested.

The performer is not named in this letter or the response, and for some reason chose to keep the pseudonym Uncle Tom. Quite possibly he is Tim Owsley, the "Middle West Representative" of the SCC. Owsley fits the description: he worked for the rival, was himself a performer, and was the only African American on the board of the SCC unnamed in either letter. By extension, then, Simon Legree is Charles Bailey. Owsley returned the call of traitor to "the race" while also engaging in some bald anti-Semitism. His letter is titled "'No Coward': Will

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[36] Sherman Dudley, "The White Man's 'Nigger,'" *Indianapolis Freeman*, March 20, 1920.

Answer Any One, Any Time, Any Where, Any Place; and Am Truly With This Combination." It is more convoluted than Dudley's message, but equally as angry (throughout Dudley is called Caius Cassius, one of the main conspirators against Julius Caesar):

> Uncle Tom moved because one Caius Casius [*sic*] tried to undo what he had done and Uncle Tom had Simon to select Casius as a foremost man in the Southern Consolidated Circuit, that arranged a change of houses in the south. And now Casius and his Hebrew brothers, both white men, had Casius go to the front and occupy an office in the south: to work on the sympathy of the weaker members (as they term it) of the show world....
>
> Casius were you protecting yourself, I would not answer, my feelings as a race man would shame me; but since you demand an answer in behalf of you and your Hebrew brothers, I answer on behalf of myself and my Gentile brothers. I own an act on the road and want as much for my services as I can get. I will never get it from a firm that can promise managers cheaper acts and greater profits. What does it mean to my brother workers and myself? Back to the old time salary but still the five percent goes on weekly to the booking agents....[37]

Dudley, a few weeks later, called for a moratorium on the trash talk.[38] Within six months of this fracas, the two companies had once again merged as the Southern Consolidated Circuit. The TOBA came into existence in January 1921 largely in response to the SCC,[39] and eventually became the sole option for black entertainers.

At this time of acrimony, veteran theatre critic Sylvester Russell penned a small poem called "The Circuit Circus Band" satirizing the confusion and anger between the various organizations:

> There's trouble brooding all around,
> The circuit circus has been found,
> Amalgamated at all ends,
> On which the problem now depends.
>
> There's Dudley, Casius of them all,

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[37] [Tim Owsley?], "No Coward," *Indianapolis Freeman*, April 3, 1920.

[38] Sherman Dudley, "Facts," *Indianapolis Freeman*, May 15, 1920.

[39] Another circuit was formed in the midst of the SCC fracas. As noted by Ted Vincent, "In autumn 1919, the Quality Amusement Corporation (QAC), of E.C. Brown/Lester Walton and company was launched, providing a separate circuit for the big Eastern and Mid-Western metropolises." The QAC stretched from New York to Chicago, hitting some of the major urban centers along the way, but not venturing into the South that the United and Southern Consolidated Circuits were fighting over. The QAC dissolved in 1922. See Vincent, 58.

> Declaring Uncle Tom will fall,
> And leave Atlanta to despoil,
> When 81 gets out of oil.
>
> There's Uncle Tom, you know him well,
> They call him "Dad" and give him hell;
> He's not so much like Jesse James,
> And he's "no coward," so he claims....
>
> All [are] marching hand in hand
> To Dudley's circuit circus band.[40]

The problem of amalgamation for the circuit circus is that the owners were fighting to establish a single, competition-less company but could not decide on the organization's hierarchy.

This preamble the TOBA demonstrates how complexly these organizations were knit together. Secondly, it shows how the discussion of the circuits is about jumps and salaries, only shifting to race when it becomes advantageous for someone like Dudley. Interestingly, even as race and race pride become important, criticizing the content of the acts or their use of blackface—though pervasive on both the SCC and United—is entirely non-existent.

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From Circus to Consolidation

The TOBA is important in the history of African American theatre, mirroring the era's push toward consolidation, housing black performers in the time after the minstrel show, and responding to the demands of an emergent black public with both disposable income and a desire for entertainment diversions that better addressed their lives. The discussion of professional black vaudeville which follows examines the various acquisitions and mergers before 1920 that made the TOBA the unrivaled circuit of the 1920s. Several of the key players are discussed, such as the unfairly maligned Dudley,[41] and Tim Moore, whose show Tim Moore's Chicago Follies toured the country in the early 1920s. The TOBA has been widely written about as a touchstone for black theatre, but the story that emerges is one not nearly as clean as either the memoirists or historians claim.

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[40] Sylvester Russell, "The Circuit Circus Band," *Indianapolis Freeman*, May 8, 1920.

Mel Watkins's *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock* provides a clear example. He titles a key chapter "The Theatre Owners Booking Association and the Apollo Theatre... *changing the joke and slipping the yoke*," thereby connecting the TOBA to the subversive function of black humor brilliantly theorized by Ralph Ellison.[42] Watkins sees the TOBA, or black circuits in general, as a "godsend for struggling black performers" looking for some stability in bookings, and also as an "incubator" to help "transition from minstrelsy's rigidly maintained stereotypes to a performance style that more accurately reflected the majority tastes of the black community."[43] Watkins does not dwell on the circulation of blackface, preferring to focus on the evolution into the public realm of a race-specific style of humor. Watkins's approach is typical of the way the TOBA has been celebrated for bringing dignity to the African American entertainment world.

But the TOBA has also been vilified by scholars who use it to decry the generally terrible working conditions of performers. For example, Watkins quotes from Ethel Waters's autobiography on the poor accommodations at the Monogram Theatre:

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[41] Ted Vincent portrays Dudley as a Machiavellian businessman willing to undercut the black performers he purported to support. The eventual triumph of the TOBA, for Vincent, hinges on Dudley, who "tip[ped] the scales" for the white-owned conglomerate, thereby selling out other black-owned circuits. Despite having a grasp of the complexities of the various mergers and competing business organizations, in the end Vincent prefers to discuss Dudley as a political schemer in a black hat, twirling his moustache. See Ted Vincent, *Keep Cool: The Black Activists Who Built the Age of Jazz* (East Haven, CT: Pluto Press, 1995), 57–62.

[42] In a 1950s essay Ellison identified the subversive quality of black humor through its ability to appropriate and invert the dominant social power structure. See Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964).

[43] Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 367–69.

> "Of all the rinky-dink dumps I played, nothing was worse than the Monogram Theatre in Chicago." It had paper-thin walls and was near the El, so "you stopped singing—or telling a joke—every time a train passed," then continued when the noise died down. "You dressed away downstairs with the stoker," where you had to stoop over to get into costume, "then you came up to the stage on a ladder that looked like those on the old-time slave ships."[44]

Watkins uses Waters's words as evidence of racist business practices, but his contention is misleading for several reasons. First, this quotation from Waters is part of Watkins's criticism of the white-managed TOBA, whereas the Monogram was run by African Americans. Second, the Monogram predates the TOBA and was a late addition to its ranks. So Watkins is simplifying the case to make a general statement that is, in part, inaccurate. More importantly, even if the Monogram could be taken as an example of the typical TOBA house, nowhere in any of the justifications for the creation of that company or of its rival circuits were working conditions for performers voiced as a concern: Nicer dressing room accommodations was not a priority for either owners or performers. The points of contention were salaries, binding contracts, and a continuous season with short jumps. True, the conditions at the Monogram were bad and the elevated train rumbled by and disrupted the performances. But this was a condition of the particular theatre and not of the circuit in general.

"Most distressing" in Watkins's estimation are conditions in the South where some TOBA houses were located. As he writes, "[T]he circuit included extensive travel in the South, where blacks, and particularly black entertainers, were not welcomed by the town fathers."[45] Watkins names Charles Bailey as an example of this mistreatment because he once beat and imprisoned Bessie Smith and another time forced Ethel Waters to flee town.[46] Bailey was part of the TOBA conglomeration, but he was not a founding member and he spent some time on rival circuits as well. Watkins is right to use Bailey as an example of the dangers of performing in the South, but such hazards were not specific to the TOBA. Other circuits treated performers similarly, as did independent houses. And companies traveling as tent shows encountered intense racism. Should the TOBA have treated the performers better? Yes, of course. But combating racism was not part of the organization's mission, nor was it included in the grievances performers brought against the organization or any other circuit. These performers are to be celebrated for what they endured and how they prevailed, but placing the blame on the TOBA distorts its position within the cultural landscape—and shifts the pervasiveness of racism in the country to the individual hatreds of a few powerful businessmen.

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[44] Ibid., 366.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

The TOBA certainly was run by regressive-thinking individuals, which was in line with the conservative sentiments of the day. J.A. Jackson, the era's most important and influential journalist for black entertainment, wrote a weekly column in *Billboard*. He interviewed the president of the TOBA in 1922, when it was really gaining in strength. During the conversation, Clarence Bennett displayed a casual racist paternalism to the performers in describing the need for and benefit of segregated houses (a portion of this was excerpted at the beginning of the chapter):

> The segregation must infallibly make for the best interests of the white and the colored races. The colored man must be taught to respect his own color, and, while not infringing on the white, that he will find the open road to the best interests of his people.... East is East and West is West, and never the twain may meet, and it is thus with the races—the colored performer should be taught to respect his color and his race, and by doing this he will surely gain the respect of his white brother who has broken the way for him to civilization.[47]

This Washingtonian ideal of racial uplift through self-sacrifice and humility was losing favor in the minds of black intellectuals, but retained an obvious appeal for white businessmen. (Burnett distorts the social concepts of B.T. Washington.) Such a racial attitude underlay the relationship between owners and performers.

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[47] J.A. Jackson, "The T.O.B.A. Election."

When the TOBA was formed in early 1921 in opposition to the SCC, the owners flooded the press with letters extolling the better conditions of their circuit. Though such praise must be handled with a degree of skepticism, it can be stated that, at the very least, the issues raised by the TOBA in articles sent to *Billboard* and the *Chicago Defender* indicate the points of contention that managers believed the black entertainment profession would be interested in. Like the SCC/United discussion, these are related not to in-house conditions or racism, but to circulation: short jumps between locations, long stays and not one-night stands, and continuing work for up to forty weeks.[48]

More than fifty percent of the theatre houses that made up the TOBA came from the SCC—and, tellingly, this included the houses run by almost the entire governing SCC board.[49] When the organization was officially launched a month and a half later, numerous other theatres had jumped aboard, some from the SCC and some not.[50] According to official statements, the TOBA was created to benefit both owners and performers. The early press releases about the organization, written for the performance newspapers, ask entertainers to change allegiances—this was mostly an illusion of choice, as many of the theatres had been part of the rival SCC only a month previous. In justifying how the organization would benefit performers, the focus is not on conditions in the houses (which were the same as on the other circuit) or conditions around the houses (which were in the same dangerous Southern and Northern towns as the other circuit) but on the seamless connection of routes, the method of circulation. Here is one of the first direct statements from the TOBA in January, 1921:

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[48] The magic number for professional performers was always forty weeks, for some unexplained reason.

[49] "New Combine of Southern Negro Houses is Announced."

[50] "Milton Starr Makes a Statement," *Chicago Defender*, February 12, 1921.

> For the past six months there have been underground rumblings of discontent among the performers, also the theater owners, with the manner in which a booking office was operated.... We mention no names, as complaints have been coming more frequently daily, both from performers who are laying off and performers who have been given large railroad jumps with small salaries awaiting them at destination.[51]

The justification for the organization, according to this account, is performers' complaints.

In the same issue of *Billboard*, the remaining members of the SCC responded. They stressed, in counterpoint to the TOBA, the health of the route:

> Consolidated Doing Well
>
> Notwithstanding some reports of unfavorable conditions in the South, the Consolidated Southern Circuit, according to both actors and the exchanges, has not felt any decline in business. At present 31 companies and 56 vaudeville acts are being kept busy on the 35 weeks' time over territory stretching from Chicago to Philadelphia, via the Mississippi River, the Gulf and Atlantic Coasts. Practically every city with a sustaining population to justify it has a house of this circuit.[52]

As both sides were making contradictory claims for the state of the profession, J.A. Jackson put out a call to performers. "Some unfavorable reports upon conditions in the South for our companies have reached this office," the call began, echoing the statement from the TOBA. "However, it is not due to any bad financial state of affairs, but to bad routing: the greed of some of the local managers and the long jumps that have been undertaken by some companies that were not capitalized for such expenditure."[53]

The position and justification of the TOBA was solidly stated in a letter by its president, Milton Starr, that ran in both *Billboard* and the *Chicago Defender* on February 12, 1921. It reads, in part:

> The organization of the Theater Owners' Booking Association was effected by a group of the most influential theater owners in the South and Middle West, primarily for the purpose of saving from impending disaster the entire

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[51] "New Combine of Southern Negro Houses is Announced."
[52] "Consolidated Doing Well," *Billboard*, January 1, 1921.
[53] J.A. Jackson, *Billboard*, January 1, 1921.

> colored theatrical industry, which was threatened by the gross mismanagement and unfair dealings of the booking agents, who kaiserlike dominated the colored vaudeville in almost the entire country.
>
> Resolved to put an end to these irresponsible and incapable agents, this group of men chartered and organized the Theater Owners' Booking Association, an organization that is owned, controlled and operated by theater owners.[54]

The rest of the statement gives an overview of the business model, in which theatre owners become members with the purchase of three shares of capital stock at a hundred dollars per share (a thousand dollars today) and are granted franchise rights in the cities where the theatres are located. According to Starr, "This eliminates entirely the franchise fees and office fees that have heretofore been the bane of the theater owners' existence and the delight of the unreliable agents." Curiously (and ominously) for an organization that is introducing itself to the black entertainment world through the two newspapers most used by the performers themselves, there is no mention of the performers at all.

Who were these booking agents that "kaiserlike" (a nice bit of 1920s jingoism) controlled vaudeville? The new organization declared its distaste for these people starting with the name Theatre Owners' Booking Association: the owners control the bookings. Details from black vaudevillians and the black press are scant, but if the black variety world mirrors the white, booking agents were the entertainers' representatives who became prominent middlemen starting with the rise of vaudeville in the 1890s.[55] They negotiated with theatres for placement and salaries in exchange for a customary five percent of the fee. The TOBA attempted to use the strength of their numbers and the promise of continued work to remove the agents from the accepted business model. By doing so, the owners could tax the performers in several ways: they charged a fee for handling the booking, created the conditions of the contract, and regulated salaries. Given these conditions and the eventual monopoly of the TOBA soon after its inception, the haphazard organizing of several performers' unions at the time is not a coincidence.

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[54] Milton Starr, "Statement to the Colored Theatrical World," *Billboard*, February 12, 1921.

[55] Wertheim, 96.

Jackson, one of the most astute observers of the black theatrical world in all its forms, was a staunch supporter of the rights of entertainers. He was also aware of the difficulties they faced in all regions of the country and in all aspects of business. Initially he welcomed the TOBA—not because it offered to improve conditions but because competition could benefit the performer. In January 1921, he wrote a short piece entitled "New Circuits of Negro Houses and the Probable Effects," which stated, "Thus a three-cornered fight seems to be on for the control of the colored business. The performers will no doubt profit, as the territory can simply support three well organized circuits [the third was the independent houses] if properly cultivated. The competitive conditions will no doubt bring about a number of improvements vital to their interests."[56] Less than a month later he added, "Properly handled the situation resolves itself into a circumstance that will prove the salvation of the Negro actors' present deplorable condition."[57] Here, again, Jackson is focusing his excitement on continued work for the performer. Though a certain degree of consolidation is beneficial, Jackson here hopes the situation stops short of monopoly.

Unfortunately for Jackson and the performers, the TOBA noiselessly incorporated the SCC in the summer of 1921, a move in which Dudley was instrumental.[58] The TOBA began its efforts at stabilizing the industry in what was, by many accounts, a difficult season for the profession, due to high temperatures and a general economic slump. The comings and goings of the organization—and their response to complaints and criticisms—were featured prominently in the *Chicago Defender*. (Ted Vincent believes that the theatrical editor allowed his page to be a

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[56] J.A. Jackson, "New Circuits or Negro Houses and the Probable Effects," *Billboard*, January 15, 1921.
[57] J.A. Jackson, "As This Page Predicted," *Billboard,* February 5, 1921.
[58] *Billboard,* June 4, 1921.

"sounding-board" for the company.[59]) According to the TOBA management, a major problem was too many acts and not enough houses, and the answer was consolidation at the level of individual troupes. TOBA executive Milton Starr, reflecting on the industry's woes, wrote on June 18, 1921:

> There is only one solution to this problem and the performer must adopt this if he expects to work all through this summer. The best people from two companies should combine to form one company. If the companies would agree to combine in this manner, then work would be had for all of the best people in the profession for the hot summer months, and the less desirable performer would be the only one to be eliminated. If this scheme is not acted on by the companies, then a great number of companies will be compelled to discontinue until the usual reopening of theaters in September.[60]

This proposal was reiterated a week later by treasurer and general manager Sam Reevin: "By cutting the number of people it will cut the salary list, railroad fare and excess baggage. It will help to pull through these hard, trying times."[61] This suggestion, judging by the communiqués from organization leaders on the eve of the new theatrical season, soon became a "policy of general retrenchment" and a "demand" to the smaller troupes. The benefit for companies, the owners offered, was reduced transportation costs and the opportunity of "eliminating from the ranks of the real actors all those would-be actors who have so long been the parasites of Colored vaudeville."[62] The other controversial point between the owners and the performers—based on the evidence of the owners' letters in the *Defender* and the number of times they returned to the topic—had to do with a new policy regarding salaries, which were now going to be on a sliding scale based on the popularity of the acts in various houses, instead of a more standard and regulated pay. As Reevin wrote at the beginning of September 1921:

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[59] Vincent, 61.
[60] Milton Starr, "A Statement," *Chicago Defender*, June 18, 1921.
[61] Sam Reevin, "An Open Letter," *Chicago Defender*, June 25, 1921.
[62] "Next Season," *Chicago Defender*, July 30, 1921. Given the scant information about show rosters, it is unknown what effect these suggestions had on touring shows.

> The time of paying all companies alike, the agent not knowing what show they have; in some cases he even never heard of it before, and for just any company to receive the same salary as old, reputable companies is a thing of the past. The shows will receive as much as they are worth, according to their merits. Even now some companies and acts are receiving more than others.[63]

Of course, with the removal of the booking agents, it was at the sole discretion of the owners to decide which show merited the highest salary and what that salary should be.

The management argued this arrangement would be good for the entertainers, because it would keep them constantly innovating their acts, thus keeping audiences happy and making the industry as a whole stronger. Only at this point, in these situations, does the TOBA mention the entity known as the audience—a faceless mass exerting pressure on the actors to perform better. It was a smart rhetorical move by the owners. In its circumlocution, I am reminded of Fredrick Taylor's theories of Scientific Management: the reason workers' wages should not have to be increased commensurate with the increase in their output is because of the pressure from consumers to keep prices low. Because workers can simultaneously be counted as consumers, they are exerting pressure *on themselves* to take a lower wage.[64] This TOBA policy seems to have been implemented for the new season, but the owners did not anticipate the response from entertainers to so subjective a criterion: each act on a bill insisting theirs is the best and fighting with managers when they are not granted top salary. By mid-October, only six weeks after the new policy was put in place, Starr published a letter asking acts to cease hectoring managers and the head office with salary complaints:

> One week I received three special deliveries from three acts on the same bill complaining about the fourth act on the bill getting a few dollars more than they were. They registered no complaint about their salary not being enough, but were sore because another act was getting more.

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[63] Sam Reevin, "Prospectus," *Chicago Defender*, September 3, 1921.

[64] Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911; repr., Sioux Falls, SD: NuVision Publications, 2007), 77.

> It is impossible to convince an act that the other fellow has a better act or more drawing power. Each thinks—or insists, anyway—that his act is the best. They also do not stop to think that some acts are favorites in some places, and since they draw best the manager is willing to pay more for those acts, and if you tell them that they will send you a list of theaters where they are favorites and where the manager wants them at once, and in most cases the list will include every theater in the country.[65]

Of course, the intensity of the response from performers had something to do with the monopoly of the circuit.

The stranglehold of the TOBA and its exclusivity as a booking and routing organization was short lived. By February 1922, roughly a year after its inception, a collection of theatres broke off and formed the rival Managers and Performers Circuit (M & P). Despite a short and intense battle between the two organizations, the M & P failed to gain a foothold in the towns and regions dominated by the TOBA, especially certain hub cities crucial for establishing manageable routes, and it was reabsorbed.

The man who created the trouble was E.L. Cummings, one-time head of the SCC, supported by Charles Bailey from Atlanta. Rumblings of dissatisfaction were heard at the TOBA's annual meeting in January 1922, and by February the M & P had thirty-two houses lined up, mostly in Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina. As noted in *Billboard*, the list "contains none of the houses of the [TOBA] circuit, save two owned by persons said to be promoters of the new venture."[66] The new conglomeration of theatres placed "colored vaudeville precisely where it was during the season of 1920–21."[67] The struggle between the circuits did not last long. By July, the circuit was reporting twenty-three houses, down ten from February. And even this changed a few weeks later, when the fickle Bailey and his 81 Theatre in Atlanta jumped back to the TOBA.[68] The M & P, though, continued. Jackson reported on the company's first annual meeting in August 1922, concluding the piece by commenting, "Neither circuit can offer a full season's work, nor can either circuit give a route that does not compel the acts to spend the greater part of the salary on transportation."[69] The circumstance was quickly resolved, as by November 1922, after some speculation in the press and a bit of back-and-forth by the parties involved, the two circuits were once again merged under the aegis of the TOBA. The agglomeration of houses was broken up into four regional wheels, each allowing the performer a chain of theatres with quick jumps and continuous work.

