

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Embodying Race, Performing Citizenship:
Racial Impersonation and Immigrant Identity in American Popular Entertainment, 1870–1920

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Field of Theatre and Drama

By

Maria De Simone

EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

September 2021

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Abstract

Embodying Race, Performing Citizenship: Racial Impersonation and Immigrant Identity in American Popular Entertainment, 1870–1920

Maria De Simone

“Embodying Race, Performing Citizenship” investigates racial and ethnic impersonations in American popular entertainment, especially vaudeville, between the 1870s and the 1920s. I focus my analyses on first-generation Irish, Chinese, and Jewish Eastern European artists and their American-born children during a time when the United States had absorbed the highest number of immigrants from the most varied ethnic, national, and cultural backgrounds since the country’s foundation. While racial impersonation often reiterated stereotypical and derogatory representations, I highlight immigrant artists’ awareness of its power to reshape identity politics. I argue that due to racial impersonation’s potent impact on audiences, immigrant artists deployed it as a tool to challenge fixed conceptions of racial subjectivities, race relations, and belonging to the national ethos.

Immigrant performances, more effectively than racial impersonations by white, Protestant, American-born artists, highlight a tension between the validation of ethnic origins—interpolating between authentic and stereotypical depictions—and their rejection. Such a tension suggests that the pathway towards “Americanization” encompasses sudden sprints, false starts, and missteps. Thus, American immigration history should not be framed as a progressive narrative concluding with the assimilation of the foreign, but rather a complex process of negotiation that requires the *performance* of race to assert or contest self-identified or externally assigned racial identities.

Whereas racial impersonation has already received the attention of scholars in theatre and performance studies, critical race theory, and cultural studies, this study goes beyond stage representations to focus on the particular immigrant experiences motivating or affecting them. I ask, what role did immigrant experiences play in the creation and evolution of theatrical racial representation in the United States? What do immigrant racial impersonations tell us about contemporaneous ideas of race, civic relations, and national belonging? Lastly, how did immigrant racial impersonations impact the way audiences came to understand race?

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to those who assisted me throughout this project. I am thankful and extremely humbled by the intellectual curiosity, generous patience, and diligent mentoring of Professor Tracy C. Davis, who guided this dissertation and my academic development since I arrived at Northwestern. Most sincere thanks to the members of my dissertation committee, Professors Susan Manning, Harvey Young, and Elizabeth W. Son for their generous consideration and insightful critiques. I also wish to extend my gratitude to Prof. Ji-Yeon Yuh for the thought-provoking discussions on American immigration history, and Prof. Krystyn Moon for helping me navigate the Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files at the National Archives. Hayana Kim, Keary Watts, Weston Twardowski, and all my colleagues in the Interdisciplinary Theatre and Drama program at Northwestern University provided invaluable intellectual and emotional encouragement. Finally, many thanks to my “writing buddies” Vanessa Tonelli and Zach Nilsen, who offered their feedback and wrote with me in coffee shops around Chicago and Venice.

I would like to extend thanks to the institutions and groups that offered me a supportive intellectual community during the designing and drafting phases of this project: the Social Science Research Council’s Dissertation Development Program; Newberry Library’s “The Archive: Form, Theory, and Practice” workshop; the Popular Entertainment Working Group at the International Federation for Theatre Research; and the Comedy Studies Working Group at the American Society for Theatre Research. Many thanks to the institutions that funded my dissertation research: the Mellon Foundation, the Buffett Institute for Global Affairs, and Northwestern’s Graduate School, School of Communication, Office of Fellowships, and Gender

and Sexuality Program. Lastly, my gratitude goes to the Archivists who made this research easier and fun, especially Sylvia Wong at the Shubert Archives and Aaron Seltzer and Brita Merkel at the Seattle and San Francisco National Archives respectively.