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[65] Milton Starr, "The Wherefore," *Chicago Defender*, October 15, 1921.
[66] "New Colored Circuit is Reported Forming," *Billboard*, February 4, 1922.
[67] "New Chain of Theaters Starts Operations March 6," *Billboard*, March 4, 1922.

This lengthy history of black vaudeville circuits is necessary to a discussion of blackface in the 1920s, and not only to correct the inaccuracies about the circuits perpetuated through histories of the African American stage. The blackface masks that circulated more than reflected racialized norms—they interacted with and reacted to these norms. This helped the longevity of the performance tradition, and highly influenced its reception by black audiences.

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Blackface Tradition

The relationship between blackface performance and African American audiences has always interested, even fascinated, historians. From a historical distance the acceptance and enjoyment of blackface by blacks seems contradictory, self-hating, or conciliatory toward a racist hierarchy. In the context of African American vaudeville and their African American audiences, race consciousness and blackface makeup were not necessarily antithetical to each other. It may not even be fair to set them up in direct comparison, as I have done here. An irony of professional black vaudeville is that the racist segregation that created these circuits may have alleviated the racism of performances within the playhouses. Without whites in the audience, or without houses in which whites were expected to dominate, acts did not have to cater to easy stereotyping.

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[68] "Bailey Back to T.O.B.A.," *Billboard*, July 15, 1922.

[69] J.A. Jackson, "Cummings Elected Head of M. & P. Circuit," *Billboard*, August 12, 1922.

One of the most convincing arguments for the popularity of blackface—something that works in tandem with one of the overall arguments of this project—comes from David Krasner. In *A Beautiful Pageant* Krasner posits a theory of blackface enjoyment, while still acknowledging how indefinite any explanation of spectator pleasure can be. "Perhaps," he notes as an introduction to the discussion, "the most important ingredient to the success of blackface shows to black audiences was the belief that blackface comedy, however self-mocking, was part of a cultural heritage."[70] Blackface was an incidental detail to the performances themselves, having no bearing on the comedy of the act or the narrative arc of a skit. Yet it was a necessary incidental detail. Burnt cork on African American performers' faces was an indication of, a signifier for, a particular type of vaudeville humor: topical, local, punning, parodic, sometimes ribald and suggestive.

With judicious use of scare quotes, Krasner continues: "[B]lackface troupes represented an 'authentic' tradition of entertainment that many believed was rooted in the South.... Blackface, although derogatory, was still a 'tradition.'"[71] The word tradition drags me back to Theodor Adorno's famous dictum, "One must have tradition in oneself, to hate it properly,"[72] but to love instead of hate. Blackface entertainers were enjoyed and celebrated—not *for* their blackface but certainly not *in spite* of it. Adorno defines tradition as "not consciousness but the pregiven and binding existence of social forms—the actuality of the past."[73] This blackface performance element was, paradoxically, an element of racial identity for African Americans at the time, not as a signature of racial subjugation but as an emblem of a cultural past. Does hating something properly mean loving it improperly? Or that the love is improper?

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[70] David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 277.
[71] Ibid., 279.
[72] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso Press, 2005), 52.

Tradition is a museum piece. In his essay "Valéry Proust Museum," Adorno writes of "the fatal situation of what is called 'the cultural tradition.'" More than just the actuality of the past, a cultural tradition can be a deadening cycle. "Once tradition is no longer animated by a comprehensive, substantial force but has to be conjured up by means of citations because 'It's important to have tradition,' then whatever happens to be left of it is dissolved into a means to an end."[74] That is, cultural tradition enters into a loop of self-referentiality, which is what the blackface tradition was on the black vaudeville stage. In this setting, blackface was a citation not of blackness but of blackface. It had an authenticity rooted not in race but in past performance. And this difference of attitude, focus, and enjoyment separates what can be discussed as tradition here and what will be discussed as nostalgia in the upcoming section on the Joe Bren Theatrical Company. There are subtle, powerful differences between tradition and nostalgia, between the acknowledgement or even celebration of social struggle and the elision or erasure of it.

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Classifying Tim Moore

What, specifically, were the shows on the TOBA circuit, and who were the performers? Two types of acts traveled on the TOBA. There were small specialty acts that performed short skits: solo comedians or duos, a jazz band, a magician. Those could be cobbled together, four or five on a vaudeville bill, to create an evening's worth of entertainment or to supplement a movie. There were also fully packaged shows which included comedians, musicians, and often some group of "light-skinned" (or "tan" or "bronzed" or "high-brown") "beauties."[75] These companies usually consisted of ten to fifteen people and were the target of the consolidation campaign by the TOBA officers in 1921.

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[73] Theodor Adorno, "On Tradition," quoted in Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 5.

[74] Theodor Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," in *Prisms,* trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1967), 175.

Hundreds of performers moved around the country, appeared and disappeared, jumped between circuits, traveled overseas, banded and disbanded. In August 1922 J.A. Jackson wrote an article naming the black vaudeville acts and companies playing throughout the country. Despite acknowledging the likelihood of omissions, he listed 264 acts.[76] Some of the notable entertainers include: Willie Toosweet, Johnny Hudgins, Tom Fletcher, Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham, Florence Mills, husband-and-wife team Butterbeans and Suzie, female impersonator Andrew Tribble, and comedy duo Buck and Bubbles. Many of the houses (though not all) were owned by whites. But the companies were formed by blacks, the acts were written by blacks, and the performers were black. Almost every notable African American entertainer of the next generation of television or film spent time on the TOBA. Though, this fact does not mean that the TOBA can take credit for these performers' talent—it just means there was no other place for them to go.

A different perspective on the business shake-ups detailed previously can be provided by tracking a single company as it traveled across the country and jumped different routes, showing, like the Eddie Green letter quoted earlier, how a performer navigated the turbulent waters. One such show was Tim Moore's Chicago Follies, a successful (but by no means exceptionally successful) production formed by, managed by, and starring Moore and his wife Gertrude. The production is representative for exhibiting many standard elements of a TOBA show: blackface comedians, a variety of entertainments, and a female chorus. The company was piece-time laborers, only getting paid once the product had been completed. The Moores encountered problems with theatre owners and worried about the costs of moving their employees long distances to uncertain destinations.

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[75] The sexual display of lighter skinned black women was another holdover from the nineteenth century minstrel show. The interaction of blackface performers and female choruses will be taken up in the next chapter.
[76] J.A. Jackson, "Vaudeville the Real Ladder of the Colored Artist," *Billboard*, August 5, 1922.

Tim Moore is a representative performer, given his work both before and after the Chicago Follies. He was born in Rock Island, Illinois in 1888. He worked early on as part of a medicine show and, apparently, performed with "Cory Miskel and Her Gold Dust Twins."[77] A 1908 skit he created that has some tantalizing resonances for this project is the one-man *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: half of his face was painted white to represent Simon Legree, the other half was in blackface to represent the title character.[78] He produced his own show in 1910, at the age of twenty-two, called Tim Moore and His Georgia Sunflowers.[79] There may have been an earlier version of the Chicago Follies in 1916, but the 1920 version was the longest-lasting.

Tim Moore's Chicago Follies toured from 1920 to 1923, when it was replaced by Tim Moore's Bronze Review. It was one of many shows of the 1910s and 1920s to have Follies, Jollies, or Frolics in the title—an obvious attempt to capitalize on the notoriety of Florenz Ziegfeld's productions. The line-up of the show can be cobbled together from various notices in the black press. According to one detailed review, it was a "speedy hour and a half show" with a "bunch of new songs and dialogue, some fast, slow and medium dancing, some pretty girls and some nifty costumes."[80] The production starred Tim as a blackface comedian acting alongside Gertrude, who most likely did not wear the make-up. Other solo acts included Little Bit Turner singing opera and dancing the Georgia Hunch, and female impersonator Frank King.[81] Several articles reference women performing as "old maid" characters, and someone named Mrs. or Miss Johnson as a solo act. In 1923 the company presented a sketch called "The Assistant Manager," described in a review as "a very light story full of screamingly funny situations, interspersed with a fine list of songs, dances and snappy dialogue."[82] The overall picture is of an eclectic vaudeville show in which the blackface comedian is one element—but not the focus. The make-up was rarely commented upon.

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[77] Bart Andrews and Ahrgus Juiliard, *Holy Mackerel!: The Amos 'n' Andy Story* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1986), 71. This latter detail may be a fabrication, because the date given for the start of the show precedes by several years the official debut of the impish mascots of the Gold Dust Washing Powder.

[78] Henry Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 406.

[79] Bernard L. Peterson, jr., *Profiles of African American Stage Performers and Theatre People, 1816–1960* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2001), 191.

The route of the show illustrates some of the opportunities and limitations for a black-owned company, the fluidity within a very limited range of options. For the first several months of 1920, Tim and Gertrude were a stand-alone act working at the Monogram and other theatres in Chicago. (Their home seems always to have been Rock Island.) Around June of that year the Chicago Follies company was formed and began touring in SCC houses. They immediately ran into problems with a theatre manager, requiring the intervention of Sherman Dudley. According to the *Freeman*:

> Friday, June 4th, Dud learned that there was some trouble between the manager of the Rainbow Theater, Baltimore, and Tim Moore and his company. Uncle Dud lost no time in hopping the first train to Baltimore, and was on the spot to adjust matters. When all the facts from both the manager and the company were explained, Uncle Dud told the manager he was not giving the company a fair deal and unless he played the company the next week, as per his contract, that he would discontinue his bookings and eliminate his house from the Dudley Circuit.[83]

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[80] Tony Langdon, "Players in New Show at Avenue's Grand and Monogram Draw Well," *Chicago Defender*, March 3, 1923.

[81] Tim Moore, "Tim Moore Writes," *Chicago Defender*, July 31, 1920.

[82] Tony Langdon, "'Shake Your Feet' Drawing Well at Grand; Tim Moore in Return Date at the Monogram," *Chicago Defender*, March 17, 1923.

[83] "A Live Wire," *Indianapolis Freeman*, June 19, 1920.

Though the article stresses the courageousness of Uncle Dud, it still highlights the vulnerability of a touring production. Throughout 1920 and into 1921, the company toured on the SCC in areas around Virginia and Washington, D.C., before venturing west as far as Muskogee, Oklahoma, and then back toward Louisville, Kentucky. It was still on the SCC after the formation of the TOBA. At the beginning of April 1921 the company was performing at the Victory Theater, an SCC-affiliated house in Louisville, yet two weeks later they were at the Liberty Theatre in Chattanooga, Tennessee—the hub of the TOBA organization. The company remained on the TOBA for the rest of the show's existence, playing in houses with seating capacities of up to a thousand people. By November 1923 Tim and Gertrude created the Bronze Beauties show, thus bringing the several year run of the Chicago Follies to a close.

As a postscript to the Chicago Follies tour, Moore published a letter in the *Chicago Defender* in February 1924. It praises the efforts of the new TOBA organization and even supports the owner-controlled salary system, but Moore also breathes a sigh of relief for the stability of good routing. He writes:

> I don't remember writing much if any about the Colored vaudeville situation since it first started, as I worked in Honolulu most of the time after Mr. Dudley first organized the circuit. Of course, at that time I was playing in Colored theaters but booked them independently and would play from two to four weeks in each theater. But since my return to this side, I have found things changed a lot.
>
> I have played 11 of the T.O.B.A. circuit and my only kick was that our sets needed better routing and more money, and as Mr. Dudley and the other agents assure us of this, I am sure that every act and small company is going to work hard to put their act over and try to become a box office attraction for we know that if we don't draw at the box office the managers cannot pay us more money; we also knows [*sic*] that all acts cannot be headliners and the only way to tell who is who, is to go by the attendance and the applause. Then you will hear the people talking about the show in the cafes, poolrooms and on the corners; they will mention who they think is the best and the managers will hear the audience commenting on the show as they leave the theater. He will also know who is who.

The article ends with an appeasing message to the TOBA, and an unintentional malapropism:

> I think it is a grand thing and I am sure it won't be long now before we are classified and get our just dues. Mr. Dudley and the T.O.B.A. have done much and we are going to make good. We thank them of course. I am speaking for myself and all good performers. I know it is true that some of them will never make grade A, as they do not study, but we should all take advantage of this opportunity and elevate as well as classify the Colored show business.[84]

Moore means neither "to categorize" not "to designate secret" when he writes classify or classified, rather to class up, but the irony of this quotation is how Moore invokes both the segregation and marginalization of African American entertainers of the era.

After the Chicago Follies and Bronze Beauties, Moore had an extended vaudeville career in other peoples' shows—he was in a play called *Lucky Sambo* in 1925, and performed in several editions of Lew Leslie's *Blackbirds* (1924, 1930, 1932, 1936, and 1939). He starred in several films, including the cross-dressing comedy *Boy, What a Girl!* in 1946. His most lasting contribution to the history of US entertainment was at the very end of his career, when he played the character Kingfish in the all-black television version of *Amos 'n' Andy* in the early 1950s.

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Clubs, Unions, and Communities

In response to—or, at the very least, concurrent with—the rapid consolidation of the theatre houses into chains was the formation of, or attempted formation of, several unions intended to give the black entertainer a collective voice in the industry. As mentioned, the necessity of a separate union for African American performers was predicated on their exclusion from white unions and social groups. Because of this, the Frogs club was formed in 1908 and the Colored Vaudeville Benevolent Association (CVBA) was created the next year.[85] The latter lasted into the 1920s and was, for the most part, a social club that also staged benefits for industry people.[86] The CVBA office in New York was considered a place of assembly for a transient profession. Any member could drop by when in town, swap gossip, pick up mail, and perhaps find a place in a company. It may have been unique when it opened, but not so by 1920. As Jackson explained in an article entitled "Vaudeville the Real Ladder of the Colored Artist": "Today a half dozen clubs, societies and unions are required to function in this direction for the greatly enlarged group of colored artists who now contribute to the merriment of the world through the medium of vaudeville."[87] In this, the CVBA was joined by the Colored Performers and Theatrical Club of Chicago, the Hiawatha Club of Los Angeles, and the Dining Room Club of New York. These organizations were similar to the Elks and Shriners Clubs to be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

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[84] Tim Moore, "Tim Moore's Letter," *Chicago Defender*, February 23, 1924.

[85] Wertheim, 179.

But these social clubs should be differentiated from unions, which give workers of a particular industry bargaining power in negotiating with managers. Around 1920 there were several attempts at creating unions, many of which were ineffective. There was the Colored Actors Protective Association, described as a "new organization" in 1921.[88] It did not garner much attention and must not have caught on among the profession, otherwise Jackson's *Billboard* column would certainly have given it some press. That same month, he reported on another organization, the Colored Actors' Legion,[89] which also quickly disappeared.

A curious offshoot of these endeavors was a segregated branch of the National Vaudeville Artists (NVA) that the Big Time owners attempted to establish in 1921. *Billboard* covered the stunted efforts in its pages. The first article was titled "Fears Union, Would Organize 'Jim Crow' N.V.A." and included the subheading: "E.F. Albee Seeks to Forestall

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[86] For example, they helped build homes for elderly performers.
[87] Jackson, "Vaudeville the Real Ladder of the Colored Artist."
[88] J.A. Jackson, "Here and There Among the Folks," *Billboard*, January 15, 1921.
[89] J.A. Jackson, "Colored Actors' Legion Organized," *Billboard*, February 5, 1921.

Colored Actors' Movement for Affiliation with Labor by Establishing Harlem N.V.A. Club." It begins, "Fearing the movement among colored actors for an affiliation with organized labor, E.F. Albee, vaudeville magnate and sponsor of the Nonunion National Vaudeville Artists' Club, is making an effort to organize a 'Jim Crow' branch of that organization."[90] According to reports, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson was tapped by Albee to drum up support for an African American branch of the NVA. Attendees of the exploratory meeting were informed that they "must not expect to avail themselves of the downtown clubhouse" where "the white vaudevillians hung their hats." Two weeks later, organizational efforts were described as "a fiasco": "It became known this week that those furthering the promotion of the Albee scheme arranged for the leasing of the Lafayette Theater, an up-town colored playhouse, for last Sunday night, where it was planned [*sic*] to stage a rally. This, however, failed to materialize for unexplained reasons." Most African American performers were offended by Albee's efforts.[91] What is interesting about the short-lived attempt at circumventing a union is how far-sighted Albee was. There were very few African American performers on the Keith-Albee Circuit in the early 1920s and, as has been noted, Big Time vaudeville had little successful union activity.

The longest-lasting union was the Colored Actors' Union (CAU), founded in the summer of 1921, around the time the TOBA absorbed the SCC.[92] According to Ted Vincent, the creation of the CAU was an elaborate way for Dudley to sell-out his former friends in the entertainment profession. "The Dudley-promoted entity," according to Vincent, "was a 'company union' of the type that bosses form when threatened by genuine trade-union organizing."[93] The CAU was certainly ineffectual, but Vincent's caricature of Dudley is simplistic. The CAU legitimately had performers' interests in mind, and so did Dudley. He was the first treasurer of the organization and acknowledged his contradictory position as a manager and also a part of a union. It also received a powerful endorsement: J.A. Jackson had enough faith in the intentions of the organization to lend it his unrivalled index of performers, agents, and venues which he had painstakingly gathered through extensive traveling.[94] The CAU's main problem was that it rarely did more than make suggestions in the press or directly to the TOBA. The governing theatre owners of the organization were free to take or leave any of its concerns. More often than not, these were not addressed, or excuses were made for continuing policies favorable to management. I do not wish to speculate on how the industry would have been different had a strong or vocal union existed. But I do wonder, given the business conditions and general racism of the time, if such a thing was even possible.

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[90] "Fears Union, Would Organize 'Jim Crow' N.V.A.," *Billboard*, September 3, 1921.
[91] "Albee's 'Jim Crow' N.V.A. Scheme Takes a Flop," *Billboard*, September 17, 1921.
[92] "T.O.B.A. Absorbs the Southern Consolidated," *Billboard*, June 4, 1921. The article refers to the "recently organized" CAU.
[93] Vincent, 62.

By 1923 the TOBA was the established circuit for black entertainment. It had the money, houses, routes, performers, and acumen to retain its supremacy; and the benignly racist paternalism of the white owners along with the complacency of black managers meant the performers were largely voiceless in business decisions. But they had few options. I find it fascinating that competing circuits never lasted, that the establishment of a single circuit was an inevitability, and can find no better reason for this than the dialectical pairing of circulation and consolidation. That is, as more of the country became traversable through the railroads, more companies could travel faster and farther—a greater dispersal of entertainment by performers like Tim Moore and his company. At the same time, and completely interlinked, such speed and circulation created conditions favorable to consolidation: a centralizing of contracts, routes, and management. Mel Watkins has it backwards: he sees the rumble of the train as a problem *within* the TOBA when in reality the rumble of the train created the problem *of* the TOBA.

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[94] See Anthony D. Hill, *Pages from the Harlem Renaissance: A Chronicle of Performance* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996) for a detailed discussion of Jackson's efforts.

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Elks' Minstrel Show Makes Hit

The third circuit to be contrasted with the Big Time and TOBA belonged to the Joe Bren Theatrical Company. It sold much more of a traditional minstrel show in its format and content. The Joe Bren Company helped amateur groups—mostly Elks Clubs and Shriners—stage local minstrel shows for the sake of fundraising. These organizations would hire the company out of its central office, which would send out representatives to the community for a week of intense rehearsals culminating in two or three public performances. These representatives would travel from town to town, staging and restaging the same minstrel show. This section of the chapter briefly maps the history of the company up to the 1920s and describes some of the acts and employees. The entire enterprise of amateur minstrel performance traded on the idea of nostalgia, and this replicated blackface show was uniquely situated for the needs of the communities which desired it. The concept of community can be discussed in the context of a Bren show akin to the ideal community envisioned by Arthur Kaser in his writings. The success of the Bren Company and, interrelatedly, the regressiveness of its African American caricatures, are due to this community attachment and involvement.

Very little has been written about this organization, or others like it if they existed. The tantalizing scraps of information about Bren focus on Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, who first met as employees and later went on to create the *Amos 'n' Andy* radio show.[95] But not much is known about the formation of the company or Joe Bren. Part of the reason for this omission is the difficulty in finding information; no records from the company exist and searching for evidence in newspapers is exceedingly challenging.[96] Even within these limitations there is enough compelling information to both give a portrait of the company and justify its place alongside the Combine and the TOBA.

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[95] See Andrews and Ahrgus; Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden, *All About Amos 'n' Andy and Their Creators Correll and Gosden* (New York: Rand McNally & Company, 1929); and Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (1991; repr., Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001).

Bren was always an entertainer. The earliest newspaper article about Bren I uncovered is a 1904 ad for Carl Hoffman Music Company of Kansas City, Missouri, where he worked in the sheet music department.[97] By the end of the decade he had started his own theatrical business. Kansas City would remain his and his wife's home until 1915,[98] when they relocated to Chicago to help expand the company. One of the descriptions of his work from 1909, when Bren and his wife traveled to Albuquerque to stage a minstrel show, includes the elements typical of a Bren show:

> The Albuquerque Elks have broken out again. They simply cannot be kept quiet for long, and this time it is a great big minstrel show, the biggest ever, that will be used as a medium for showing the talents and graces of the membership of 461. The Elks have put on minstrel shows before and know how. The last one they tried was a solid scream from start to curtain and it made half a dozen of the stars famous. So, being no novices, the members may be expected to do much better this time and when it is considered that they are going to have the best minstrel director in the United States to drill, conduct and manage the show, it will pay to look out for Thanksgiving night, when the big event is to occur, and be as near the front row as possible....
>
> Joe Bren, the famous musical director, of Kansas City, is to have full charge of the minstrel show. Bren is famous from coast to coast as a minstrel

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[96] Much of the information used in this section was compiled through very modern technology, the America's Historical Newspapers database at the New York Public Library. An enormous number of newspapers from 1690 to 1922 were scanned into the program and it includes a search-engine tool that can read text. Practically speaking, it would have been an impossible task to unearth many of the short articles from village and town newspapers across the South, Southwest, and Midwest that mentioned Joe Bren. The biggest limitation to the history constructed here is that not *all* newspapers are part of the database program. Certainly the company worked in towns other than the ones mentioned here. (Also, sometimes the search engine missed words or phrases when the newsprint was smudged or blurry.) America's Historical Newspapers, http://www.nypl.org/databases/index.cfm?act=3&id=854 (accessed September 5, 2008).

[97] *Kansas City Star*, January 24, 1904.

[98] I was frustrated in my efforts to find the wife's name, as she traveled with him for several years and participated in the minstrel shows. But newspaper articles refer to her only as "Mrs. Joe Bren."

> man and even more famous as a musical director. He made himself world famous with the song, "I Don't Know Where I'm Goin', but I'm on My Way," and has written many other song hits. Bren will have complete charge of the show here. He will arrange and import the costumes, outline the music and the olio, drill the company and direct. He is a great director and in securing him the Elks have insured the success of the enterprise.[99]

Several things of note about the workings of the company are described in this article. First, not only is Bren supporting a fraternal organization, but it is one that already had been staging an annual minstrel show and was looking to improve upon it. Second, and as was customary, Bren would come to town with everything prepared: the script, the songs, and the costumes. Several weeks later the paper rhapsodically called the show "the most successful theatrical performance ever attempted by amateur talent in this city: theatrically, musically, financially, socially, and every other way."[100]

The performance followed the standard minstrel show format, with ensemble numbers, solo spots to highlight individual talent, and plenty of comedic music. It was open enough to allow for the insertion of local names, locations, and humor. Also, a large chorus of townsfolk could participate:

> The scene of the First Part of the production is supposed to take place in Palm Beach, Florida, at the world renowned and beautiful summer villa of Dr. George Sniffles McLandress. Having ascertained that many of his Albuquerque friends are wintering in Palm Beach the Doc decides to have a stag party and the opening curtain shows the genial host and his retinue preparing for the arrival of the guests.[101]

Racist caricature was prevalent. The show included a skit called "The Minstrel Man, the Porter, and the Maid" featuring Bren and his wife; a solo turn with Bren at a piano imitating "a onearmed Chinaman"; and a blackface routine called "The Blackville Police Court." The finale was a parody of the Salome dance starring a local man. This cross-dressed Dance of the Seven Veils is another staple of both professional and amateur theatricals: the send-up of highbrow art forms, in this case the "*Salome* craze" of the early twentieth century.[102] Bren later burlesqued the prison scene from *Il Trovatore*.[103]

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[99] "Albuquerque Elks Burst Out in Big Minstrel Show," *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, November 7, 1909. The song "I Don't Know Where I'm Goin', but I'm on My Way" was a legitimate hit at the time, and was performed in professional vaudeville. African American coon-shouter Rosa Scott performed it as did H.S. Smith with Allen's Minstrels Tent Show. See Abbott and Seroff, 22, 229.

[100] "Elks' Minstrels Have Two More Big Houses," *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, November 26, 1909.

[101] "Grand Minstrel Show Parade of Elks to be Held This Noon," *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, November 24, 1909.

Bren and his company staged minstrel shows almost exclusively, but he also wrote two "light operas" in these early years: *The Inside Inn* in 1910 and *The Masqueraders* in 1911. The latter is notable for the subplot of a Russian anarchist attempting to blow up the white romantic lead and killing the Jewish store clerk instead.[104] At most, they featured a blackface servant or two. Both were reused in later years as part of larger programs.

The company expanded throughout the second decade of the twentieth century, staging minstrel shows in a growing number of towns throughout the US. Bren began employing others as representatives in addition to traveling himself, certainly after 1915 when he moved his headquarters to Chicago. Along with the script, songs, and costumes, the company supplied "special scenery and elaborate electrical effects" beyond what could be created or bought by amateurs.[105] As the years progressed, the shows remained as annual benefit performances for fraternal organizations.

Only a partial picture can emerge of the towns that requested assistance from the Bren company, but the names of a few between the years 1909 and 1922 include: Montgomery, Pine

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[102] David Krasner writes of a Salome dance by Aida Overton Walker in the 1908 production *Bandana Land*—and Bert Williams's parody of it in the same show with the decapitated head replaced by a watermelon. See Krasner, 64–70. In the same year, the white blackface team Bedini and Arthur had their own parody, in the "gyrating figure of 'Salami,'" and they were joined by a young Eddie Cantor who performed his own blackface Salome. See Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 110. White blackface performer John Hyner sang "De Sloamy Dance" on the Keith-Albee circuit. See Erdman, 111.

[103] "Elks' Minstrel Show Makes Hit; Barthes Features," *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, September 25, 1914.

[104] "Highly Hilarious Joy Reigns for Two Nights," *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, April 16, 1911.

[105] "Elks' Minstrel," *Hobart Republican* (Hobart, OK), January 13, 1914.

Bluff, and Poplar Bluff, Arkansas; Pueblo, Colorado; Columbus, Georgia; Boise, Idaho; Belleville, Illinois; Aberdeen, Maryland; Duluth, Minnesota; Kansas City, Missouri; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Charlotte, North Carolina; Hobart, Oklahoma; Columbia, South Carolina; and Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas.[106] Most are small towns to mid-sized cities. In contrast to the list of place names culled from the 1904 Denison catalogue and discussed in the context of mail-order minstrelsy, these locations were more populated—both in 1900 and after the urban population explosion of the 1920s. The smallest town, Aberdeen, Maryland, had a population of about six hundred in 1900 and a thousand in 1920. Kansas City, Missouri is the largest with a population of one hundred fifty thousand in 1900 that more than doubled two decades later.[107] Kansas City, Bren's hometown until 1915, should not be taken as a typical location that would hire him. Most towns are around the fifty thousand mark, like that of Middletown. These locations were able to sustain—and needed—the types of fraternal organizations that hired the Bren Company.

The organizations that sponsored the Bren company over the years were Elks Lodges and Shriners Clubs, Knights of Columbus and the American Legion. Many were white-collar businessmen's clubs that offered members dinners, activities, and chances for networking among the middle class. And it was only organizations of this kind that hired Joe Bren—not high schools, colleges, or church organizations which bought amateur minstrel scripts. In *Middletown*, the Lynds devote over twenty pages specifically to club organizations, because of their prominence and because there was such a huge shift toward them in the 1920s. Such clubs were woven into the fabric of Middletown and were symptomatic of, are perhaps the most visible and pervasive symbol of, the changing conditions of Middletown life. "This trend toward greater organization appearing in so many leisure pursuits," they write, "culminates in the proliferating system of clubs which touches the life of the city in all its major activities."[108] The Joe Bren Theatrical Company flourished as these same organizations expanded, benefiting from the same changing social conditions and addressing the same social needs.

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[106] Newspapers for larger cities such as Chicago, New York, etc. are included in the America's Historical Newspapers database search engine. No mention of Joe Bren's company is found in them. There are two possibilities as to why the Bren Company is not mentioned: either it did not work in these cities or the performances were too amateur to warrant mention in the press.

[107] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing, 1900*, http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs /decennial/1900.htm (accessed June 29, 2009); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing, 1920*, http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/ decennial/ 1920.htm (accessed June 29, 2009).

With the minstrel shows, there was always a tryout that the company conducted to determine which roles the local talent was best suited for. Members and non-members of the sponsoring organization were included, and women always played prominent characters. Sometimes the social hierarchy of the community was reflected or inverted in the casting of the show; a version staged in Belleville, Illinois in 1916 included the local prosecuting attorney as interlocutor.[109] In the later years of the company, groups of attractive, young local girls were prominently featured—also reflecting the success of the Ziegfeld shows, along with the Shubert brothers and others.[110]

The company was never hired to assist organizations to mount a production as if they had no knowledge of how to do it, but instead helped improve the already existing annual minstrel show. And this ties the work of Joe Bren to some of the other blackface images, examples, and spectacles detailed throughout the dissertation. The Joe Bren minstrel shows were both mass-produced and handmade. They were connected to a longstanding theatrical tradition, both of minstrelsy and of the local minstrel show; on the other hand, they were constantly praised for being up-to-date, zippy, and peppy. Wrote the *Hobart Republican* in 1914, "The old time idea of

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[108] Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929), 285.

[109] "Prosecuting Attorney in Minstrelsy," *Belleville News-Democrat* (Belleville, IL), January 24, 1916.

[110] Glenn, 157.

Minstrels, with its all black-face and only men in the company will be replaced [thanks to the Joe Bren Company] by the new and strictly modern phase of minstrelsy which in many respects is similar to musical comedy. Only the eight end men appear in black face, thus making more prominent their work."[111]

Genre trouble between minstrelsy and musical comedy was common in articles describing these shows, a telling detail for productions hoping to draw strength from tradition while also remaining current. Minstrelsy was old, and the conventions used in these shows were blackface makeup, a topical and parodic humor, and some endman/interlocutor relationship. Musical comedy, in this situation, meant women performers, "girl" choruses, and narrative-driven vignettes. Other new elements the Bren Company brought were the scenery, costumes, and lighting effects; numerous articles mention with a touch of pride that these were manufactured in and shipped from Chicago and New York City.

But the use of blackface by the Joe Bren Company is much closer to the nineteenth-century minstrel show than to the professional vaudeville stage or contemporary musical comedy. In these club organizations—steeped in invented traditions giving continuity to community identity—there was a nostalgia about minstrelsy. And this nostalgia was different from, but related to, the mass-marketed nostalgia theorized by Lauren Berlant, in which a sense of national identity was formed through the elisions of past suffering.[112] What can be seen in these shows is a particularizing of this nostalgia, the parceling out of it on a local level. And in the Joe Bren Theatrical Company, with its packaged minstrelsy, there was an interesting combination of the home-grown and the corporate akin to an Aunt Jemima advertisement or Arthur Kaser script.

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[111] "Elks' Minstrel," *Hobart Republican* (Hobart, OK), January 15, 1914.

[112] Lauren Berlant, "Pax Americana: The Case of *Show Boat*," in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 69–106.

The necessity of blackface was an always implied, rarely mentioned part of the show. Its importance is demonstrated by its absence, when the promised blackface mask is not presented. A short piece in the *Albuquerque Morning Journal* from September 1914 combines this mixture of nostalgia, community, and promise. The article, titled "Band Wears White Collars; 'Cullud' Idea is Dropped," begins:

> Owing to the fact that the band men appeared wearing white collars the Elks minstrel committee was compelled to disappoint the public which had been promised a parade yesterday afternoon led by a "cullud" band. The musicians reported just before the time set for the starting of the parade and did not have time enough to remove their collars to undergo the transformation, so spectators were treated to the novel spectacle of a white band leading a minstrel parade.

Here is the natural place for blackface within this community: an expected addendum, or even precursor, to minstrel-style entertainment. Blackface is more than just theatrical makeup, it is considered a "transformation" across a racial barrier. The "novel spectacle" that afternoon became even stranger as they began marching. A mixture of camaraderie and violence marked the Elks' event, blurring the line between organizational involvement and forced conformity, parade and mob:

> About sixty Elks were in the procession. At the start there were only thirty, but others were seized by those in the ranks as they went along and when they finished at the club their number had doubled. One Elk was dragged from an automobile and forced to march. Another was shoved into line when he was caught washing his store windows.[113]

It almost defies comprehension—this sight of blackface paraders pulling a white man from his car and forcing him in line. But the violence of the scene, the gleeful violence with overtones of a lynch party, was only possible thanks to the transformative power of minstrelsy.

Newspaper articles rarely cite specific jokes from a Joe Bren show. When they do, it is to quote those quips made at the expense of local politicians and civic leaders, the type of "insert local place name" gag common to Kaser's work as well. The local communities delighted in some stamp of individuality—even within the parameters of the reproducible amateur minstrel show. But blackface humor, of the old style, was important to the production. Though the scripts themselves no longer exist, Joe Bren published a joke book, *Smile-Awhile*, in 1918. Its humor can easily be considered as typical of his other work. A representative joke involving dialect is the following:

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[113] "Band Wears White Collars; 'Cullud' Idea Dropped," *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, September 19, 1914.

> FROM NOW ON
>
> A negro named Rastus Johnson had stolen some money, confessed his crime and was sentenced to the penitentiary; as he entered the gates of the prison, he saw his friend, Mose Jackson coming out. The guard allowed him to say a word to Mose.
>
> Rastus (sorrowful): Whar you goin', Mose?
> Mose (smiling): Been in fo' five yeahs; got discharged and now I'm on my way. Whar you goin'?
> Rastus: You know dog gone well whar I'se goin'.
> Mose: How many days did de judge give you, Ras?
> Rastus: He didn't give me no days.
> Mose: Den how many months did he give you?
> Rastus: He didn't give me no months.
> Mose: Den how many yeahs did he give you?
> Rastus: He didn't give me no yeahs.
> Mose: Well den what did he give you, Rastus ?
> Rastus: He just said to me—YOU IS IN FROM NOW ON.[114]

"From Now On" may have been taken from a Joe Bren skit, because it is written as a dialogue. And the content of the joke, from the stereotyped names to the stolen money, hearkens back to the minstrel shows of old.

The company continued to expand its operations into the 1920s. In 1922 the *Kansas City Star* noted that Joe Bren's business had "grown in the last fifteen years so that his company is now arranging and preparing more than two hundred shows."[115] A slightly more conservative estimate comes from historian Melvin Ely. He writes, "The Bren organization's show season ran from September until June. Bren usually kept two crews in the field, each consisting of three or four directors or coaches. A given crew rehearsed and staged shows in three, four, even five towns a month, typically presenting two or three performances on successive evenings in each place."[116] The ten-month season for the Bren employees is longer than the hoped-for forty weeks of the TOBA or Big Time vaudeville. Two crews visiting four towns a month equals eighty cities a year.

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[114] Joe Bren, *Smile-Awhile* (Chicago: 1918), 52–53.
[115] "Joe Bren Recalls Start Here," *Kansas City Star*, May 25, 1922.

As noted, the lasting notoriety of the Joe Bren Company is that Gosden and Correll began working there together and later went on to create the *Amos 'n' Andy Show*—inarguably the most famous blackface characters of the twentieth century. According to an early official history of the radio program, both Gosden and Correll began in local amateur shows before being recruited by the Bren business:

> Amateur theatricals called [Correll]. He sang in the quartet. He sang in the minstrel circle.... At one time a professional producer staged a show in town with local talent, and of course, Correll was in it. He did his part so well, and showed so great an understanding of the fundamentals of showmanship, that the producer offered him the job of taking one branch of the show and rehearsing it.... Two years later he was rehearsing a show in Durham, North Carolina, when he met a young fellow by the name of Freeman Gosden.[117]

They worked with Joe Bren in the early 1920s, touring between 1920 and 1923 and then settling down at the company's Chicago offices. Ely describes their routes on the Bren circuit: "[A]lthough small cities and towns, especially in Bren's Midwestern home region, provided the bulk of the company's clientele, Correll and his colleagues also coached performances in larger cities, not all of them in the Old Confederacy."[118] In each town across the county they presented the same minstrel program and in their wakes they left the same satisfied customers.

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[116] Ely, 36.
[117] Correll and Gosden, 16–17.
[118] Ely, 46.

The template of the business in the 1920s—the shows, the rehearsal process, the sponsoring organizations—remained similar to what Bren was doing a decade previous. Indeed, some of the same acts were recycled. For example, the "Jollies of 1921" revived a one-act version of "The Inside Inn" that Bren wrote in 1910. Much of the plot and comedic business of "Inside Inn" remained, though several changes reflected the changing times. The comedic character Schnitzelburg Reisenheimer was dropped, probably due to anti-German backlash after World War I, and "Garlick the Waiter" was replaced by "Jazz the Porter."[119] But the "Jollies of 1921" still included a trip to Minstrelland, men in blackface and drag, and novelty songs. Judging by the titles, the songs are of the old minstrel variety. The program included "Down in Sunny Tennessee," an elegy to old Southern ways; "Oh, Brotheren," a faux-gospel number; "Mammy's Arms," a Jolson-style croon to motherhood; and "Sweet Mama," presumably about a girl. Singing of both a Mammy and a Mama represents the two types of black women conceivable to a white audience. The persistent power of the Mammy stereotype was covered in chapter two's discussion of Aunt Jemima, and a Sweet Mama was Mammy's inverse: young, light-skinned, sexually available and sexually promiscuous.

The new novelty act in the show was the finale called "The King of Gadzook," about a monarch who never laughs. "As the remedy for the habitual sadness of His Majesty of the desert island," one review states, "[a] blackface aviator [from the US] suggested that the king accompany him to America and witness the performance of the [local] minstrels."[120] This skit, sometimes generically titled "Oriental Fantasy," allowed for a new type of exoticism to be included in the minstrel show format. The scenario, an island king and his queen learn enjoyment from a group of US minstrel performers, mixes together old and new racisms. Within the performance, the king wears some sort of racial masking and his wife is a cross-dressed man. Their "real" racial identity is contrasted with a group that, within the logic of the skit, is wearing blackface. (And I have no idea if the aviator is supposed to be a minstrel performer or an African American, the reviewer seems not to care.) The enjoyment for the audience, laughing along with the king while also laughing at the king, is predicated on piercing these many levels of artifice. But after the curtain fell, there was no island or islanders, no real minstrel performers or real black people—the community was celebrating itself.

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[119] "Big Crowd Enjoys 'Inside Inn' at Elks," *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, November 9, 1911; "Legion Minstrels Score Triumph First Appearance," *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, MD), February 21, 1921.

[120] "Large Crowd Witnesses 'Dokie' Minstrel Show," *Charlotte Observer*, September 2, 1922.

Analyzing the building and policing of community boundaries is possible with Joe Bren, differently than with the other circuits described in this chapter. Audiences and audience involvement are more present. Unlike the transient professional entertainers' attempt to create clubs and camaraderie, Bren's was a business with a packaged product entering an existing, grounded community with an established (though changing) identity. The company accentuated the existing rituals and established mores. The racism is casual, comfortable, and expected.

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Blackface Travels to Charlotte

With the hundreds of acts and dozens of theatres on the Big Time and TOBA, and two crews of Joe Bren employees traveling the country, it was likely that they would cross paths. During the first week of September 1922, performers on the three different circuits of entertainment intersected at Charlotte, North Carolina.[121] The city was large enough to serve as a regional railroad hub and support theatres catering to white and black publics. (According to the *Negro Year Book*, Charlotte had a black population of nearly fifteen thousand in 1921, second in the state only to Winston-Salem.[122]) The contrast of these three shows highlights two main themes of this chapter: the pervasiveness of blackface across the US and the confounded ideas about race and racial difference by the white public.

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[121] "Theatres: Vaudeville Bills Soon at Academy," *Charlotte News and Evening Chronicle*, August 30, 1922.

The Keith-Albee circuit had recently come to Charlotte, and the Academy Theatre, into which its acts were booked, had just converted to strict vaudeville. According to a preview article, "more vaudeville houses are opening in the South and this circumstance brings a much higher type of performers [*sic*] to the South each season." Inaugurating the house on its first bill was blackface performer Eddie Ross. The article's tortured prose about him is worth quoting: "The far famed blackface comedian, Eddie Ross, known throughout the United States as the comedian and an artist of world wide fame with the banjo, will be one of the greatest artists in the Country, will be on the first half of the week."[123] Blackface banjoists were in vogue at the time and Ross was a top performer.[124] "The very concept of him," writes Nick Tosches, "a white man in blackface, a hillbilly singer and a jazz singer both... is at once unique, mythic, and a perfect representation of the schizophrenic heart of what this country, with a straight face, calls its culture."[125] A minstrel banjoist as headliner evidences the continued importance of blackface on the professional stage, and Ross's hillbilly/jazz pairing demonstrates professional vaudeville's balancing act of white and black, old and new.

At the same time, representatives of the Joe Bren Theatrical Company were helping the Dramatic Order Knights of Khorasson (D.O.K.K. or "Dokies") stage a "home-talent musical comedy" for the second year in a row.[126] "The show will be a combination of minstrel and musical comedy," it was reported, with "several attractive song and dance numbers."[127] The highlight of the show stressed both local and erotic elements: the "Nature Dance" presented by the "girl dancers" of Charlotte. This chorus also performed with local amateur Willard Dixon, who sang "Oo La La" in the persona of "Clarence Wildwave, the sissy floorwalker." The evening concluded with the "King of Gadzook" routine. Between eight hundred and a thousand people witnessed the first of two performances.[128]

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[122] Monroe N. Work, ed., *Negro Year Book: An Annual Encyclopedia of the Negro 1921–1922* (Tuskegee, AL: Negro Year Book Publishing Company, 1922), 309.
[123] "Theatres: Vaudeville Bills Soon at Academy."
[124] Nick Tosches, *Where Dead Voices Gather* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 140, 245. Ross recorded for Victor Records as early as 1923 and performed as a blackface banjoist for the rest of the decade.
[125] Ibid., 3.
[126] "Suez Temple to Present Comedy Soon," *Charlotte Observer*, August 11, 1922.