I could not have reached the finish line on this project without the friends and families who encouraged, reassured, and motivated me during my last year of graduate school: Gabby, Matt, and Jude Randle-Bent, Sean Pohorence and Sara Pridgen, Elena Weber and Chris Odenthal, Martin Repinecz, and Luisa Iandolo. The love of my brother Paolo, my mother Cira, and my father Vincenzo has been an embarrassment of riches. Most of all, I owe many thanks to Yajit Jain, the best husband and work partner ever. We were in this together, from start to finish. Thank you for pushing me beyond what I used to call limits, for making everything less scary, for your unwavering love.

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List of Repository, Record Group or Collection Abbreviations

Arthur Frank Wertheim Papers: Bair's notes

Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files: CEACF

Eddie Cantor Papers: ECP

Elinore Sisters Vaudeville Act Papers: ESVAP

Margaret Blake Alverson Collection: MBAC

Museum of the City of New York: MCNY

National Archives and Record Administration: NARA

New York Public Library for the Performing Arts: NYPLPA

Robinson Locke Collection: RLC

Sophie Tucker Scrapbooks: STS

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Chapter 1: Theorizing Racial Impersonation and Immigrant Identities in American Entertainment, 1870–1920

On March 10, 1884 the Irish-majority town of Scranton in eastern Pennsylvania was in an uproar. The disruption was brought by the announcement that “the angular, irresistible, and audacious phiz of Pat Rooney” would perform his Irish songs and dances at the Academy of Music that evening. *The New York Times* wrote that as Scranton was only five hours away from New York City, its residents were “frequently favored with some Metropolitan ‘talent.’” Yet occasionally, the reporter explained, “that which passes for genuine genius in Gotham is not appreciated here, especially in the aesthetic Irish comedy.” Pat Rooney was one of thousands of Irish impersonators touring the United States on the vaudeville circuit. Scranton’s Irish audiences were alarmed by Rooney’s visit because they remembered his performance two years prior, when he caricatured the town’s chief of police, Patrick Golden, who was also of Irish origin. “It was well known,” *The New York Times* revealed, that Golden, “who threatened on that occasion to trash the originator of ‘Muldoon, the Solid Man,’ even if it cost him his belt and club, was nursing his wrath to keep it warm.” Accordingly, on arriving in Scranton, Rooney was warned that “if he attempted to ridicule anybody in town, and particularly Officer Golden, he might expect to have his skull cracked.” “He was also told,” the journalist stressed, “that the burlesque of the Irish character was not agreeable, and that there were several people in town who would not mind ‘cleaning out his show’ in case he attempted to present any of his low libels on the Celtic race.”¹

¹ “Pat Rooney in Trouble: Unappreciative Irishmen In Scranton Make the Comedian’s Life a Burden,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 1884, 4.

This *New York Times* article is the only negative piece of criticism I could trace on Pat Rooney. By not including a description of the performance, it makes assessments impossible: why were Rooney's Irish impersonations appreciated everywhere *but* Scranton? Racial and ethnic impersonation had become a popular genre thanks to the craze for blackface minstrelsy starting in the 1840s.² With the rise of vaudeville a few decades later, the genre traveled far and wide on a theatre circuit that for the first time in history embraced the whole country. In New York City, the *New York Times*' reporter implied, Rooney was a "genuine genius," but in Scranton, where the majority of residents were Irish American, just the memory of Rooney ridiculing an outstanding member of the Irish community was a serious affront.

To resolve the situation, Rooney's manager visited the mayor's office. He meant to explain that a single caricature should not be interpreted as attacking an entire ethnic group, but the mayor retorted that since "few Americans had time or inclination [...] to read Irish history, and their impressions were generally formed by what they saw on the stage," it was important to represent *all* Irish people in a good light. Remarkably, the mayor of Scranton did not justify his constituents' reaction by highlighting their Irish heritage, nor did he argue against Rooney's impersonations to protect Chief Golden's reputation. Scranton's Irish residents certainly did not appreciate seeing their ethnicity or any member of their community mocked—but that was not the whole point. According to the mayor, racial impersonation had such an impact on the audience that they derived their entire understanding of race from it. Racial impersonation was a "history lesson" for many Americans and although the idea might surprise scholars today, it was widely accepted by late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century theatergoers.