The town supported a TOBA-affiliated house open to black audiences. A local company was performing in the theatre, but the two white papers of Charlotte, which normally did not cover shows there, made an exception that week:

> Rex Theatre to Play One Show for White People
>
> According to Sam Craver, owner and manager of the colored theater, the Rex, located at Second and Brevard street, so many white people have expressed themselves as wanting to see a real show by colored people that the real opportunity is almost here to see just what you want—a real show put on by colored people only, headed by one of the foremost players of their race, Tom Moore, who for the past 15 years has been playing in and around Charlotte with a troupe of colored players, known far and wide among the colored people as performers that will easily rate as stars.
>
> The special performance is being arranged at a great expense and for the express purpose of affording the general public, which their desires demand, and to those who want to see, and will really enjoy a rich, snappy show by colored people the opportunity is here, for on next Thursday night at 12 o'clock a special performance will be given for white people only.
>
> To those who appreciate a rich cross between a minstrel and a musical comedy, guaranteed clean and in every way respectable, as amusement, can now secure seats for this special performance.
>
> The management states that nothing but the pick of all the jokes and scenes from Tom Moore's 15 years playing comedies will be presented, with a personal statement that the performances will be above reproach in every respect.[129]

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[127] "Nature Dance of Young Ladies for the 'Jollies,'" *Charlotte Observer*, August 20, 1922.

[128] "Large Crowd Witnesses 'Dokie' Minstrel Show," *Charlotte Observer*, September 2, 1922.

[129] "Rex Theatre to Play One Show for White People," *Charlotte Observer*, August 30, 1922. Both the *Charlotte Observer* and *Charlotte News and Evening Chronicle* ran nearly identical articles about several of the performances that week, including this one. They had been written by a local press agent and reprinted.

Tom Moore bears no relation to Tim Moore, nor is there direct evidence of the use of blackface in the performance (though there very well may have been). Regardless, several elements of this short overview are interesting, in the context of this chapter and dissertation. The added performance is an example of one of the infamous "Midnight Shows" against which actors protested vociferously at the time. These were added to a run without additional pay and, assurances of cleanliness aside, were especially raunchy to meet the expectations of a rowdy crowd. Also, as with the Joe Bren performance, the show is described as a "cross" of minstrelsy and musical comedy. Finally, out of the four theatres in Charlotte named in the article, only the address of the Rex is included—whites needed extra help in locating it.

Most fascinating is the insistence on the real. Eddie Ross is described as a blackface banjoist and the Dokies are presenting a minstrel show; the TOBA performance is "a real show by colored people only." In this one week, in this one town, due to the coincidental intersection of these three circuits, is found the confused yet overdetermined conditions of racial demarcation of the era. Everything seems so simple and matter-of-fact: the blackface and the real are divided and the former is not really attempting to be the latter. Whites desire authenticity but require an audience space devoid of blacks in order to enjoy it. The categories of entertainment are fixed, but mutable. The boundaries of the races are demarked, but flawed.

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The TOBA Rolls On

The early 1920s was the last moment of dominance by vaudeville circuits in the US entertainment world, though the owners and entertainers refused to accept their obsolescence. The industry was overwhelmed by the movies, which were not only cheaper to produce and easier to disseminate but also stole the exact theatres and routes of distribution that the chains had painstakingly hammered together. There is no specific end date to the TOBA, or to the Keith-Albee Circuit. (And the fate of the Joe Bren Theatrical Company is anybody's guess.) Big Time vaudeville quietly eroded over the decade of the 1920s, as costs increased and interest waned. By 1928 "Keith" was reduced to the middle initial of RKO Pictures.[130] And the Great Depression wiped everybody out—in the aftermath of the 1929 market collapse, Dudley sold his theatres and devoted himself to raising horses.[131] This was to have a profound effect on how shows were produced and marketed. "The near extinction of the road," writes David Savran, "meant that by the 1920s legitimate theater in the United States had come to mean theater in New York City."[132] The movement East and the movement toward legitimacy will be taken up in the final chapter, which focuses on black musical theatre.

Yet the TOBA briefly returned, in the late 1990s, in a stunning display of well-meaning historical erasure. In 1999 the vaudeville review show *Rollin' on the T.O.B.A.* opened in an off-Broadway theatre. (The show was denied Tony Award consideration for benignly racist reasons, a bitter pill to swallow given the history of the circuit itself.[133]) The *New York Times* preview article describes the plot of the show: "The three characters in 'Rollin'... take a tour of the circuit in 1931. Drawing on music ranging from Duke Ellington to Fats Waller, the words of Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, and original hits by the comedy team [Flournoy] Miller and [Aubrey] Lyles, [Bert] Williams and others, the musical shows how performers found dignity under harsh circumstances like entering the stage through the orchestra pit, doing seven shows a day and having their material and paychecks stolen."[134] Setting the show in 1931 is curious, as the circuit then was a far cry from its days of importance. I imagine that Ronald Stevens and Rudy Roberson, the show's performer/writers, chose the date so they could include late 1920s and early 1930s jazz music like that of Waller and Ellington. Also, Williams died in 1922 and never performed on the TOBA, but his importance required his inclusion. This description of the TOBA, like those histories by Watkins and others, focuses on its racist aspects. But, like those histories, this search for dignity led the performer/writers to overlook the social complexities negotiated by black performers on the time: "'One thing that is not authentic is that we didn't do it in blackface,' Stevens said. 'That was demeaning. They had to do that and we didn't have to.'" And "Roberson said he was never concerned that the characters could be construed as demeaning. He said the cast discussed the dialogue to insure that the language was not stereotypically insulting: 'Chicken Bone Express,' a train transporting black entertainers, for example, was dropped."[135] By rewriting history, the performer/writers, in an effort to please and not discomfort their audience, perfumed history with the sweet aroma of "Nostalgia—a whiff of the past from which social struggles have been conveniently erased."[136]

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[130] Wertheim, 269.

[131] Kevin Byrne, "Sherman Houston Dudley," in *African American National Biography*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3:84–85.

[132] David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 113.

[133] For a description of the controversy, see David Savran, "Middlebrow Anxiety," in *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 54.

Nostalgia here is doing what nostalgia always does. Ironically, the minstrel nostalgia of the 1920s performances on the TOBA was meant to erase the social struggles of this search for dignity that became the subject of this 1990s nostalgic reinvention.

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[134] Felicia R. Lee, "An Encore for Black Vaudeville: A New Revue Finds Dignity in a Derided Art Form," *New York Times*, February 10, 1999.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Savran, "The Haunted Stages of Modernity," in *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, 96.

Chapter Five

"Back Up No'th with Me, Mammy": Black Musicals on Broadway

The destination was New York, had always been New York. For decades, black performers and productions strove to get a showing there, as a way of legitimizing their efforts and elevating their entertainments. New York attention was national attention, a phenomenon that had as much to do with national methods of distribution as it did with New York's arbiters of taste. The luck, ability, and pecuniary support to play Broadway meant increased cultural capital for these productions, and this situation also allowed the shows to tap into the centers of circulation and distribution necessary to travel the nation: ad agencies, theatre circuits, sheet music companies, and recording studios. A combination of circulatory power and cultural privilege was vital to how these shows reached the country. At the beginning of the 1920s, a number of intertwined factors made a Broadway hit out of the black musical *Shuffle Along*.[1] With book by Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles and music and lyrics by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, the show was a Broadway revelation whose impact opened the way for a number of other black musicals. And blackface and minstrelsy were integral to the intended reception of these productions.

Analogous to the way New York was the goal for black entertainers, this chapter is the dissertation's culmination. It extends the analysis of the ways cultural products, aided by new distributive methods, reinforced a racial binary in the United States. These musicals cannily utilized the caricatures and performative styles discussed previously; but, because these cultural products were circulating at the same time, all were drawing from the same well of images and ideas. Though these musicals enjoyed a privileged position in the landscape of US culture and

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[1] No black musicals were shown on Broadway during the 1910s after the lackluster 1911 Bert Williams vehicle *Mr. Lode of Koal*.

US race relations, this dissertation does not privilege their racial messages over those of Aunt Jemima, Arthur Kaser, or the vaudeville circuits. They all supported and reflected each other.

The period covered here begins with the surprising success of *Shuffle Along* and ends with the equally surprising failure of Sissle and Blake's *Chocolate Dandies* in 1924. In three short years the innovative and trend-setting styles had become passé. Other musical comedies produced on Broadway within this timeframe are *Liza* and *How Come*, which were joined on Broadway by a large number of black revue shows: *Put and Take*, *Plantation Revue*, *Dixie to Broadway*, *Strut Miss Lizzie*, and *Runnin' Wild*.[2] This list deceives if it suggests a diversity of personnel or material, as these plays were staffed by a remarkably small number of writers, musicians, and entertainers. The limitations of this grouping are discussed below, but what must also be acknowledged is that this situation allowed for the conditions whereby blacks had much greater control over their artistic productions and the methods of their distribution. For example, the Black Swan recording label, founded by African Americans C. Carroll Clark and Harry H. Pace, distributed records between 1921 and 1923; and J.A. Jackson's column "in the Interest of the Colored Actor, Actress, and Musician of America" ran in *Billboard* magazine from 1920 to 1925.[3] Not coincidentally, these years coincide with the productions examined here. These shows also can be grouped together, not through any essentializing of the performers' blackness, but rather because they were so indebted to *Shuffle Along*. Critics, audiences, and producers of later shows expected something similar to but slightly different from *Shuffle*. The musicals were molded by their creators to fit this expectation, leading to a certain agglomeration of themes and situations. They toyed with conventions of the musical form but also with those of prevailing racial stereotypes.

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[2] This chapter refrains from addressing black musicals which played in New York City but not on Broadway, such as *Oh Joy*, a show that played in a tent erected on an athletic field at 57th Street and Eighth Avenue. "4th Colored Show," *Variety*, July 28, 1922.

[3] Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890–1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 168–72; Anthony D. Hill, *Pages from the Harlem Renaissance: A Chronicle of Performance* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996).

This chapter begins by defining New York as the national cultural epicenter which embraced these musicals. This is followed by an examination of several key thematic tensions that typify the productions. The social categories paired together in the musicals have been discussed throughout this project: regions of North and South, communities of urban cities and rural towns, gender distinctions of male and female, and racial differences of black and white. These tensions (and their eventual resolution) were exhibited through the plots, songs, and performers' bodies in the live productions. The chapter concludes by tracing what happened to the musicals after they were packaged as inexpensive cultural products. These shows trafficked in minstrel nostalgia and blackface tradition for the sake of emotionally manipulating their audiences, as much as any advertisement or vaudeville skit. Though this chapter focuses specifically on cultural products created and performed by African Americans, they were not all equally uplifting not necessarily less racist than the products already analyzed. But certain shows were able to successfully undercut established hierarchies.

A central tension, here as throughout the dissertation, was between definitions of the urban and the rural. Fredric Jameson's conception of modernism, used in the context of Arthur Kaser's work, deserves repeating. Jameson illustrates Ernst Bloch's phrase of the "simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous" through the image of the peasant field with an automobile factory on the horizon.[4] This pairing of pre-modern and industrial loci of production was a literal fixture of the US landscape that also serves as Jameson's metaphor for conjoining different eras: place is time. The presence of field and factory was a central tension of Kaser's Middletown, and it is also at the core of Jimtown, the fictional community created in *Shuffle Along*. Kaser named and assuaged these social pressures through sophisticated calibrations of blackface nostalgia; the black musicals of the 1920s wove them into the fabric of their invented locations. As in Kaser's community and Jameson's imagery, these dialectical pairings are kept separate: positioned next to each other, not blended together. As such, the urban and rural divide is personified, racialized, and gendered in clear yet complicated ways. For example, rural-ness, Southern-ness, and blackness were often conjoined. Dialectically paired social, regional, and economic categories structure these works, making them ideal entertainments for their era.

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[4] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 304.

Recently several scholars have looked at the pairing of regressive and progressive elements in *Shuffle Along*, the most historicized black musical of the time. They recognize its use of and indebtedness to minstrelsy, and further acknowledge the combination of old minstrel stereotypes and contemporary musical stylings as the main reason for the show's success. In these nuanced accounts placing *Shuffle* inside a living social context, there is a deep awareness of US race relations, the performance of race, and how the show's creators capitalized on both. Ann Douglas and David Krasner have written about race in *Shuffle Along* and the musical's place within the US cultural landscape. In her investigation of the "mongrelization" of US culture during the 1920s, Douglas calls *Shuffle Along* "an audacious and self-conscious mining of the Negro musical's black-and-white roots.... Anything, but anything, from the latest and hottest Negro dances to the oldest of white blackface routines, was grist to the *Shuffle Along* mill."[5] That is, the bi-racial underpinnings of black popular entertainments are recognized and tweaked in a way that previous black musicals, such as those of Bert Williams and George Walker, did not. Krasner concludes his book on African American drama in the Harlem Renaissance with a chapter on *Shuffle Along* and nostalgia. He writes that the show "complicated minstrelsy," and further states that its "mixture of blackface denigration and progressive change, mockery and pride, parody and resistance created a paradox of competing urges."[6] These contradictions do not render the show's message null, but rather allow audiences to read into the play widely different messages along the lines of their existing racial ideologies. *Shuffle* was able to appeal to everyone by not fully committing to anything. Evidence of these competing messages can be seen in the reviews of the original production. As David Savran notes in his discussion of *Shuffle Along*'s "plantation nostalgia number" called "Bandana Land":

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[5] Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1995), 378.

> The song, like so much of *Shuffle Along*... authorizes a kind of double reading. The piece can be interpreted as it was on opening night by Alan Dale as a simple, "jolly" "'darky' musical comedy" performed by actors who "reveled in their work." Or it can be seen, as it doubtlessly was by many African Americans in the audience, as an ironic reinvention of a racist formula that freely appropriates and satirizes the conventions of both minstrelsy and musical comedy.[7]

What distinguishes Savran's analysis is the centrality of irony and satire as tools a minority group can use for subverting racist norms. Irony is not a form of humor or entertainment exhibited in any of the previous chapters, and it was a key element of these musicals at their most sophisticated. For Douglas, Krasner, and Savran, the emphasis is on the live Broadway performance of *Shuffle Along*. These balanced paradoxes and double readings are skewed toward stereotype when the show is atomized for technological reproducibility.

The tensions within the productions should be viewed alongside those created by the productions themselves in a crowded and stratified cultural landscape: how they tried to position themselves and were being categorized as new and respectably middle class/middlebrow while still incorporating tropes and characteristics of earlier, less reputable, genres. As has been shown, minstrelsy in the 1920s remained an entertainment steeped in tradition and nostalgia that was a comfortable method for acting out racial divisions. But minstrelsy was out of step and out of date; the new, modern entertainment form for discussing race was jazz music, which in the 1920s elicited the same fascination, fear, and attraction that minstrelsy did in the 1840s. As part of their self-forming as an urban, Northern entertainment performance, these black musicals embraced jazz as a musical genre.

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[6] David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 264.

[7] David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 75.

Crucially they did so without ignoring minstrelsy—not by a wide margin. At this moment of cultural transition, minstrel elements demonstrated, even proved, their own obsolescence to the audience. Minstrelsy was used in order to be dismissed. Carl Van Vechten, the most famous white man of the Harlem Renaissance and the person most instrumental in explaining black culture to whites, wrote an article for *Vanity Fair* in 1925 on the black musical titled "Prescription for the Negro Theatre." After acknowledging the enthusiasm that initially greeted such productions, Van Vechten writes,

> Latterly, the lack of public interest in these African frolics has become so pronounced that it has come to be believed along the upper stretches of Seventh Avenue and in the dusky section of Tin Pan Alley that any Negro musical show is now foredoomed to certain failure and faces are long and features are glum as a result.[8]

Though Van Vechten retains a racist belief in the ability of black primitivism to revive the form, he recognizes the tension in the productions between their Jazz Age and minstrel elements. Blackface is rejected on aesthetic, as opposed to political or social, grounds. This chapter uses the Van Vechten essay as a way of returning the discussion back to the idea of the performed obsolescence of minstrelsy.

This whole dissertation focuses on cultural activities of the early 1920s, yet it is only here (in New York, in this chapter) that certain common phrases used to encapsulate the time are examined, all of which pair a word metonymically evoking blackness with one evoking newness: Jazz Age, Harlem Renaissance, and New Negro. As with any sophisticated definition of an era, a grouping of unrelated or tangentially related social factors contributed to the overall meaning. Some of the factors which contributed to its arrival include the Great Migration, the end of World War I, the onset of Prohibition, and the widespread availability of entertainment technologies.

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[8] Carl Van Vechten, "Prescription for the Negro Theatre" in *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance, 1920–1940*, eds. James Hatch and Leo Hamalian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 427.

The dominance of New York City as a cultural hub, dictating style to the nation, is so well established as to be taken for commonplace; still, a few of the causes for this importance and the ways the city conveyed ideas of taste back to the wanting nation deserve examination. Mapping New York, both geographically and mentally, illustrates many of modernism's anxieties that plagued the city and the country. New York was home to a large number of talented artistic individuals and not coincidentally it was also the home of different cultural industries from sheet music to vaudeville circuits to publishing houses. But the city also benefited from a particular dialectic that echoes throughout this study, between centralization and distribution. The US Census "declared America for the first time in its history an urban nation, and New York was the largest city in that urban nation."[9] Concurrently the homogenization of US culture was rapidly increasing, with New York creating and administering the litmus test for aesthetic quality. "When New York found its fun in the pious and pompous follies of New England, and did so via syndicated columns, movies, radio programs, and recorded songs that reached national and global audiences," Douglas observes, "the modern era began."[10] These city dwellers were in the passionate throes of modernism and the nation was looking to them for cultural advice—even when rejecting the urban, it was usually New York being derided. The city's purveyors of culture developed a certain self-consciousness, which was also a distinct element of the black musicals of the era.

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[9] Douglas, 4.

[10] Ibid., 9.

Within the confines of the metropolis, modernism's tensions were stylized in a way that relates directly to the era's hierarchal racial thinking. The fissures between whites and African Americans in New York, the close separation of peoples, ran through the city's cultural products. Such a pleasurable yet imbalanced dichotomy was also literally mapped onto Manhattan in several different ways, from neighborhood housing restrictions to the segregated threshold of a Harlem nightclub. The artworks of the era can also be analyzed in spatial terms. For example: Van Vechten's staged photographs, with their simplistic use of a black-and-white color palate to symbolize racial mingling; or the opening scene of Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*, with its separation between the fictive island and "the States." An almost-too-perfect example for this study is the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, the white male quartet which brought this new music to prominence in 1917. They were playing in New York at Reisenweber's Club on 58th Street, but the band's name announced both their New Orleans roots and a connection to a generalized (yet authentic) Southland.[11]

Prohibition began in 1920 and was quickly parodied in songs, newspaper articles, and musical comedies. A proclivity for booze and excessive drinking had been a stereotype associated with minorities as well as the lower classes, but during the years of Prohibition this was conjoined with an urban savvy: the ability to find liquor and speakeasies, the knowledge of locations and passwords to gain entry, and the slumming enjoyment of breaking the law. Prohibition and speakeasies were also synonymous with the rise of cabarets, and by little extension the music in them. Stanley Walker's history/memoir *The Night Club Era* begins in

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[11] David Wondrich, *Stomp and Swerve: American Music Gets Hot 1843–1924* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2003), 113–14.

1920 with the moment the Volstead Act went into effect and concludes in 1933 just after the repeal of Prohibition. While luridly describing the era's illegal glamour, Walker rattles off some of the more famous locales, peppering his evaluation of Harlem nightlife with an affected white pomposity:

> The Club Alabam', with an agile brownskin show and Johnny Hudgins, in the days when the African trend was going strong, together with such places as the Bamville, the Cotton Club, the News, and Gladys's Exclusive Club, where the songs were, to be blunt about it, filthy.... Small's, in Harlem, where the waiters did the Charleston, late at night, while carrying fully loaded trays.... The Jungle Room, rough, noisy and primitive.... The invasion by the whites of the Harlem clubs, in particular, created a situation which could have caused serious trouble. It didn't; only in a few instances was trouble reported, and then it usually was in a very cheap place where a white man had no business going.[12]

Walker's snarky, breezy tone belies the racism of New York in the Jazz Age and how it was mapped onto Manhattan. His use of the word "invasion," brutal in its clarity, denotes nationalistic boundaries, military power, and colonialist occupation. Many of the names conjure images of Dixieland, from the white Cotton to the elided Alabam', while the "exhilarating primacy of the primitive"[13] on display in the Jungle Room suggests a racial ideal that blacks are closer to an elemental power. In Walker's schema, the dejure segregation of some clubs is contrasted with the defacto segregation of cheap places whites had "no business" entering. These night clubs enacted categories of space and race, and positions of attraction and separation.

This invasion was experienced differently by black Harlemites. Rudolph Fisher, through his use of clinical anthropological terminology, satirized the encroachment of whites into Harlem enclaves with his 1927 essay "The Caucasian Storms Harlem." After noticing "a lot of 'fays" in a favorite bar, he scours the neighborhood looking for respite:

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[12] Stanley Walker, *The Night Club Era* (1933; repr., Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 94, 96, 97, 101.

[13] Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 146.

> I tried the Nest, Small's, Connie's Inn, the Capitol, Happy's, the Cotton Club. There was no mistake; my discovery was real and was repeatedly confirmed. No wonder my old crowd was not to be found in any of them. The best of Harlem's black cabarets have changed their names and turned white.

Fisher acerbically concludes, "time was when white people went to Negro cabarets to see how Negros acted; now Negroes go to these same cabarets to see how white people act."[14] Black musicals had similar scenographies to the interiors of the clubs with their southern flair, but they never replicated the surrounding urban environments. The interiors gave white people the safe thrill they desired, which was necessary for the clubs' success. And what better evidence of this could there be, than the fact that Sissle and Blake were part owners of the Harlem nightclub Bamville, a name they then gave to the Southern town in their musical comedy *Chocolate Dandies*?

The Harlem Renaissance saw the triumph of a nationalistic black culturalism over a Du Boisian concept of political action, a Washingtonian ideal or economic uplift, or a radical socialism.[15] As David Levering Lewis summarizes the thinking of the time, "No exclusionary rules had been laid down regarding a place in the arts. Here was a small crack in the wall of racism, a fissure that was worth trying to widen."[16] But those dictating artistic legitimacy wanted novels, poetry, and straight drama, works that were aesthetically and politically challenging. Missing from this list is the financially successful genre of musical comedy. According to Lewis, Harlem Renaissance taste arbiter Alain Locke wanted "highly polished stuff, preferably about polished people, but certainly untainted by racial stereotypes or embarrassing vulgarity." He concludes, "Musical comedies, whatever the Afro-American contribution, were decidedly not the coming art form for the *Opportunity* muses."[17] At the time, these musicals were thought of as vulgar both for their reliance on stereotype and their mass popularity.

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[14] Rudolph Fisher, "The Caucasian Storms Harlem," in *The Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 111, 115.

[15] An acute analysis of the reasons for this shift to cultural politics can be found in Barbary Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

[16] David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 48.

In spite of the dismissals, later essays and memoirs by some Harlem Renaissance luminaries admit enjoying the musicals. In 1930's *Black Manhattan*, James Weldon Johnson speaks glowingly of *Shuffle Along*, *Put and Take*, *Liza*, *Runnin' Wild*, *Dinah*, and *Chocolate Dandies*.[18] Langston Hughes, more than just appreciating the musicals, places them at the forefront of what would define the New Negro movement. He writes that *Shuffle Along* "gave a scintillating send-off to that Negro vogue in Manhattan," adding that that it "gave just the proper push—a pre-Charleston kick—to that Negro vogue of the 20's, that spread to books, African sculpture, music, and dancing."[19] So some of the ambivalence about black musicals was deciding whether or not they could fit with the artistic products and political mission of black intellectuals. This tension was never resolved. But the rejection and later acceptance of the shows by these thinkers and artists points to some of the balancing acts necessary for the musicals to be comfortably enjoyed by white and black audiences in New York.

Describing how differing notions of race formation were read into these musicals is necessary before discussing how the shows balanced tensions within themselves. A cataloguing of reviews from *Shuffle Along* through *Chocolate Dandies* for instances of racial bias would be a wearying exercise in repetition. For brevity's sake, two reviews are here set in relief as representative of opposing racial perspectives. Little on the surface connects them together: the first is a caustic look from the African American–run *New York Amsterdam News* of the disastrous 1923 run of *How Come*, the other is a white reviewer in the *Chicago Herald and Examiner* listing problems with the Broadway-bound *Chocolate Dandies* in 1924. Each are extreme in their reactions and rhetoric, yet both lay bare fundamental ideas about race and have a striking awareness of the place of regressive stereotypes in popular entertainments. The reviews perceive race as both essential difference and constructed performance. This unacknowledged contradiction is particularly true of blackness, and it does not matter if the article is published through the African American or white press.

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[17] Ibid., 95, 96.
[18] James Weldon Johnson, from *Black Manhattan*, in *The Harlem Renaissance Reader*, 39–41.
[19] Langston Hughes, from *The Big Sea*, in ibid., 77.

How Come began its trip to Broadway at the height of the vogue for black musicals in New York, with numerous productions already there and a large amount of interest in the form by producers. One of its earliest notices in the New York press announced it as the inaugural show in a new theatre building "devoted exclusively to colored productions in the Broadway sector" to be called the Paul Dunbar Memorial Theatre.[20] (The project never advanced beyond these early reports.) Written by and starring Eddie Hunter, the show played to good houses at a Philadelphia tryout yet arrived in New York in April 1923 to bad reviews and lackluster attendance figures.

The flop of *How Come* led the *Amsterdam News* to run a scathing attack, directed at the show but encompassing the whole industry. It is a more sophisticated and angry piece than those which usually ran in the paper under the editorship of Lester Walton. The article is titled "No Hope for 'Colored Shows' with 'White Ideas,'" which sums up its argument and scolding tone. It begins by acknowledging the privileged position of the white dailies to make a show's fortune:

> As we go to press a copy of the New York Times has been placed into our hands and while we do not share the opinion in full of the Times critic, we are reproducing the opinion regarding "How Come?" to show the trend of thought of those whom it is supposed can either make or break a show on Broadway.
>
> After witnessing many of the rehearsals here and seeing the show in Philadelphia, we were led to believe that the many changes necessary to insure a hearty welcome for the show, but as early as Sunday night we had our doubts and did not hesitate to voice the opinion at theatre [*sic*] on Monday night that praise

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[20] "New Colored Theatre Down Town," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 20, 1922.

> could not be expected from the metropolitan dailies if the offering was allowed to go in its crude state.
>
> In spite of the adverse comment which we expect from the columns of the majority of the dailies, we feel that Hunter could have done much better if... he had been allowed to carry through his ideas. Again we repeat that such brilliant men as Messers [Jesse Shipp] and [Alex] Rogers have shown rare intelligence in refusing to tackle one of these shows un[l]ess they had full sway in carrying out their ideas.
>
> When we became luke-warm on two other shows with which [producer] Jack Goldberg were connected because of the impossible ideas supposed to emanate from the brain of colored men and women, we won for ourselves a few enemies who believe that a colored writer must adhere to the old way of praising any and everything.[21]

What is alternately confusing and illuminating about this article is that the white ideas and black ideas so central to the harangue are never explicitly stated. By not too much inference, it is clear the article is referring to the stereotyped minstrel behavior of the production. The article blames an overreliance on minstrelsy for the show's failure and explicitly calls it a white idea devoid of reality, a sentiment that pushes the article beyond the aesthetic realm and into the political. I can think of no better way of describing what minstrelsy meant to black performers of the 1920s than with the oxymoronic phrase "impossible ideas supposed to emanate from the brain of colored men and women," notions that actually come from white financiers. A rarity at the time is the article's acknowledgement that performance could sustain stereotype.

The article on *Chocolate Dandies* can be contrasted with the *How Come* piece because it believed stereotype to be necessary for an enjoyable black show; for this reason it is no less political than the *Amsterdam News* piece. Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake brought their new musical to New York in 1924. After the national and international notoriety of *Shuffle Along*, the duo had every reason to anticipate success from this robust and better funded endeavor. Yet, the show neither recouped its investment nor was in any way as enduring as its predecessor.

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[21] "No Hope for 'Colored Shows' with 'White Ideas,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, April 18, 1923.

According to the creators, it was not "enough of a colored show."[22] Which meant that, in spite of the blackface comedians and similar plot structure, the show lacked for minstrelsy. This sentiment is encapsulated by the pre-Broadway review titled "White Art Rather Than Black Magic, Says Stevens." Like the *Amsterdam News* article, it explains artistic failure along bifurcated ideological and racial lines, and is even more vociferous in the contrasted pairings:

> The show seems to suffer from too much white man; it is both sophisticated and conventional. You feel that the colored folk have been encouraged to go their own way only in the talking scenes, where, save for the miraculous exception of "Shuffle Along," they are habitually dull.
>
> You feel the arresting, the civilizing hand of [producer] Julian Mitchell in the direction. Nobody seems to go out of his head. Where we used to have splendid barbarians we now have splendid barbers.
>
> It is... the fatal influence of the white man that makes the show seem second rate for all its costly costumes and sceneries. There is too much so-called politeness, too much platitudinous refinement and not enough of the racy and the razor-edged. There is, in a word, too much "art" and not enough Africa.[23]

Stated in this article is the tension which underlay many reviews of all these black musical comedies. Like the *How Come* article, white interference is blamed for the show's failures. To this journalist, though, African Americans are all energy and no agency. Here is exemplified the racial belief system and accompanying patronizing expectations of white audiences, with their vogue for the primitive and the oh-too-unfortunate arrival of civilization. Reviewer Stevens is imposing his own "impossible ideas" on the show, by repeating the invented binaries of white and black, civilization and Africa, sophistication and happiness.

These two articles were chosen to succinctly convey competing yet synchronic notions about the combination of race and aesthetics: the black reviewer decrying the white minstrelized ideas and the white reviewer criticizing the lack of minstrelsy. One claims that the show pandered to stereotypes too much and the other claims the show pandered not enough. The reason for the failure of both productions was due to white ideas of blackness. One glaring consistency implicit in the two reviews is the privileged position of whites—producers, reviewers, and audiences—in the construction of black identity. Both reviewers toy with notions of essentialized racial difference and performed racial characteristics. But these two articles are not contradictory; rather, they illustrate competing irreconcilable ideals about the construction of racial identity in and through US entertainments.

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[22] Robert Kimball and William Bolcom, *Reminiscing with Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1972), 180.

[23] Ashton Stevens, "White Art Rather Than Black Magic, Says Stevens," *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, March 31, 1924, quoted in Kimball and Bolcom, 180.

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Jimtown to Broadway

The confusion about racial formation is interrelated with the categorical confusion between the revue show and the musical comedy. The main difference between the two entertainment genres was that revue shows lacked a cohesive plot. Race as a social category was being negotiated through these musicals, and without a strong narrative many characters were little more than caricatures and stereotypes. Revue shows were considered acceptably and comfortably black, whereas the sophistication of musical comedy was the privilege of whites and whiteness. This section explicitly separates the revues from the musical comedies based on the criteria of having a narrative, before exploring how the black musical comedies utilized plot conventions to their advantage. The ability to explore social tensions and challenge racial hierarchies was dependent upon a plot and a comfortable resolution to the dramatic complications.

At least five black revue shows played Broadway between 1921 and 1924. These included Irving (brother of Flournoy) Miller's *Put and Take*, Henry Creamer and Turner Layton's *Strut Miss Lizzie*, and Lew Leslie's *Plantation Revue* and *Dixie to Broadway*. Also, in the aftermath of a disagreement over royalties with Sissle and Blake, Miller and Lyles created and starred in *Runnin' Wild*. The music for a revue show was almost always written by a single individual, and usually songs were written specifically for the production. If one were to place the African American entertainments that played Broadway on a continuum, as newspapers sometimes did in the 1920s, revue shows would be positioned between nightclub acts and musical comedies. All three had commonalities of song, mise en scène, and use of blackface. Like musical comedies, revue shows had box offices, opening nights, and published reviews; like nightclub acts, they lacked a coherent narrative. The shows are remarkably consistent in their themes, capitalizing on an interest in and belief of a Southern black primitivism. (Southern, black, and primitive were distinct yet hopelessly enmeshed characteristics in such urban entertainments.) The phrase "Dixie to Broadway" sums up the mood of these productions, suggesting a plantation scene that travels to the Great White Way. Although each specific production wanted to distinguish itself in some way, none dared stray too far from the accepted formula or audience expectation.

The extant information about these performances is tantalizing but brief. With no book remaining, little primary material exists of the comedy or other skits. The music too was largely unrecorded and unprinted. Unlike vaudeville shows of previous eras which included popular songs in an effort to promote their sheet music sale, or musical comedies that used the success of the overall production to then sell music and recordings, these revues lacked such promotional and marketing potential. What remains are newspaper notices that record titles of songs and comedy scenes, all of which clearly telegraph the style of entertainment. A quick list is sufficient. *Put and Take* opened with a sketch called "Wedding Day in Georgia" and included the self-referential song "B'way Down in Dixie."[24] *Plantation Revue* included the songs "Old Black Joe," "Southern Hobby," "Robert E. Lee," and "Southland," and concluded with the skit "Minstrels on Parade." *Dixie to Broadway* included "Dixie Dreams" and the Plantation Chocolate Drops crooning "Put Your Old Bandana On."[25] The minstrel connections are almost too obvious to mention.

Creamer and Layton's *Strut Miss Lizzie* followed the same pattern. One article about the show included a lengthy description of the opening scene, called "In Old Southland." It is written by a patronizing white reviewer weary of the standard fare he is once again witnessing, and reads like a parodic summation of this entire dissertation:

> For a moment early in the proceedings we feared a plot. Shortly after the curtain had arisen on one of those dear old Southland scenes, with soft-voiced darkies singing in the spotlight and waving their matted hats joyfully, over the sweeping vista displayed on the back drop, a young man rushed in with a suitcase and a worried expression.
>
> "Well, well, well," said he, or words conveying a similar thought, "here I am again in my dear old home land.... And there, as I live, is my dear old mammy!"
>
> And there, sure enough, she was, bandanna and all.
>
> "If it isn't little Josephus," cried she, looking up suddenly and catching sight of the eager boy. "Come to you mammy's arms!"
>
> Which he did forthwith.
>
> "Have you come home to stay?" asked mammy, as soon as the embrace had been negotiated.
>
> "No," said Josephus: "rather have I come to take you back up No'th with me, mammy. This is a colored year on Broadway."
>
> "Oh, no, my son," replied mammy, with feeling; "oh, no, I cannot go up No'th with you because I love my dear old Southland so—"
>
> Which, as it transpired, was only a music cue for a favorite Creamer and Layton melody called "Dear Old Southland." And that was the last of mammy, Josephus, and the threatened plot.[26]

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[24] *Put and Take* clippings file, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

[25] Henry Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 193, 295–96.

[26] *Strut Miss Lizzie* clippings file, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

From the bandana-coiffed Mammy to the nostalgic plantation home, this summary could describe any of the revue shows.

As a precursor to a close reading of black musical comedies, these revue shows highlight how the dualities of black performance were complicated by a plot—however thin, however perfunctory, it might be. (That a complex narrative and character motivation could be threatening to white audiences is more than just theoretical speculation: at the Broadway opening of *Shuffle Along*, Noble Sissle was afraid that a non-comic love song between two black characters would cause a riot.[27]) The assumed naturalness of blacks is evident in many reviews, as are the natural abilities of African Americans in earthy kinds of dance, erotic types of song, and an easy sense of humor. There was an unwillingness to accept, or wholeheartedly embrace, the narrativization of black musical comedies. Plot was the providence of whites. To extrapolate but a step further, if whiteness was aesthetically equated with narrative, blacks were without plot, without narrative, without history. They were objects, masks, stereotypes.

Because of this very real, palpable racial antagonism, when African Americans re-introduced the black musical comedy to Broadway in the 1920s, these racial tensions had to be diffused into narrative tensions and conventions—which is how the minstrel tradition was necessary to the creators. Within the musicals, the plots explain a tension between the North and the South, which translates into an antagonism of the urban for the rural. The Southern locations of these musicals exist out of time, in a Magnolia-scented nostalgic past; while the North intrudes in these idyllic scenes with an urban newness that is fun and exotic and jazzy. This Northern-ness also imposed a certain power upon the South—and, in several of the musicals, is instrumental in restoring order to the fictional Southern towns. These plays helped Northern urban audiences feel good about themselves.

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[27] Kimball and Bolcom, 93.

In the early 1920s *Shuffle Along* was The Black Musical: the model of what a black musical was, how it should be structured, how songs should sound, how performers should look. *Shuffle*'s impact was so great that it re-established and redefined the form. It was categorized as an all-black musical comedy, which meant that the cast was entirely African American and the songs and story were almost certainly written by blacks as well. The producers of these shows, particularly those bound for Broadway, were white. Being labeled as an all-black musical carried certain expectations for journalists and audiences of minstrel show–style entertainment. Race was extremely important to *Shuffle Along* from its inception, even though it is not explicitly addressed in the story. Part of its importance as a piece of theatre and as a cultural touchstone is its awareness of the performativity of race.

The plot of *Shuffle Along* is paper-thin, and some reviews stated that it felt like a couple of vaudeville skits stitched together—which, indeed, it was.[28] The story centers on the crooked politicians and thieving business partners Steve Jenkins and Sam Peck (played in blackface by Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles), who are both vying for the position of Jimtown's mayor. The only reason the third, honest candidate, Harry Walton, seems to be running is that his beloved's father will not consent to her marrying unless he has the job. Steve wins and begins a political corruption crime spree. When both he and Sam are caught, the path is cleared for Harry's ascension to elected office and wedded bliss.[29] (The reestablishment of social order and romantic coupling go hand in hand.) But the literal and figurative agent that restores order is the musical's only outsider: Keeneye, the "great colored detective" from New York.[30] It takes his (urban) skills to recognize and expose the corruption of Steve and Sam.

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[28] Elements of *Shuffle Along*'s plot stretch back to a comedy routine titled "The Mayor of Dixie" that Miller and Lyles wrote in 1907. See Kimball and Bolcom, 86. Karen Sotiropoulos also traces some influences back to 1915's *Darkeydom*, that starred the duo. See Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 230–33.

[29] *Shuffle Along: A Musical Comedy*, Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.

Jimtown is a place out of time, despite some mention of telephones and a passing visual reference to automobiles.[31] And this is connected to both the nostalgia elements of song and setting and the minstrel elements of the comedy. An excellent example of minstrel show flimflammery is an early scene in which Steve gives a political address:

> Listing to me folkses. Listing to me. We will pay no more attention to my reponent. We will "ignose" him and talk on matters of heap much more reportance.... Frinstance, - - look at the redition of your city today. I say look at the redition of Jimtown today. We have no lextrive lights here... So dark here o' nights that if you light one match you got to light another one to see if the first one is lit. Make me your mayor.... I'll see dat everybody in Jimtown gets lit up. I'll do more den dat- - I'll see dats you all gits 'lectrocuted.[32]

Steve's speech is broken up because a waiter passes with a platter of chicken, distracting both him and the crowd. This excerpt is essentially a minstrel-show stump speech, with the malapropisms and faux-sophistication of the talk signifying Steve's inability to grasp the modern concept of electricity. The integration of minstrel routines was a hallmark of all subsequent productions.

The next musical to premiere on Broadway was *Liza* in 1922.[33] It had a book by Irvin Miller, whose revue *Put and Take* had played Broadway the previous October. Everything about *Liza* was an attempt to build on the success of *Shuffle*, and it blatantly copied *Shuffle*'s plot and characterizations. The show is also set in Jimtown, and it follows the efforts of the town's civic leaders to raise money for a statue in the late mayor's honor (presumably the honest Harry Walton). The title character is in love with an out-of-towner named Dandy, who impersonates the new school teacher to help the fundraising and win the trust of Liza's father. The play ends with the money collected and the scheme revealed.[34] The plot's mirroring of *Shuffle* also applies to the blackface characters. In *Liza*, these are Ice Cream Charlie and Bodiddily, two odd-job men who in one scene contemplate embezzling money from the monument fund. They also have a stand-alone minstrel show routine set in a graveyard at midnight where they attempt to unearth a casket with five hundred dollars in it (and a dead body) but are scared away by ghosts.

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[30] Ibid., 18.

[31] Printed on the backdrop representing the town square is a sign for "Stevens Automobile." See Kimball and Bolcom, 104–5.

[32] Ibid., 14–15.

[33] The show was originally called "Bon Bon Buddy, Jr.," an homage to a song made famous by George Walker.

The urban outsiders of *Liza* are Dandy and his sidekick Ras Johnson. The reason Dandy must masquerade as the school teacher is that Liza's father has vowed to kill him on sight. Dandy is responsible for Liza "going on the stage,"[35] and apparently corrupting her. What Liza, under Dandy's influence, brings to Jimtown are Northern entertainments such as jazz tunes and modern dancing. The North, the stage, and jazz are equated with each other, and the whole package is seductive and dangerous. *Liza*'s run was modest compared to *Shuffle*, but it did bring in audiences. The same cannot be said for either *How Come* or *Chocolate Dandies*.

1923's *How Come* is about Rastus Skunkton Lime and his friend Dandy Dan and their attempts at getting money through various illegal schemes while evading the law.[36] Like *Shuffle*, it is a stitched-together collection of vaudeville skits, but because the narrative focuses on the blackfaced comedians and lacks any romantic arc, the plot is particularly open-ended. In various scenes Rastus and Dandy Dan embezzle from the Chicken Trust Corporation, dig for buried treasure, and sell a drug store they do not own. The reliance on the blackface character Rastus (played by writer/director Eddie Hunter) and his sidekick pushes the show much farther toward minstrelsy than the other musical comedies of the time. This imbalance was why it drew the notice and ire of the *New York Amsterdam News* in the review quoted earlier.