² Throughout the dissertation, I use the terms "racial impersonation" to designate all theatrical depictions of both race and ethnicity.

While racial impersonation often reiterated stereotypical and derogatory representations, this study highlights immigrant artists' awareness of its role as a history lesson. I argue that due to racial impersonation's powerful impact on audiences' understanding of race, immigrant artists deployed it as a tool to challenge fixed conceptions of racial subjectivities, race relations, and belonging to the national ethos. Immigrant performances, more effectively than racial impersonations by white, Protestant, American-born artists, highlight a tension between the validation of ethnic origins—interpolating between authentic and stereotypical depictions—and their rejection. Such a tension suggests that the pathway towards “Americanization” encompasses sudden sprints, false starts, and missteps. Thus, American immigration history should not be framed as a progressive narrative concluding with the assimilation of the foreign, but rather a complex process of negotiation that requires the *performance* of race to assert or contest self-identified or externally assigned racial identities. Whereas racial impersonation has already received the attention of scholars in theatre and performance studies, critical race theory, and cultural studies, this study goes beyond stage representations to focus on the particular immigrant experiences motivating or affecting them. I ask, what role did immigrant experiences play in the creation and evolution of theatrical racial representation in the United States? What do immigrant racial impersonations tell us about contemporaneous ideas of race, civic relations, and national belonging? Lastly, how did immigrant racial impersonations impact the way audiences came to understand race?

This study investigates racial impersonations in American popular entertainment, especially vaudeville, between the 1870s and the 1920s. I focus my analyses on first-generation Irish, Chinese, and Jewish Eastern European artists and their American-born children during a time in which the United States absorbed the highest number of immigrants from the most varied

ethnic, national, and cultural backgrounds since the country's foundation. The elements that I consider constitutive of racial impersonation are: 1) racially or ethnically recognizable costumes and/or makeup; 2) racial jokes and/or stereotypes in characters and comedy; 3) distinct national/ethnic languages or English accents typically associated with a specific racial or ethnic group, and 4) music and dance commonly associated with specific racial or ethnic groups due to their origin within that group or specific references in lyrics.

To select representative performers as case studies I sampled vaudeville and variety programs for theatres in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco.³ Between 1870 and 1920, impersonators most frequently played German, Jewish, Irish, Chinese, Italian, and African American characters. With the help of secondary sources, I singled out immigrant performers who identified with these same races or ethnicities. Italian and German artists were active in variety and vaudeville but infrequently as racial impersonators. While possible causes need to be further investigated, I restricted my research to the remaining identities: Irish, Chinese, and Jewish European. African American artists have also been set aside due to the incomparability of their recently acquired citizenship status with that of newly arrived European and Chinese immigrants. In this introductory chapter I theorize racial impersonation by white and Chinese immigrants as a performative and political tool; contextualize racial performance within the histories of American vaudeville and patterns of immigration; summarize the project's framing theories; and explicate the rationales behind my selection of sources and methodologies.

³ Playbill Collection, Chicago Harold Washington Library; American Vaudeville Museum Collection, University of Arizona's Special Collections.

Defining Racial Impersonation

Considering how imbricated the theatrical arts are with ideas of “theatricality” as authenticity *versus* make-believe, reality *versus* appearance, and presentation *versus* representation, it is useful to begin by defining “impersonation” in opposition to “imposture.”⁴ Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait have shown how each age has had its own standards for how much of the actor should be seen behind the character. Too much might interrupt the suspension of disbelief, but too little might make fiction feel too real.⁵ For instance, an American-born actor of Chinese descent impersonating a Chinese character might pass for Chinese more easily than an ethnically white actor. During the Chinese Exclusion Era, when Chinese nationals were not allowed to emigrate to the United States, would such an “impersonation” be taken for “imposture” and put the actor’s citizenship at risk? In this case, “too little actor” might bear consequences beyond the theatre stage and imperil the actor’s right to citizenship and residence.