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[34] *Liza*, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[35] Ibid., 4.
[36] *How Come*, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

The play is mostly set in Memphis, Tennessee. Rastus and Dandy Dan bilk the locals for as much as they can, and after a jailbreak they make their way to the urban safety of Chicago. The move to Chicago pushes the two blackface comedians into the 1920s—in the final scene of the play they are running a speakeasy out of a shoe store. The scene is another example of the urban audience being shown itself, because its humor centers on Rufus teaching a new member the elaborate code system for ordering illegal hooch. But Rufus also brings some country ignorance with him. His partner claims that he has no idea how to drive the car he just bought, a prompt for Rufus to launch into a stump speech (with an odd rhyme scheme):

> The carburater did not lubricate just right with the generator, they was a conbustercation of compressed air, which caused the car to stop everywhere.... they was something wrong with the crank and the gas was leaking in the tank, they was also something wrong with the spark, but I reckon I lost dat driving through the park. The piston rod was somewhat loose, and the batteries were dead and there ain't no juice, of course you know every break down has its cause.[37]

The skits and characters in *How Come* are retrograde compared to the era's standards of black entertainment, dooming it to a short and unprofitable Broadway run followed by an abbreviated tour.

The final musical under discussion is 1924's *Chocolate Dandies*, with music and lyrics by Sissle and Blake and book by Sissle and Lew Payton. They had hope for the show, and believed they could capitalize on *Shuffle Along*'s success. (An early draft of the show is even called "Shufflers."[38]) The plot and characters mirror *Shuffle*, with winning a horse race replacing the mayoral election in order to bring the two lovers together. It takes place among the cotton fields of Bamville, Mississippi. The act two complication is that the horse owned by Mose Washington, one of the blackfaced characters, wins but at the conclusion this is just a dream and the correct filly was victorious all along. By the time the producing team starting writing *Chocolate Dandies*, the self-referentiality of the black musical world had reached its extreme. In the typescript, the horses are all named after black musicals that had played or were playing on Broadway: Shuffle Along, How Come, Liza, Strut Miss Lizzie, and Running Wild.[39] (Of course, the hero's horse is Shuffle Along.) By the Broadway opening, the horses' names were replaced by more generic ones, but that Sissle and Payton were even toying with such near-mockery is indicative of how this conglomeration of entertainers viewed themselves as an insular group. The shows' overall similarity added to their quick failure as a subgenre of the musical form. *Chocolate Dandies*'s demise brought an end to the confidence, both artistically and financially, of the form's uniqueness.

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[37] Ibid., n.p.
[38] *Chocolate Dandies* ["Shufflers"], Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

The Northern intrusion in the show demonstrates the region's savvy on the one hand and ability to restore order on the other; the North is both more interesting and more politically powerful than Bamville. The only character from the North is Dobby Hicks (played in the original by Sissle), a professional horse gambler and cheat who seduces a group of chorus girls. The other Northern intrusion occurs near the end of the play and, like the role of Keeneye the Detective in *Shuffle*, acts as a corrective to the corruption of a blackface character. Through a convenient plot twist, Mose Washington becomes owner of the Bamville Bank and his mismanagement threatens the financial stability of the town. Mose receives a letter from the "Federal Bank of America" that has the authority to arrest any bank president guilty of malfeasance—this leads to a run on the institution.[40] No less than the power of the national government helps save the town.

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[39] A sixth horse is named Dumb Luck, after a black musical that was unable to secure either money or space for a Broadway run.

[40] *Chocolate Dandies*, act 2, scene 3, 28.

These shows wanted their New York audiences to leave the theatre feeling good about themselves: Their urban, jazzy, sophisticated way of living was being celebrated in the shows. This need to display a Northern cultural dominance was repeated in all aspects of the performances—most forcibly through the songs.

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Jazztime Towns

Besides the racial designation "black," "musical" is the other operative word for categorizing the entertainments of this chapter. Music was a vital part of the identity of these shows, which was tied to the overwhelming belief in the inherent musicality of African Americans. This section focuses on the songs and lyrics in the black musical comedies: their content, their placement in the show, and their overall meaning. Two types of songs dominated, and they reflected the urban/rural and North/South divides that were so sophisticatedly calibrated in these shows: nostalgia tunes and jazz numbers. The clear division between genres was a significant reason, maybe even the primary reason, performances were able to strike the balances that are examined in this chapter.

The Southern nostalgia songs of the shows were congruent with the locations and lives of their denizens. An early number in *Shuffle Along* is called "Bandana Days" and act one tune in *Chocolate Dandies* is titled "Bandana Land," a repeated motif from Sissle and Blake which sums up the mood of all these songs. The South, the Sunny South, is a place locked in the pre-industrial and pre-modern past. "Bandana Days" fully articulates this combination of Dixieland and minstrel elements, as only the bandana could do so readily and economically: conjuring up Aunt Jemima and an idealized image of black, feminine, Southern servitude. Leading the singing is a blackfaced character named Uncle Ned, the stereotype for a subservient slave figure that stretches back at least to Stephen Foster. The song is not connected directly to the plot nor does it contain any dramatic tension related to a character's emotions or psychological mindset. "Bandana Days" is a romanticized eulogy to earlier times and the lyrics are a list of standard plantation tropes:

> In those dear old Bandana days,
> Cane and cotton
> Ne'er forgotten
> Bandana days.
> And those quaint old Bandana ways...
> Banjos strummin',
> They'd be hummin'
> Bandana lays.
> And in the pale moonlight
> They'd swing left and right,
> In those dear old Bandana days.[41]

In publicity photos for the scene, Uncle Ned is bowing to a Jemima-costumed chorus member wearing the titular bandana.[42] "Bandana Days" created a pattern copied by subsequent nostalgia song lyrics; they are inert, creating mood and feeling while being devoid of plot. Like the Southern locations of the shows and the banjo strumming of the blacks that inhabit them (though no one actually plays a banjo onstage in these productions), the words promote a simplistic past. Yet, to return to Savran's reading of the song as a "sly satire of plantation nostalgia," the music of "Bandana Days" bypasses Stephen Foster–esque sentimentality in favor of up-tempo syncopation that "looks... backward to ragtime and forward to jazz."[43] This detail is important: the satire is due to the incongruity between lyrics and music, but it becomes politically pointed (more than aesthetically) because of the racially coded styles that are combined.

"Bandana Days" established a point of origin that was also a moment of restoration. That is, nostalgia tunes were now a standard element of black musicals and the lyrics catalogued existing, established minstrel and Southern tropes. Lyricist Maceo Pinkard clearly had this song in mind in *Liza*'s opening tune "Tag Day," which includes the following:

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[41] Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, *Bandana Days* (New York: M. Witmark and Sons, 1921).
[42] Kimball and Bolcom, 101.
[43] Savran, 75.

> We will tag you as in bandana days,
> We wont brag but we're the hit of the craze
> Old Black Joe and Mammy Jennie they know,
> Them were the bestest days and they'll tell you so.[44]

These lyrics explain what "Bandana Days" illustrated: They were the bestest days, a claim legitimized by the minstrel stereotypes Old Black Joe and Aunt Jemima. This love of unspecified Southern "days" continues in *Liza* with the song "On the Moonlit Swanee," which begins:

> On the moonlit Swanee,
> Hear the darkies singing,
> And the banjoes ringing,
> And all seems gay.[45]

Coming from the all-black chorus of the show, the song is an endorsement of a pre-modern past (and "Swanee River" is a Stephen Foster tune). This nostalgia trip was also essential to *How Come*. The music and lyrics are gone, but the song titles from the program are full of possibilities: "Pickanniny Vamp" (described as a "ragged version of 'Here Comes the Bride'"[46]), "In My Dixie Dreamland," and "Bandanna Anna."

Ambivalent songs of stereotyped Southern-ness, with a handful of coded objects (cotton, banjoes, moon) rearranged for the sake of variety, continued into *Chocolate Dandies*. "Dixie Moon" opens act two of the show. The script explains the setting in detail, in a way that could be describing the Aunt Jemima ads of chapter two:

> This scene is laid on the lawn, in front of the house of Bill Splivens, which is on the outskirts of Bamville and running from the road, outside the yard to the Mississippi River, in the distance are fields of white cotton. To the left, rear, can

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[44] *Liza*, n.p.
[45] Ibid., 18.
[46] "How Come," *Variety*, April 19, 1923.

> be seen the lights of the houses in town. It is night and the Dixie moon is pouring its silvery rays down on the waters of the broad Mississippi.[47]

The quartet singing the song begins by thanking the environment for inspiring their music: "Our melodies in minor keys were first originated/ Under the Dixie moon." So a the mood created in the first lines are of a Dixie authenticity and songs in the minor mode—which generally connoted the emotions of sadness or tragedy. But this setting and emotion is contradicted as the lyrics continue. "These melodies in minor keys were first syncopated/ Under the Dixie moon/ There's a rhythm swinging with 'em that makes life seem dearer/ Under the Dixie moon."[48] The sad minor keys have been ragged, in counterdistinction to any plantation feeling, making the song more modern, urban, and Northern. "Every time a strong accent contradicts the basic meter, syncopation occurs.... In jazz, syncopation is not an effect—it is the very air jazz breathes."[49] Regional and racial conventions are again being toyed with, and explicit racisms are undercut.

The fixation on the Jemima-esque bandana continues in *Dandies*. Whereas *Shuffle Along* located the bandana temporally, with "Bandana Days" being a past time of leisure, *Dandies* situates the headscarf spatially with "Bandana Land."[50] It begins, "I love Bandana Land with its cotton fields so white/ You know Bandana Land sure is a wonderful sight," and continues by saying "folks up North" want to come visit.[51] This type of song was an essential and expected element for these black musicals, whose settings are places located out of time: Bandana Days are/is Bandana Land, as convoluted as that reads. These songs traffic in stereotyped images such as the playful banjo and pillowy cotton, but this utopia can be read either as a fantasy land or nowhere at all.

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[47] *Chocolate Dandies*, 20.

[48] Kimball and Bolcom, 179.

[49] Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux, *Jazz* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2009), 14.

[50] The song title was the same as a Williams and Walker musical of 1908.

[51] *Chocolate Dandies*, 7.

A curious corollary to the nostalgia-tinged songs in these musical comedies are those numbers that self-consciously refer to the minstrel tradition. These songs trade in stereotypes while humanizing them—at best a risky proposition, but a potentially powerful one if the songs mean to convey an ironic distance from minstrelsy. These songs contain the musicals' most overt references to the minstrel tradition, and also have a high probability for double-readings by white and black audiences arriving at the theatre with different attitudes and perceptions about black culture and black political progress.

Shuffle Along actually has characters named Uncle Tom and Old Black Joe, who are the stereotyped figures from minstrelsy their names immediately indicate. What is fascinating about Tom and Joe is that they are part of the world of *Shuffle Along* and are also decades-old minstrel caricatures—stereotyped ambivalence turned into self-referential certainty through a song they sing about themselves. Here are the lyrics of "Uncle Tom and Old Black Joe" in their entirety:

> I'm Uncle Tom and I'm old Black Joe,
> I came up from the time long ago,
> My name's in history, everyone sings of me,
> Though three score and twenty, we have pep aplenty,
> Now we are going right down to the square,
> And we will be showing the mayor,
> Where he shall start to build a City Hall
> And tell him when we're coming to call
>
> Chorus
> We are electioneers, Jimtown electioneers,
> And since '61, Old Black Joe and Uncle Tom,
> At election time, whether rain or shine,
> We're down at the polls when they call the roll,
> We have elected every president since '63,
> The last one that we elected was old Booker T,
> If you want to know, who makes Jimtown go,
> It's Uncle Tom and Old Black Joe.[52]

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[52] *Shuffle Along*, 16.

The use of stock characters from minstrelsy, along with an acknowledgement of this, points to the show's use and dismissal of this particular theatrical tradition. These characters *are* Jimtown; they make Jimtown go. But by announcing a self-awareness while using such images and tropes, Sissle and Blake are at the very least allowing the possibility for an ironic reading, with the humor derived from the stereotype's successful political machinations.

The other *Shuffle* song that hearkens back to minstrelsy is "Sing Me to Sleep, Dear Mammy, with a Hush-a-Bye Pickaninny Tune"; a song about another song. After Harry loses the election and the hand of his darling, he sings of a longing for mother's lullabies—an Oedipal minstrel trope that stretches back at least to Stephen Foster. He wistfully declares:

> Mammy, I'm feeling tired and weary,
> My heart is heavy laden, too,
> Mammy, there's only one who can cheer me,
> And that only one is you.
>
> Chorus
> So won't you sing me to sleep, dear Mammy,
> With a "Hush-a-bye, oh, pickaninny tune,"
> Just like you did in Alabamy,
> Mammy let me hear you croon—
> "Go to sleep, ma honey, Sandman's coming soon,
> He's watching you up yonder in the moon."
> Then when I fall to sleep in your dear arms,
> I know I'm safe from earthly harms,
> If you will sing me to sleep, dear Mammy,
> With a "Hush-a-bye, oh, pickaninny tune."[53]

Like "Uncle Tom and Old Black Joe," the song is also about its own minstrelized past.

Chocolate Dandies recycles these tropes. The show includes a "Dancing Picininnies" number, which extols "the land of dancing picininnies/ Land of prancing picininnies/ Grand old land of cotton and corn." And it describes, like its *Shuffle* counterpart, "old folks" singing little ones to sleep.[54] A number that references both *Shuffle Along* and the history of minstrelsy, with ties to how blacks are viewed and judged because of such stereotypes, is "Sons of Old Black Joe." The song begins:

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[53] Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, *Sing Me to Sleep, Dear Mammy, with a Hush-a-Bye Picaninny Tune*, (New York: M. Witmark and Sons, 1921).

> Though we're a dusky hue let us say to you
> We're proud of our complexion we blush without detection
> But how seriously surprised you'll be
> When we tell you bout our pedigree.[55]

The lyrics state the belief that Old Black Joe will "never be forgotten long as fields of cotton down in sunny Dixie grow." The song, with its fixation on skin coloring and paternity, could be interpreted as a sly critique of racism and the use of stereotypes in creating a racial hegemony. All of these songs reinforced a timeless ideal of the South as a place into which blacks could conveniently be placed, but what separates these tunes from those by Stephen Foster or Joe Bren or Arthur Kaser is their knowledge of, and perhaps anger about, such treatment.

No irony attends to the jazz songs in the shows, though they also display a certain self-awareness. In counterdistinction to the obsolescent and outdated minstrelized elements of these productions, jazz was celebrated for being new and a bit dangerous. It really must be kept in mind that jazz was one element among many in these shows and that these songs were selling the idea of jazz in the same way nostalgia songs were selling the Old South. Jazz was an intrusion, even could be called an invasion, on the scene and in these locations—much like the Northern characters who brought urbanity with them. As Savran notes:

> For producers of vaudeville and musical comedy... jazz and jazz-inflected language, choreography, and design were the key to forging a uniquely American theater vernacular that could respond to and express the new rhythms and economies of the Machine Age.[56]

Also, the new music was treated with a certain amount of mistrust, despite its thrills and appeal.

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[54] *Chocolate Dandies*, 24.
[55] Ibid., 9.
[56] Savran, 37.

While jazz was being discussed by the characters in the shows, the Broadway audiences were being told it was something which separated them from backwater inhabitants of the South. To explain this idea, some key songs from these musicals are examined along with their context in the show—who was singing them and the place of these characters within their fictional communities.

Shuffle Along again set the standard. An early number, the first solo song after the opening chorus, is "I'm Simply Full of Jazz." Both the song and the person who sings it are in sharp contrast to the minstrelizing or balledeering of other tunes. It is sung by Ruth Little (played in the original cast by Gertrude Saunders), best friend to the lead ingénue Jessie. From the very beginning, and throughout the show, Ruth is characterized as a sexually adventurous woman in contrast to her chaste friend. (Her other solo number is the eleventh-hour torch song "I'm Craving for That Kind of Love.") After listening to Jessie and Harry declare their fidelity to each other, she remarks, "[N]one of that wedding stuff for me, kid." When asked why not, her response, "Because I'm simply too full of jazz," kicks off the song:

> Everybody thinks I'm crazy,
> They say I've gone plum mad,
> Everybody thinks I'm crazy,
> Lost all the sense I ever had.
> When they see me shake, it makes them shiver,
> When I do a break, it makes them quiver,
> But I'm not insane, I'm not to blame,
> The cause of it all isn't in my brain.
>
> Chorus
> Just because I like to do a wiggle,
> In a regular Salome style,
> Just because I like to do a lil wriggle,
> Like on the Hawaiian isle,
> 'Cause I kick like a donkey, jump way back,
> 'Cause I act like a monkey, and ball the jack,
> And like Miss Minnie, I do the shimmie,
> Keep my shoulders shaking until you hear them crack,

> Just 'cause you see my feet a' shufflin'
> Just because I act like a razz,
> Cause I seem a little hazy,
> I ain't crazy, I'm just full of jazz, jazz, jazz
> Simply full of jazz.[57]

Setting aside the speculative claim etymologically linking the word jazz to male ejaculate,[58] which would render the whole number a crude joke, the lyrics are hazy as to why specifically jazz is the anathema of marriage. Clearly, though, the song is about itself: a jazz song that takes jazz as its subject. And, much like *Shuffle*'s "Baltimore Buzz," the lyrics almost certainly served as stage directions and choreographic cues. What is also clear from the lyrics and Ruth's attitude toward the romantic coupling (that, it should be mentioned again, brings the show to a close), jazz is new and strange—exotic like Hawaii, salacious like Salome, and decidedly not of Jimtown.

The lyrics and subject matter of "I'm Simply Full of Jazz" bear more than passing resemblance to the George and Ira Gershwin song "Fascinating Rhythm" from 1925's *Lady, Be Good!*[59] In that song, the new musical form also causes "the neighbors" to question the singer's sanity, and it follows a similar rhyme scheme. As the Gershwins describe it:

> Fascinating rhythm,
> You go me on the go,
> Fascinating Rhythm,
> I'm all a-quivver.
> When a mess you're making,
> The neighbor's want to know,
> Why I'm always shaking,
> Just like a flivver.[60]

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[57] *Shuffle Along*, 4–5.
[58] Wondrich, 116.
[59] For a more general discussion of *Shuffle Along*'s influence on the Gershwins, see Savran's chapter "Fascinating Rhythm" in *Highbrow/Lowdown*, 65–102.
[60] George and Ira Gershwin, "Fascinating Rhythm," *The Ultimate George Gershwin*, vol. 2, Pearl B00008KCMO.

But "Fascinating Rhythm" reverses the message of the Sissle and Blake number. For the Gershwins, "the pitter-patter in [the] brain" threatens to "drive [the singer] insane"; however, Ruth insists she's "not insane" and "the cause of it all isn't in my brain." In *Shuffle*, jazz dancing and music are more declarations of independence than intoxicating drugs, an outsider's choice not an insider's calamity. In "I'm Simply Full of Jazz":

> When they see me shake, it makes *them* shiver,
> When I do a break, it makes *them* quiver.[61]

From Ruth's perspective, the shivering and quivering comes from the anxious society not the liberated singer/dancer. But these two lines also describe the wonderful danger of jazz: When Ruth shakes and breaks, the disapproving masses inadvertently begin a dance of their own. The comparison between these two songs is made not to illustrate a difference in attitude along racial lines, but to show how carefully perspectives on jazz were constituted by the era's musical geniuses.

The song structure and tone in *Liza* closely follows the *Shuffle Along* model. Mirroring its predecessor, the musical opens with a chorus number "Tag Day" that is followed by a short scene between the title character and her best friend Nora:

> Nora: And I'm crazy about the stage myself. I'm simply full of jazz.
> Liza: Then you'd make a hit.
> Nora: Yes, because jazz always gives me pleasure.

Nora then sings "Pleasure," which opens with the lines: "I've got a little way all my own/ Different from any of you here."[62] Over and over again, *Liza* lifts lyrics from the Sissle and Blake songbook. The act one number "Running Wild Blues," also sung by Nora, steals the subject and sentiment of "I'm Simply Full of Jazz." In it, she longs for "sweet melodies... just oozin with jazz" that have "gone right to [her] brain."[63] The obvious, almost desperate, connection to *Shuffle Along* is noteworthy, as is the conflation of jazz, erotic enjoyment, and the stage.

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[61] *Shuffle Along*, 5. Emphasis added.
[62] *Liza*, 2.

An act one number from *Chocolate Dandies* provides the clearest example of how the jazz numbers convey the urban and rural divide. The song, called "Break 'Em Down," locates its music and dancing in a Northern, urban locale that travels to Bamville and is taught to the locals (and, of course, the New York audiences). It begins by explaining its own pedigree:

> Out in Chicago, that jazztime town,
> They have a new dance called Breakin' Em Down.
> Believe me when you do it, it takes a lot of pep,
> Then honey, lead me to it, I'll follow every step.[64]

After establishing its own urban credentials, the tune sings its way through its own choreography. Whereas the Southern locations of these musicals are nostalgic relics, Chicago is a jazztime town—urbanity itself is characterized by the time signature of the music. The urban has a fascinating rhythm; in a different though related way, time and space are again conjoined.

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The Flavor of Minstrelsy

The combination of the urban with jazz and the rural with nostalgia songs illustrates an acknowledgement of the unease with modernity; something related but distinct was happening to the categories of gender and race and how these interrelated ideas were mapped onto the bodies of performers. Male/female and black/white were understood as essentialized categories of difference at the level of body and biology. Concurrently, though, these musicals in some way acknowledge the performative aspects of both. The musicals and their newspaper review descriptions obsess over the skin color of the female cast and chorus; male cast members, blackfaced or not, were never discussed this way. This discussion about embodied gender and race is a culmination of the previous sections on music and narrative, as none of these performative elements are divorced from each other; rather, through these balanced tensions, the logic of minstrelsy and necessity of blackface within these musicals becomes clear. If there is a single contrast that most directly illustrates the underlying dichotomy of modernity and obsolescence in these shows, it is the one between a black/brown/tan female chorus line and a semi-circle of blackfaced male minstrels.