To be called an impostor is to be called out as a pretender who does not belong to the group who is in charge of evaluating its members’ appeals for inclusion. Those assessing potential impostors normally base their decisions on what they believe to be “authentic.” Authenticity is arguably a fixed ontological category, yet it produces a strictly binary logic: one is either real or a fake—you either belong with the group or you do not. Immigrants have repeatedly been seen in American culture as impostors of a particular sort. Among the immigrant groups I focus on in this study, the historical racialization of Chinese nationals as “aliens”

⁴ I am in debt to Tina Chen for this framework. Tina Chen, *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁵ Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait eds., *Theatricality* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

ineligible for citizenship and of Jews as a “deceiving” people has produced a series of related stereotypes in theatre and cultural products more broadly.⁶ Accusations of “passing” have often equated to accusations of “imposture” for immigrants and racial minorities. This becomes even more complicated when the immigrants are popular entertainers and “impersonators” by trade. Unlike actors interpreting a character in “legitimate” theatre during a time in which Realism was the widespread style, popular entertainers benefited from letting the audience see their private identity behind the stage persona. This strategy not only encouraged the development of a fan culture based on the feeling of proximity to the artist but also supported a thriving gossip industry emerging from newspapers’ society columns and dime novels inspired by stage personalities. The entertainers who “impersonated” another celebrity, well-known figure, or simply mimicked a different racial or ethnic identity often did not disappear in the masquerade. Rather, they played up the blurring of boundaries between actor and role to intrigue the audience and, in this way, partake in the fan and gossip cultures.

Impersonations are not meant to fool but rather reveal those little cracks that allow the viewer to see something of the actor behind the character. Impersonation is a paradoxical act whereby authenticity and reproduction are simultaneously valued and challenged. For this reason, impersonation lends itself to subversive and resistant possibilities: it disrupts binary logics and provides access to a territory where the indefinite becomes enthralling. Yet imposture and impersonation do not always result in qualitatively different performative acts. In fact, the overlap between imposture and impersonation might obfuscate different motives behind the

⁶ Harley Erdman, *Staging the Jew: The Performance of an American Ethnicity, 1860–1920* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

performances: to gain membership in a group or reveal the structure behind the participation rules. To avoid accusations of imposture, immigrants are pushed to employ techniques that reveal enough of the actor behind the character to mark the performance as impersonation. Jewish American Sophie Tucker, for example, made sure that her audience saw and heard the Jewish girl behind her blackface character. Her makeup and Black Southern dialect imitation were so convincing that her spectators gasped when, at act's closing, she would peel off one of her gloves to reveal her white skin. The surprise was even greater when she would drop Yiddish words into lyrics otherwise rendered in stereotypical Black dialect.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb “to impersonate” as an act of representation but also “embodiment of an idea, quality, or feeling.” To impersonate may mean “to pretend to be,” but that is only one definition among the many offered. Per the *OED*, more prominent are connotations related to the materiality of the body: to put an idea “into a body” or “provide a soul or spirit with a bodily form.”⁷ The immigrant artists included in this study all used impersonation to *im-personate*, or put ideas into a body. Specifically, their characters were tools to materialize (and often question) common understandings of Irishness, Chineseness, or Jewishness. The race or ethnicity of their characters was not binding—in fact, like Sophie Tucker, they might play a Black character to embody what it meant to be a Jew in America. The case of Chinese American Lee Tung Foo is especially exemplary of this. Lee imitated Scottish singer Harry Lauder, but he also admitted that his performance was too far from the original for his audience to believe he was the real Lauder. Interestingly, he also confessed that accuracy of reproduction was not his main goal; rather, by singing with as much pathos as Lauder, and

⁷ “Impersonate,” Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/92330?rskey=zfalNa&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>

pronouncing words in a correct and even specifically accented English, he wanted to challenge a widespread stereotype according to which people of Chinese descent were terrible singers and could not speak English properly.

Case Studies

Scholars in cultural and literary studies have adopted a variety of frameworks to theorize the difference between impersonation and imposture. I borrow three such frameworks—visibility, public *versus* private, and passing—as ways to introduce my case studies’ performing techniques, goals, and results. David Crane distinguishes imposture from impersonation by focusing on the “visibility” of the act: “(true) imposture—unlike impersonation—can’t be seen too easily.”⁸ Irish American Pat Rooney and Kate and May Elinore made their Irish impersonations “visible” by overstating the most theatrically Irish elements in them. Such a strategy often produced over-the-top characters, yet it was also clear that the performance’s goal was to critique debasing Irish stereotypes. Rooney and the Sisters crafted depictions of Irishness that both Irish and non-Irish audiences enjoyed by maintaining a visible separation between performer and role: in Rooney’s case, his elegant dancing and realistic costumes contrasted with his exaggerated characters; similarly, the Sisters’ grotesque aesthetic was so visibly artificial that no audience member would have interpreted it as representing the Irishness of the performers.

Hillel Schwartz understands imposture as the “compulsive assumption of invented lives” while impersonation implicates “the concerted assumption of another’s public identity.”⁹ For

⁸ David Crane, “A Personal Postscript, An Impostured Preface,” in *Pedagogy: The Question of Impersonation*, Jane Gallop ed., (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1995), ix–x.

⁹ Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles* (Boston: MIT Press, 2014), 62.

Hillel, more or less “visible” is translated into a public *versus* private issue. Chinese American Lee Tung Foo and Jue Quon Tai exploited this framework to distinguish their impersonations more or less markedly from acts of imposture. Lee assumed “another’s public identity” when he imitated Harry Lauder, but as I implied above, he never tried to hide his “private” Chinese American heritage. In contrast, by emphasizing her Chinese heritage over her American upbringing, Jue Quon Tai had spectators guess whether she actually came from China. Her private self and public persona almost coincided, yet her performance did not really “fool” anyone. When she travelled back to the United States after a tour abroad, immigration officers recognized her from theatrical newspapers: “notwithstanding she is being ‘starred’ as a ‘foreign princess,’” one officer claimed, “she is generally believed to have been born in Los Angeles, California.”¹⁰

Lastly, Gayle Wald’s definition of passing as “reflect[ing] subjects’ desire to control the terms of their racial definition, rather than be[ing] subject to the definitions of white supremacy” is productive to frame racial performance as a subversive act even when it seemingly reinforces racial boundaries.¹¹ Wald’s invisible performances of passing might “fool” others, yet they also make the color line and its injustice visible. From this perspective, passing performers are at once impostors and impersonators: their performances are seamless, but they also lay bare racial structures. Jewish American Eddie Cantor and Sophie Tucker blurred color lines to claim their right to define their Jewishness autonomously. Tucker’s voice and accent combined with an

¹⁰ New York City Inspector in Charge H. R. Sisson to Washington D.C. Commissioner General, August 10, 1916, Jue Quon Tai’s immigration file, RG 85: Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files 1880–1960 (CEACF), B 350 f 105/813. National Archives and Record Administration (NARA), New York City, NY.

¹¹ Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 6.

impeccable makeup and a “Black” musical repertoire let her pass for a Southern African American woman. But contrary to expectations, she only impersonated Blackness so she could emphasize her Jewish identity by means of contrast. Cantor’s impersonations did not sell him as a Black man, yet they tricked spectators into believing that he was a blackface performer by choice. However, Cantor’s blackface only existed to highlight the Jewish identity of the comedy, character, and actor: as such, blackface was not a sign for Blackness but an expressive tool to materialize the idea of Blackness and, by contrast, of Jewishness.