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[63] Ibid., 20.
[64] *Chocolate Dandies*, 3.

The objects of sexual desire were the female choruses, who, because of their youth, costumes, and use in songs of love or suggestiveness, are supposed to be seen as such. The sexual fetishization of African American women, particularly equating lighter skin tones with sexual availability, had a long history from the nineteenth century minstrel stage to Sherman Dudley's Smart Set shows of the 1910s. (The rather sinister connection between lighter skin and beauty within the black community, and its relation to a racial self-hatred, was often written about by Harlem Renaissance writers—most pointedly in Wallace Thurman's satiric 1929 novel *The Blacker the Berry...*) And the attention to skin color in songs stretches back to the "yella gal" tunes of the nineteenth century as well.[65] But the accumulation of sexualized female choruses, contemporary jazz music and dancing, and provocative racialized song lyrics in the 1920s musicals created an intensified model of black female beauty in contrast with the intensified image of a grotesque Aunt Jemima.[66]

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[65] See Annemarie Bean, "Black Minstrelsy and Double Inversion, Circa 1890" in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, ed. Harry J. Elam, jr. and David Krasner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[66] Nor were such designations exclusive to musical comedies or jazz. Lawrence Levine writes about the skin colorization in African American blues songs of the 1920s through the 1940s. He lists the color gradations described in the lyrics: "A number of quire different shades were recognized: deep black, ashy black, pale black, dead black, chocolate-brown, coffee, sealskin-brown, deep brown, dark brown, reddish brown, deep yella brown, chocolate, high-brown, low-brown, velvet brown, bronze, gingerbread, fair light brown, tan, olive, copper, pink, banana, cream, brightskin, high yaller, lemon." Levine curiously reads this cultural obsession as evidence of "color

A song from *Shuffle Along* that bandies categories of race and gender is the "Fox Trot Novelty Song" called "If You've Never Been Vamped by a Brown Skin, You've Never Been Vamped at All." It is an act two number sung by the blackfaced comedic leads backed by a chorus identified in the opening night program as the "Jimtown Vamps."[67] The number occurs right before the minstrelized tune "Uncle Tom and Old Black Joe" discussed earlier. Over the course of the song, the whole social order of religion and law is upended by the voiceless presence of a sexualized female. In the first verse, the sanctity of marriage is undermined as a prominent church member's hypocrisy is exposed:

> Deacon Birch of Mt Zion Church
> Was hailed up into court,
> He was brought in by his wife, I think,
> And charged with non-support.
> A seal-skin brown with jet black hair
> Caused Deac' to lose his head,
> And when the judge called Deac' to speak,
> Dese am the words he said:

The song then turns to the refrain. In the second verse, the courtroom itself is decimated:

> Old Judge Lee shy as could be
> Sent for the brown skin vamp,
> And when she breezed in why
> The court looked like a shell swept camp.
> The clerk pass'd out, the jury gasped,
> And all turned pale as death,
> Poor ol Judge Lee gave this decree
> With his last parting breath:[68]

The refrain is then repeated. All the characters in this song are African American; yet, in the second verse, another racial category is provoked into being by the bodily presence of the offending woman. All "turned pale as death" with her arrival. That is, the men in the

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pride." See Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, thirtieth anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 285–86.

[67] Kimball and Bolcom, 94–95.

[68] Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, *If You've Never Been Vamped by a Brown Skin, You've Never Been Vamped at All* (New York: M. Witmark and Sons, 1921).

courtroom—judge, jury, clerk—became white. And in that whiteness they also die.[69] (That war veteran Noble Sissle could write a lyric about a "shell swept camp" means the situation was indeed dire.) This type of racial reading can be overstated, but several aspects of this reasoning carry over into songs, theatre reviews, and the general thinking about racial divisions in the 1920s US. The vitality, liveness, and liveliness of the African American woman is contrasted with a Caucasian cadaverousness. Women may have occupied a mutable middle ground between the races, but these were playfully realized degrees of blackness; whiteness was never thought of as anything but pure. With the, of all things, courtroom setting of the song, the ramifications of such thinking in law, legislation, and society are easy to imagine.

The refrain of "If You've Never Been Vamped by a Brownskin" illustrates how Jazz Age songs of the era described black female beauty. The racial classifications of the refrain are all the more strange considering they were sung by two men in blackface:

> If you've never been vamped by a brown skin,
> You've never been vamped at all,
> For the vampingest vamp is a brown skin,
> And believe me now that ain't no stall.
> A high brown gal will make you break out of jail,
> A choc'late brown will make a tadpole smack a whale,
> A pretty seal skin brown, I mean one long and tall
> Would make the silent sphinx out in the desert bawl,
> If you've never been vamped by a brown skin,
> You've never been vamped at all![70]

This refrain offers a primer for how African American women were fetishized in the songs and reviews for these musicals: as teasingly separated color gradations.

Other musical and revue shows demonstrate the same racial pattern outlined by this *Shuffle Along* number. *Liza* has two songs that refer to skin color: "Brownskin Flapper" and "My

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[69] For a fascinating discussion between racial whiteness, corpses, and the imagery created by this connection, see the chapter "White Death" in Richard Dyer's *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 207–23.

[70] Sissle and Blake, *If You've Never Been Vamped by a Brown Skin*.

Creole Girl."[71] The former suggests that a brownskin flapper is distinct from ordinary flappers in ways that make her more desirable. The song describes her availability and connects her to New York City: "She's got a daddy for each day that's in the week/ Folks up in Harlem call her the female sheik." (A dash of Orientalism is added too.) In *Chocolate Dandies*, women from "the lightest mulatto to the choc'late brown" reside in Bamville, according to the lyrics of "Bandana Land."[72] Another example: *Strut Miss Lizzie* was presented by the "Creole Producing Company" and was billed as a show to "glorif[y] the Creole beauty."[73] As was pointed out by several reviewers, this tagline intentionally parodied Ziegfeld. As Susan Glenn notes, "Ziegfeld willingly capitalized upon the political mood of xenophobia and 100-percent Americanism.... It was not long before newspapers and electric signs on theaters advertised the '*Ziegfeld Follies*, A National Institution, Glorifying the American Girl.'"[74] The difference between the two also implied a connection between American-ness and whiteness.

In reviews, this type of adjectival exoticizing was directed exclusively and continuously at the female choruses. The *Strut* chorus is full of "saffron angularities" while *Shuffle Along* has "bronze beauties."[75] Other musicals have "yaller prima donnas" and "little chocolate lass[es]."[76] And frequently the sexual thrill of their performances are luridly described: "And those dusty vamps did look good in the costumes of net and silver—with the lighting just right for the bare bronzed thighs."[77] The white reviewers of these articles are quite willing to be vamped by brown skin.

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[71] *Liza*, 10 3/4, 32.
[72] *Chocolate Dandies*, 7.
[73] *Strut* clippings file.
[74] Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 173.
[75] "Shuffle Along," *Wilkes-Barre Times Ledger* (Wilkes-Barre, PA), September 7, 1922.
[76] *Strut* clippings file; "Plantation Revue," *Variety*, July 21, 1922.
[77] Ibid.

The chorus's connection to jazz music joins it with a sense of newness, just as the willing parallels to a show like *Ziegfeld's* connects it the Machine Age: the female choruses were seen not as individuals or even human beings but rather as "rarified ornaments, performing machines, and obedient soldier-like puppets."[78] Van Vechten recognized this connection, and found a flaw in it that led to the overall failure of the black musical comedies:

> The tendency which is likely to have the ultimate effect of destroying the last remnants of general public interest in these revues is the persistent demand, on the part of the producers, for light chorus and dancing girls. The girls latterly on exhibition are so nearly white that what with the injudicious application of whitening and the employment of amber illumination (together with the added fact that all of them have straight, and many of them red or blonde hair), there is nothing to distinguish them from their sisters in the *Scandals* or *Artists and Models* save their superior proficiency in the Charleston.[79]

Plainly stated, Van Vechten is accusing the choruses of performing in whiteface. His solution to this problem is not banish the choruses, as he advises should be done to the unfashionable minstrel elements, but rather combine the vogue for the chorus with a "wild" primitivism equated matter-of-factly with skin color:

> Awaiting the appearance of a... chocolate Ziegfeld, permit me to offer a few hints to prospective purveyors of Negro revues. First and last: advertise for a dark chorus. I don't think it will be necessary to look for "chocolate to the bone" cuties. Indeed, a fascinating effect might be achieved by engaging a rainbow chorus: six black girls, six "seal-browns," six "high Yellas," and six pale creams.... [I]t is impossible to set a limit to what might be done with this human palette of color.

Van Vechten believes his undisguised color fetishization is the method for revitalizing the black musical genre, but this is less important than the fact that he so clearly separates the choruses from minstrelsy. The genre needs a chocolate Ziegfeld, not another Bert Williams.

In counterdistinction to the fluid but contained racial alchemy of the female choruses in these musicals, the male characters were more rigidly classified racially, especially with the accentuation of the blackface mask. Out of all the instances of blackface performance covered in this dissertation, I was most surprised by its tenacity in the Broadway musicals. But these shows' creators clung to and used blackface in a unique way, to evoke a particular feeling and signal a certain message. The blackface mask was necessary ballast for the productions, grounding them in tradition and nostalgia.

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[78] Glenn, 179.
[79] Van Vechten, 429.

What I call ballast, Van Vechten called dead wood. His analysis of the black musical business in "Prescription for the Negro Theatre," insightful in some ways yet clouded by racism in others, detailed minstrelsy as an unnecessary hold-over from an earlier time that should be eliminated. He writes:

> [T]he comedians blacked their faces and carmined and enlarged their lips. This is a minstrel tradition that seems to die hard, even with colored minstrels.... For it to be followed blindly, unthinkingly, by practically every comedian in the Negro theatre is worse than an absurdity. In the end it will amount to suicide.[80]

He is referring here to an aesthetic death, not race suicide. The separation of old obsolete minstrelsy with the new modern Broadway entertainment is made clear as he proscribes:

> Seek beauties who can dance and sing, and see that the lightest is about the shade of strong coffee before the cream is poured in, and I guarantee that your show will be a success even if you throw in all the old stuff, the cemetery scene with the ghost, the moon song rendered by the tenor who doesn't know what to do with his hands, and the "I want to be in Dixie," or the Mammy, or the cotton-bale song. It might be well, however, to eliminate these stale features also, together with the repulsive liver-lips and cork complexions of the comedians.[81]

Again, and leading back to the major tension of modernity and obsolescence that these plays exhibit, his sentiments here acknowledge the repulsiveness of blackface and see it as a symbol of an outdated style of performance.

For a more complete understanding of the place of black racial impersonation upon the New York stage, the blackface in these trend-setting musicals should be examined alongside its use in other white-authored productions occurring in the same place and at the same time, which were considered current and even daring. Racial impersonation through blackface by whites took two forms: they performed in serious roles as African Americans, as in the 1926 melodrama *Lulu Belle*, or had blackface interpolated into the plot, as with 1925's *The Jazz Singer*. (Both dramas played on Broadway and have scenes set in New York.) The title character in *Lulu Belle* was engaged in a sophisticated yet stereotyped form of racial impersonation; she was played by a white actress who in the world of the play is African American, but was known to the audience, was expected to be known, as white.[82] For the other title character, Jackie Rabinowitz/Jack Robin, blackface is part of the plot—in actuality is the plot. Andrea Most provides a nuanced reading of the play in this context:

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[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid., 430.

> Blackface in *The Jazz Singer*... is not a marker of modernity. In fact, Raphelson's play can more easily be read as a nostalgic dramatization of a set of issues, tropes, and ideologies that were quickly fading in 1925. Blackface minstrelsy itself was no longer a popular form by the late 1920s. While minstrel costumes, music, dance styles, and characters still cropped up in revues and occasionally in musical comedy, blackface performance was more often used as a sentimental reference to times gone by.[83]

Here, also, blackface is a nostalgia trip for white audiences. But I must disagree with Most's later assessment that blackface was "a marker not of blackness but of race itself" in *The Jazz Singer* and concurrent white musical comedies.[84] Despite the obviousness of the artifice, I believe that blackface was a ersatz symbol specifically for black identity in society at large. The attitude of producers of serious drama in New York can best be summed up by a description of the Coney Island scene in a review of John Alden Carpenter's 1926 jazz ballet *Skyscrapers*, which describes the "black, or blacked" performers in the chorus.[85] Legitimate drama like *Skyscrapers* never had actors who were black *and* blacked. There was an assumed, even assured, redundancy to such a statement.

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[82] See James Wilson, "'That's the Kind of Gal I Am': Drag Balls, Lulu Belles, and 'Sexual Perversion' in the Harlem Renaissance" in *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theatre History*, ed. Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 262–87.

[83] Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 39.

[84] Ibid.

Every black musical comedy had blackface roles in them. In contrast to the nostalgic historical gloss of *The Jazz Singer*'s blackface, it was part of the living form. Moreover, the actors playing these roles—from Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles in *Shuffle Along* and *Runnin' Wild*, to Eddie Hunter in *How Come*, to Johnny Hudgins and Lew Payton in *Chocolate Dandies*—already had lengthy, sometimes decades-long, careers as blackface comedians. The characters were always male (with the possible exception of Josephine Baker as the "comedy chorus girl" in her break-out role from *Chocolate Dandies*).[86] They were never seen by the audience putting on the makeup, nor was the mask mentioned in the plot. From *Shuffle Along* through *Chocolate Dandies*, these were always exclusively comedic characters with stereotypical mannerisms and bad intentions. They were never romantic leads and always acted in ways that other characters did not. Such figures were placed in a social and economic position within the society of the show similar to the position of blacks in the US at large.

In these musicals the blackfaced clown is often granted a temporary elevation in status, with his inability to adapt to newfound respect, importance, or wealth creating entire scenes of sustained comedy. These characters assume social roles for which they are obviously unsuited. In *Shuffle*, it is the mayoral win by Steve Jenkins. In *Liza*, Bodiddily embezzles money, only to be swindled out of it by another character, only to have it returned to the rightful owner. During the opening scene of act two in *How Come*, Rastus must pretend to be a pharmacist in order to swindle a buyer out of money to be invested in a drug store. When Dumb Luck wins the horserace in *Chocolate Dandies,* its owner suddenly becomes the president of Bamville Bank. In his ineptitude and suspicion, he fires most of the employees and loses the deposits, leading to a riot in which the bank is destroyed. The restoration of political and economic order coincides with the harmony of the social order as well—the blackfaced characters are either imprisoned or returned to their rightful positions on the lower rungs of the community. In these shows, blackface denotes blackness, but it additionally signals that the characters are the working class. This is also what blackface meant in the 1920s.

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[85] Quoted in Savran, 191.

[86] This has a certain historical connection, as minstrelsy was a male-only enterprise in the nineteenth century. Women blacking up were considered exceptions and novelties: there were minstrels and female minstrels.

So what of minstrelsy? And how was minstrelsy thought of, or even defined, by the audiences at these musicals, in relation to the musicals? The reviews of 1921's *Put and Take* offer a stark answer to these questions. The articles represent how black musical comedies in general were viewed and they say just what minstrelsy meant to a white audience in the 1920s, how it was almost acknowledged as a "white idea."

The reviews were positive, and stressed the speed, pep, and liveliness of the production while at the same time being patronizing and essentializing in their attitude toward blacks. One review stated that the actors "displayed all the characteristic intuitive skill of their race at agile jigging, syncopated melodies and comedy—in fact, they deemed to know they had but to roll their eyes to gain a laugh."[87] Another reaffirmed the imaginary gap separating the show from New York City: "A melody-laden gale from the south stormed its way into the Town Hall last night and further proof was offered that the Negro is really the only individual possessed of all the qualifications necessary to just treatment of ragtime."

Another review directly addressed minstrelsy and its place in the entertainment world. A rather evocative reference comes from this *New York Tribune* article: "The piece is most interesting when it sticks to the genre of American minstrelsy and dull only when it apes the

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[87] *Put and Take* clippings file.

'White Way' over yonder." This quotation is interesting for several reasons. The production was playing in a Broadway house, yet the reviewer feels comfortable distancing, literally distancing, minstrelsy from white entertainers and entertainments. But more important than the reviewer's assessment is how comfortably he separates the two entertainment forms and how not *of* Broadway is the minstrel show.

A fourth review supplies this confusing assessment: "There is the flavor of minstrelsy through it, although it contains no out-and-out minstrels." This seemingly straightforward summation of the production, the performers, and minstrelsy in general strikes at the heart of how the minstrel show was defined by the 1920s. Forms and categories of entertainment were colliding, but these reviewers still preserved a hierarchy of taste, with minstrelsy occupying the tired, lowbrow, pre-modern bottom rung. Minstrelsy was not a living, dynamic form of theatre in its own right; it was a style, a rigid and calcified style that other entertainments used as flavoring. These reviewers talk about minstrelsy in the past tense, an effect of other performance genres. But in that elementalizing and essentializing, it was also understood as accurately encapsulating African American life, which was itself a style to be adopted. In the 1920s minstrelsy was, had become, had finally become, black.

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Marketing Black Culture

New York was the destination for these black musicals, but it was not the last destination. Because of its allure and cachet, a run in New York ensured a tour (successful or not) elsewhere in the US. The tagline endlessly repeated in advertisements was "a hit on Broadway." This meant not just quality and success to the rest of the country but also implied that something *of* the urban metropolis traveled with the show. But touring was not, by far, the only way these cultural products, or their racial ideology, circulated. As Karen Sotiropoulos writes about the most prominent of these musicals, "*Shuffle Along*... was geared more toward marketing black culture than toward asserting black perspectives."[88] As the most recognizable black musical and also the one which most fully capitalized on the possibilities for circulation, this final section focuses exclusively on *Shuffle Along* and how it traveled after its initial Broadway run.

Shuffle Along transcended the world of musical entertainments and became a brand. This claim is made not just because of its widespread success in several media, but because at the level of a business its name had to be protected through the court system. In 1922 the *Shuffle* producers took out a restraining order against a revue show called *Plantation Days* for using their songs and stealing their name. *Variety* detailed the scheme:

> Charging piracy against "Plantation Days," the management of "Shuffle Along" has ordered attorneys to again proceed against the western colored show. Some weeks ago the "Shuffle Along" people claimed to have enjoined "Plantation Days" in the Federal court at Chicago, the restraining order being against the use of Sissle and Blake's song numbers, written for "Shuffle," and misleading advertising.
>
> It is said one Lawrence Deas, the colored stage manager for the No. 2 "Shuffle Along," upon leaving that show went to Chicago and billed himself as the producer of "Shuffle" in the presentation there of "Plantation Days." The billing used was "Shuffle Along" (in large type) to see "Plantation Days," the latter in small lettering.[89]

Plantation Days was trying to capitalize on the recognition and fame of *Shuffle Along*. The producers knew the name would mean something to Chicago audiences. The branding of *Shuffle* and the efforts to protect it became more convoluted the next year. Sissle and Blake fell out with Miller and Lyles over how to share the *Shuffle* profits. The comedy duo went on to develop a revue; the titles "Miller and Lyles's Cakewalkers" and "George White's Black Scandals" were eventually replaced by *Runnin' Wild*. As noted:

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[88] Sotiropoulos, 234.

[89] "Colored Shows Clash," *Variety*, November 17, 1922.

> The colored revue George White contemplates producing in September may be called "George White's Black Scandals" in view of the legal set-back in the injunction suit by Shuffle Along Inc., against White, Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyle [*sic*] to retain the use and infringement of the "Shuffle Along" title.

The article remarked that "Miller and Lyle... are in the peculiar position of opposing their own interests" because they would be playing opposite a show for which they were still receiving royalties.[90] Miller and Lyles wanted to bank on the name of the show (their own names were not enough) and were prevented from doing so.

Shuffle Along was such a hit that a second company was formed in November of 1921 and spent the first half of 1922 at a theatre in Brooklyn. Then the "road rights" were sold in May 1922 and a version of the production was touring the county by August, mostly to the south and southwest. The original show with the original stars spent a year in Manhattan, went to Boston, and was in Chicago by December 1922. A second road show was touring by March 1923 in the north and northeast for a total of three live shows circulating at once. This is a complicated production history to untangle, and was even confusing at the time because so many different producers had a stake in the brand. Touring productions took out injunctions against other touring productions to prevent them from playing the same cities at the same time. According to *Billboard* from March 24, 1923:

> The [second road production] is intended to play the Eastern seaboard and the Northern territory. In this connection... a Chicago detective is in New York with Miller and Lyles-Sissle and Blake as his clients, with orders to prevent the show playing Baltimore, Washington and several other cities that the original show has on their route. That show is being routed by the [Klaw and Erlanger] office, while the new organization has been negotiating with Robert Levy for a chain of colored houses in those cities.[91]

The point to stress is how quickly the show impacted US culture and how furiously producers wanted to benefit from its vogue and success. Also worth noting is the appeal and acceptability of *Shuffle Along* in all regions and types of houses around the country: white, black, mixed, and segregated.

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[90] "'Shuffle Along' Wins in Matter of Title," *Variety*, August 9, 1923.
[91] "Third 'Shuffle Along' Show," *Billboard*, March 24, 1923.

For *Shuffle Along*, the live theatrical event also circulated by way of small commodified pieces as sheet music, audio recordings, piano rolls, and over the radio; and its long-term cultural impact is partly based on these mediated cultural products that traveled around the country like a play by Arthur Kaser or an Aunt Jemima ad.[92] In doing so, they conveyed a message of African American identity different from the live event. Several things are of importance in considering how the products circulated and what effect they had on the US's racial hegemony. Firstly, some piece of technological equipment was needed to intervene between artist and audience. Second, these pieces of equipment were articles of furniture in the home and were seen as symbols of middle-class domesticity. Thirdly, the fragments of the show most easily separated from the whole production were the songs, due to their length and relative autonomy from the plot. Such atomizing of the show at the very least allows for the possibility of repressive minstrel images or existing racist ideas to tip the show's careful balances. Racism was always at the edges of the performance, ready to take center stage.

Ragtime and minstrel music's introduction into the home began in the late nineteenth century. Stephanie Dunson explains the importance of this phenomenon: "The practice that had begun in the parlor of bringing the family together to enact particular habits that were to become national ideals now served to assuage the guilt, resentment, and uncertainty of a nation in moral flux."[93] This building of national ideals intensified with the increased production and sale of pianos in the 1920s, the era when it became the home accessory without peer for those desirous of middle-class respectability.[94] Sheet music was also the most active way for people to experience the show, as home or amateur performances a la Kaser's scripts. Over a dozen songs from *Shuffle Along* were printed and sold in stores and through mail-order by M. Witmark and Sons, one of the largest publishers in the country. Fortunately for the integrity of the songs, the images on the covers were less caricatured than in earlier eras. The first *Shuffle Along* sheet-music cover featured a row of fashionably dressed legs and feet marching in a line—no racial designation is indicated.[95] Still, the purchaser was most likely aware of the stage musical and knew the songs were written by and about African Americans. This awareness can allow for any amount of racial recalibration when interpreting the songs. Robert Dawidoff writes in an analysis of Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band" that its lyrics are "clearly about how anyone can Africanize him- or herself."[96] Such "Africanizing" was also a likely result of playing the *Shuffle Along* songs in white homes.

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[92] Eubie Blake recorded twenty piano rolls in 1921. See Eubie Blake, *Memories of You*, Biograph DK 30146. Sissle and Blake, as well as the cast of *Shuffle*, performed on local radio stations when touring to promote the show. See William Randle, jr., "Black Entertainers on Radio, 1920–1930," *The Black Perspective in Music* 5, no. 1 (1977): 67–74.

[93] Stephanie Dunson, "The Minstrel in the Parlor: Nineteenth-Century Sheet Music and the Domestication of Blackface Minstrelsy," *American Transcendental Quarterly* (2002): 251.

A related, though distinct, way that *Shuffle Along* entered the home was through phonograph recordings. Unlike sheet music, this technology was first being domesticated at the time of *Shuffle*'s popularity. "Jazz was the first new musical genre to be widely disseminated by the phonograph," Savran notes. He continues, "Because the phonograph transformed the visual and performative orientation of minstrelsy, the 'sound of white-constructed "blackness"' became more idiosyncratic, mutable, and disembodied."[97] Similar to this statement, but from a different angle, Douglas observes that these recordings allowed jazz to enter middle-class white homes where blacks would not have been invited.[98]

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[94] Douglas, 365.

[95] Even when African Americans were included, as they were in a later edition of "I'm Just Wild about Harry," the image is of a dapper young black man serenading a woman. See Kimball and Bolcom, 109.

[96] Robert Dawidoff, "The Kind of Person You Have to Sound Like to Sing 'Alexander's Ragtime Band,'" in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, ed. Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 301.

[97] Savran, 28, 33.

The segregation of blacks from white homes extended to the recordings themselves. According to Tim Brooks's encyclopedic *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry,* "Sissle and Blake's own recorded versions [of *Shuffle Along*] appear to have sold well, especially Blake's dance-band medleys on the widely distributed Victor label." He continues:

> However the biggest sales went to cover versions by a wide variety of artists (mostly white) on major labels such as Victor, Columbia, and Brunswick... In all, more than forty recordings of songs from the show have been identified during these two years [1921–22]; "Harry" led with sixteen versions, followed by "Gypsy [Blues]" with twelve (including medleys).[99]

Similar to the sheet music, a racialized recalibration of the songs occurred when they were mediated through these domestic technologies and white consumers were allowed to choose how they heard the numbers. Also, white artists could choose which songs to record. The songs performed by other artists were the numbers with conventional music and lyrics. Assiduously avoided was any hint of blackness through performing either the jazztime music or the racially tinged lyrics. "I'm Just Wild about Harry" is a romantic number described in the sheet music as a "one-step song." The other one-step tune of the show is "Bandana Days," which was only recorded by Sissle and Blake. This is also the case for both "If You've Never Been Vamped by a Brownskin," that took blackness as its subject, and the racy "I'm Craving for That Kind of Love." The extreme numbers for both minstrelsy and jazz—"Uncle Tom and Old Black Joe" and "I'm Simply Full of Jazz," respectively—were not recorded at all.[100] Sound recordings offered a safe and segregated distance.

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[98] Douglas, 386.
[99] Brooks, 378–79.
[100] Ibid., 393–95.

As a conclusion to this chapter, and for the most part this dissertation, I can think of no better image than that of three *Shuffle Along*s criss-crossing the country while incalculable recordings spin on countless phonographs and limitless copies of sheet music rest on innumerable pianos. This, to me, is the portrait of race, culture, and technology in the early 1920s—in all of its contradictions, confusions, and circulations.

Conclusion
"One Live as Two, Two Live as One": Dialectics, Death, and the Uprooted Bamboo Tree

This dissertation has described how blackface and minstrelsy circulated through US culture, and, for the most part, examples in the chapters focused on products which circulated successfully: instances where money, materials, and messages flowed through all levels of society and into all areas public and domestic, spreading a racism based on fear, habit, and ignorance. The dissertation has assiduously avoided giving undue weight to definitive markings such as starts or finishes, beginnings or endings. Instead it has marveled at the continued interconnections of racialized ideas within a mass-culture marketplace. As a conclusion, I want to look at a product whose circulation was interrupted, despite having all the engines of culture working for its success: the 1921–22 Broadway-bound musical *Under the Bamboo Tree*. It stalled because of its headliner Bert Williams's death, the only black actor in the cast and the only actor in blackface. This conclusion examines how Williams's performance history contributed to the construction of the show, details at how his death effected the production, and analyzes how his memorialization encapsulates the racial thinking of the 1920s. As Williams embodies the concerns of the dissertation, both material (technology, blackface) and methodological (race, dialectics), the event of his passing is an appropriate moment on which to draw this project to a close.

Williams signified the contradictions of blackface as much as he lived the history of minstrelsy. His work with George Walker starting in the 1890s, ground-breaking musicals of the 1900s, and career with Ziegfeld's Follies during the 1910s have been detailed in numerous biographies and biographical sketches.[1] Most of these focus on the performer's successful and better known productions of the first two decades of the twentieth century, with *Under the Bamboo Tree* an unfortunate and unrepresentative coda to an otherwise complicated life on the stage.

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[1] Ralph Allen, "Bert Williams: The Two Faces of a Forgotten Star," *American Legacy* (Winter 2005); Ann Charters, *Nobody: The Story of Bert Williams* (New York: Macmillan, 1970); Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky": Bert*

But the ways the producers built *Under the Bamboo Tree* around Williams actually encompasses his whole career and his place within the cultural landscape. When Williams first teamed up with producer A.H. Woods for the production, he was considered past his prime and a predictable has-been. But several factors then led to the involvement of the Shubert brothers, two of the most powerful theatre producers of the era.[2] A combination of several events, both effects of the early 1920s, restored Williams's prominence and gave him new viability. First, the show can be grouped with *Liza* and *How Come* as musicals that were considered for Broadway thanks to *Shuffle Along*. (Williams and Woods teamed up to work on the show before *Shuffle* was a hit—the Shuberts added their money and facilities afterward.) Also, Williams's audio recordings of songs and skits were selling remarkably well: in the year 1920, one million copies of fourteen recordings were shipped to US stores.[3] These cultural indicators led the producers to believe they would capitalize on their investment, even as they paid the star an exorbitant weekly wage coupled with a percentage of the profits.[4] After the impresario brothers added their playhouses and financial backing to the show, Williams—not just his character, but Williams—was moved to the foreground.

Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Camille F. Forbes, *Introducing Bert Williams: Burnt Cork, Broadway, and the Story of America's First Black Star* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008); Sandra L. Richards, "Bert Williams: The Man and The Mask," *Mime, Mask, and Marionette* (Spring 1978); E.L. Smith, *Bert Williams: A Biography of the Pioneer Black Comedian* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1992).

[2] At their height, Lee and J.J. Shubert owned and operated a thousand playhouses around the country. Shubert Archives, "Introduction," www.shubertarchive.org, (accessed January 5, 2010).

[3] Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890–1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 144.

[4] Williams was paid $1250 weekly (more than double the next nearest salary), as well as ten percent of the gross. *Under the Bamboo Tree* file, Shubert Archives, New York.

Productions routinely change, and sometimes radically, as they prepare for a Broadway run. *Under the Bamboo Tree* did as well, but the ways that it was altered reflect some very deeply entrenched ideas about Williams's performing persona and African Americans in general. Despite its frothy blandness, *Under the Bamboo Tree* exhibits the depressingly casual racism of the 1920s.

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I Lak-a-Change Your Name

Written by white authors Walter de Leon and Edward Delaney Dunn, *Under the Bamboo Tree* was a conventional comedy with little to distinguish itself in either plotting or characterization from other musicals of the time. It is set around a hotel on an island off the coast of California. An eccentric millionaire has recently died, but before departing he scattered clues in the vicinity to the whereabouts of a treasure. The attention brought to the hotel complicates the romance between a layabout playboy and an honest working-class girl, who are united at the end as the treasure is revealed to be cases of champaign and whiskey. Assisting in the creation and eventual resolution of the chaos is the hotel porter, Ananias Washington, played by Williams.[5]

The show was originally called "The Pink Slip" in reference to the hidden treasure narrative, but it changed somewhat inexplicably to *Under the Bamboo Tree* after the Shuberts became co-producers. The new title alluded to a 1902 song of the same name. Written by African Americans (music by Bob Cole with lyrics by J. Rosamond and James W. Johnson) and possibly based on the spiritual "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen,"[6] the number had been popular in white vaudeville for its upbeat melody and innocent African primitivism. The lyrics describe a Zulu princess wooed by her suitor through the romantic words of the chorus:

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 158.

> If you lak-a-me, lak I lak-a-you
> And we lak-a-both the same,
> I lak-a-say, this very day,
> I lak-a-change your name;
>
> 'Cause I love-a-you and love-a-you true
> And if you-a love-a-me,
> One live as two, two live as one
> Under the bamboo tree.[7]

The song, like the jungle exoticism it sweetly evoked, was still circulating in 1921 and had lingering resonances into the 1930s.[8] Its connection to the play was so tenuous and rushed that, in early drafts of the script, the name of the lodging where the action takes place is scratched out in pencil and "Bamboo Tree Hotel" written next to it.[9] The number was never performed in the show, nor was the star known for singing it. Rather, a vague sense of exoticism and blackness had an unfortunate hold on what Williams meant to the producers, and what they hoped he meant to an audience.

In successive drafts of *Under the Bamboo Tree*, the emphasis shifted from the madcap plot to the antics of the porter. The character became another iteration of the "Jonah Man" figure that Williams had been performing for decades. Williams himself brilliantly defined this archetype in a 1918 article titled "The Comic Side of Trouble":

> I am the "Jonah Man," the man who, even if it rained soup, would be found with a fork in his hand and no spoon in sight, the man whose fighting relatives come to visit him and whose head is always dented by the furniture they throw at each

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[7] Bob Cole, James W. Johnson, and J. Rosamond Johnson, *Under the Bamboo Tree* (New York: Jos. W. Stern and Co., 1902).

[8] It was even referenced in T.S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes; Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama* (1932). Quoted in Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 146.

[9] *Under the Bamboo Tree* file.

> other. There are endless variations of this idea, fortunately; but if you sift them, you will find the principle of human nature at the bottom of it all.[10]

The Jonah Man's problems are both quotidian and domestic, they revolve around the home and the comforts unsuccessfully sought there. The principle of human nature elucidated by the character is one of perseverance coupled with an expectant abjection.

The show now focused on the sole black actor/character/archetype, and this common understanding of Williams's persona. A representative example is the song "Puppy Dog," an act two number composed specifically for Williams in this production. Onstage with only an abandoned canine, he sang:

> When folks look at you,
> The first thing they do is laugh;
> You ain't comical but,
> You is such a mutt, they just laugh.
>
> Your earses and your pawses, too,
> Don't look like they was meant for you;
> 'Cause you is a joke to educated folk,
> Just like me; I'm telling true.[11]

With its mood of oppressed alienation, "Puppy Dog" echoes tunes from Williams's repertoire stretching back to his signature song "Nobody": a "great paean to self-negation"[12] written for Williams in 1905. This Jonah Man moment was considered one of the few highlights of the show. Such overpowering, even overdetermined, ghosting proved providential for the star.[13]

Under the Bamboo Tree traveled during the fall of 1921 and winter of 1922 to polish it up for Broadway: first several cities in New Jersey, then Cincinnati, Chicago, and Detroit. Changes were made at each step along the way, though the production continued to draw poor houses and rarely recouped its weekly expenditures. Williams suffered immensely from various ailments at this time and had to be dressed and undressed at each performance.[14] The weak material that Williams had to work with, along with his awareness that he was carrying the show, contributed to his worsening condition. In Detroit, Williams collapsed mid-performance, something initially assumed by the audience to be a part of the fun.[15] He was rushed home, and died on March 4, 1922, in New York. The *Shuffle Along* orchestra played at his public funeral.

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[10] Bert Williams, "The Comic Side of Trouble," *American Magazine*, January 1918, 33.
[11] *Under the Bamboo Tree* file. I have followed the punctuation added by Forbes, 316.
[12] Chude-Sokei, 35.
[13] See Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001).

The producers briefly halted the production, but re-mounted it at the end of the month. With Williams gone, the porter character no longer commanded attention. The emphasis returned to the romantic plot and the title became "Violet," after the poor hairdresser in love with the profligate millionaire's son. The production endured one more name change, eventually settling on the generic "In the Moonlight."[16] It never did reach Broadway.

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If You Lak-a-Me, Lak I Lak-a-You

What Bert Williams meant during his lifetime—to African Americans, to the entertainment world—had been discussed and debated since his rise to international prominence at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the post–World War I era he was seen, like black minstrels in general, as an embarrassing anomaly at a time of political and artistic modernism. As Louis Chude-Sokei notes, Williams's "individual success was beginning to be read as a sign of cultural and political failure; a mise en scène in which the space between mask and flesh was being erased by the exigencies of an emergent radicalism."[17] In memorializing the performer, colleagues set out to counter this perception.

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[14] Forbes, 318.

[15] Ibid., 319. There are any number of sad, poetic notions to be extracted from this scene. Caryl Phillips's fictional life of Williams finds an uncomfortable poignancy in the fact that he collapsed in the same city where he first blacked up more than a quarter-century earlier. Caryl Phillips, *Dancing in the Dark* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 205.

[16] *Under the Bamboo Tree* file.

The first assessment of Williams's life was published almost immediately, as an attempt at creating a positive legacy. Bearing the slightly patronizing title of *Bert Williams: Son of Laughter*, it was a collection of essays written by friends in the entertainment world like Eddie Cantor as well as political figures like W.E.B. Du Bois.[18] Editor Mabel Rowland's method of rescuing Williams from dismissive radicalism was to separate the performer from his blackface mask. As she stated in the preface, "The searching light of truth, it is intended, shall penetrate the burnt cork and show the man's nobility of character in its right relation to his mobility of characterization."[19] The sentence is remarkable not only for prizing Williams from his onstage persona but also for separating truth from burnt cork.

Rowland largely failed in her attempt to prove that Williams was not really his onstage persona. The unintentional pun in the phrase "his mobility of characterization" is the reason: she wanted to explain his expert clowning, but Williams in blackface was an incredibly powerful circulating force that no amount of earnestly kind words could stop. His own death could not stop it. Because Williams's performance style and mannerisms were so recognizable, several African American blackface entertainers tried to steal his oversized shoes. One was Hamtree Harrington, who billed himself as the "vest pocket Bert Williams" even before the performer died. In 1922's *Strut Miss Lizzie*, Harrington performed a skit called "Darktown Poker Club" in which he played "an entire poker game by himself" and loses.[20] The same routine appeared in a stage show called *Keep It Up*.[21] This pantomime was one of Williams's most famous skits from his solo days with Ziegfeld's Follies.[22] After Williams's demise, both Harrington and Eddie Hunter (in *How Come*) publicized themselves as heirs to his position as the preeminent black blackface star in the country. Williams continued to circulate as a nostalgic element of popular culture.

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[17] Chude-Sokei, 18.
[18] Mabel Rowland, ed., *Bert Williams: Son of Laughter* (New York: The English Crafters, 1923).
[19] Ibid., vi.
[20] *Strut Miss Lizzie* clippings file, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

The performative transmission described here resembles Joseph Roach's concept of surrogation, in which culture "reproduces and re-creates itself" through "memory, performance, and substitution."[23] But in analyzing these inherited gestures as circulating bits of Williams, credit must be given to the role of technology. Williams himself understood its power: according to *Variety*, "One of the last acts of [his] life was the recording of his song 'Not Lately' on a phonograph record."[24] And much like the copied poker routine, the record industry produced numerous Williams sound-alikes. One was, again, Hamtree Harrington, who "made a series of records for Brunswick and Vocalion... very much in the Williams style; in fact, some of his songs were virtual clones of Williams's tunes."[25] Williams was cloned, reproduced, became the ghost in the machine. Like Aunt Jemima, whose grinning visage on the pancake box existed as shorthand for a sense of Southern submissiveness and plentitude, Williams had become a brand. His name, blackface image, onstage antics, and on-record voice were marketable qualities. Rowland could not deracinate Williams from the minstrel tradition that by the 1920s he came to emblematize; there was no possibility of uprooting the bamboo tree.

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[21] Brooks, 145.

[22] It even becoming the basis for one of his few forays into film, 1916's *A Natural-Born Gambler*. Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films*, 2nd ed. (Langham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1995), 261–63.

[23] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2.

[24] "Bert Williams' Last," *Variety*, April 14, 1922.

[25] Brooks, 145.

Similarly to Rowland's volume of essays, more recent historicizations have methods for discussing the performer and his blackface mask. Some describe him as "a kind of polarity: the man and the mask, the private personality and the public persona."[26] Others, rather than distance the two, describe Williams as a cagey mimic who appropriated existing minstrel tropes in order to subvert them. For example, *The Last "Darky"* theorizes how "Williams and Walker were able to sneak a legitimate and innovative black musical theater into popular culture underneath Williams's mask."[27] In the decades since his death, Williams has symbolized many things and is assessed in many different ways: a misunderstood genius stifled by racism; a self-hating black man who was an embarrassment to his race; a West Indian masquerading as an African American masquerading as a minstrel.

In justifying these different positions, historians can turn to the same handful of famous quotations by and about Williams which support widely different perceptions of him. The historians treat him as a contradictory figure and the statements are read as tensive negations. These include Booker T. Washington's pathetically conciliatory assessment of his career: "Williams has done more for the race than I have. He has smiled his way into people's hearts. I have been obliged to fight my way."[28] And W.C. Fields's heartbreaking assessment of his creative gifts: "Bert Williams was the funniest man I ever saw and the saddest man I ever knew."[29] And Williams himself: "I have no grievance whatsoever against the world or the people in it: I'm having a grand time. I am what I am, not because of what I am but in spite of it."[30] All three statements, considered as balanced tensions, justify widely different understandings of Williams.

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[26] Richards, 7.
[27] Chude-Sokei, 32.
[28] This quotation, attributed to Washington, appears without citation as an epigram to Charter's *Nobody*. It may be apocryphal, but certainly sums up Washington's sentiments regarding Williams in his magazine profile of the performer. See Booker T. Washington, "Bert Williams," *American Magazine*, September 1910, 600–604.
[29] Rowland, 128.

But I am unwilling to accept summations of Williams's life as contradictory antipodes of smiling/fighting or funny/sad. Rather, in light of this dissertation and its examinations, I would like to consider the quotations dialectically as expressions of how race relates to culture. (And Williams's statement of being/non-being sounds straightforwardly Hegelian.) Race is neither an essentially biological characteristic nor a purely ahistorical idea—it exists at the meeting place of the physical and the conceptual: it must. The same applies to culture. A dialectical equation of race and culture also incorporates time, speed, and circulation. If the quotations are set in dialectical motion with race advancing the aims of culture as culture mutates the parameters of race, they illustrate a different and better reality for all black minstrel performers: Williams's statement defines identity as a state of constant rejuvenation, Fields's observation reflects the flickering realities of performance, and Washington's smiling and fighting are synonymous.

This dissertation has analyzed racist imagery that blanketed the US in the 1920s, creating a constantly circulating and ever-supporting quilt of denigrating ideas. At the same time, it has rejected many different readings of US culture and race formation attendant upon the knowledge that the era's racism was later overcome. Rather, a dialectical understanding of these concepts, grounded in the physical and the historical, allows for (hopes for) the visions and revisions that eventually led to such later advancements without presenting them as inevitable outcomes.

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[30] Williams, 61.

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