My case studies not only changed the way racial impersonation had been used in American entertainment to ridicule non-white peoples, but their stage work also underscored that “Americanness” is an ever-changing process constituted by daily embodied practices in response to mainstream racialization, immigration laws, and specific performing circumstances. This becomes apparent thanks to two methodological approaches rarely employed in either immigration or theatre studies. First, by comparing racial impersonations across the artists’ multi-generational work, racial and ethnic identities, and genders it is possible to observe change over time, differences between the performances of transatlantic and transpacific migrants, and the gendered limitations of racial representation. Second, by analyzing performance in relation not only to the contemporaneous theatre scene but also evolving racial theories and immigration policies it is possible to appreciate the connections among theatrical racial performance, racial thought, and immigration law. In fact, only by aligning these otherwise separate spheres can one see how *together* they organized American society into shifting racial hierarchies. The following chapters are structured to reflect this tripartite relationality. Each chapter focuses on one immigrant group and opens with a section exploring the relations among the immigration history, racial theories, and performance practices related to that group. These connections build the

foundations of the performance analyses in the ensuing subsections. Each chapter then concludes with a comparison between or reflection on the two case studies.

Below is a schematic outline of the project's case studies divided by chapters and in relation to type of impersonation, race(s) represented, and performance strategies (table 1). The bottom row refers to the goal of each group's racial impersonations. Irish American artists responded to the country's "assimilation" mandate by developing forms of ethnic identity which, as historian Kevin Kenny argues, were "an integral part of the process through which immigrants have normally become American."¹² Chinese American impersonators responded to Chinese Exclusion laws antithetically: on one hand, they asserted their Americanness by "normalizing" ideas of Chineseness while, on the other hand, they emphasized (or even fabricated) the high-class status of their Chinese heritage. This was a direct consequence of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese laborers but admitted American-born people of Chinese descent ("normalized" Chinese) and wealthy Chinese businessmen, tourists, and students ("high-class" Chinese). Lastly, a few decades since the start of mass immigration, Jewish American artists were able to re-constitute a Jewish ethnic unit thanks to what Horace Kallen calls a "process of dissimilation:" "Once the proletarian level of independence is reached, the process of assimilation slows down and tends to come to a stop. [...] Then a process of *dissimilation* begins. The arts, life, and ideals of the nationality become central and paramount; ethnic and national differences change in status from disadvantages to distinctions."¹³ Cantor's and Tucker's blackface characters embodied this process. Their Jewish identity increasingly emerged from

¹² Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History* (Harlow, UK: Routledge, 2000), 148.

¹³ Horace Meyer Kallen, "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot," *The Nation* 100, no. 2590 (18–25 February 1915). Emphasis in original.

behind the black mask until it became “central and paramount” to the performance. Their distinct Jewishness resurfaced modified: “change[d] in status from disadvantages to distinctions.”

	Irish American (1870s–1900s)		Chinese American (1900s–1910s)		Jewish American (1900s–1920s)	
	Male Pat Rooney	Female Elinore Sisters	Male Lee Tung Foo	Female Jue Quon Tai	Male Eddie Cantor	Female Sophie Tucker
Type of impersonation	Issue of "visibility"		Issue of Private v. Public		Issue of "passing"	
Race/ethnicity represented	Only Irish		<i>Either Chinese or other identities</i>		Jewishness through the Black mask	
Performance strategy	"True to the life" Irishness	"Grotesque" Irishness	"Normalized" Chineseness	"Emphasized" Chineseness	"Explicit/symbolic" blackface to reveal Jewishness	
Outcome	Assimilation		Exclusion		Dissimilation	

Table 1: Case studies divided by chronological chapters and in relation to type of impersonation, race(s) represented, performance strategies, and goals.

American Immigration and Vaudeville: Two Parallel Histories

Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, American live entertainment was a flourishing enterprise. Blackface minstrelsy was one of the most widespread performance forms in the 1870s, followed by travelling circuses, dime museums, and variety shows.¹⁴ During the span of a decade, variety shows' eclectic format, which encompassed song and dance, comedy sketches, and some circus arts, was reproduced on a national scale in what became known as vaudeville. As several theatre historians have argued, vaudeville initiated a national entertainment industry.¹⁵ The ambition of its managers was not only to build nation-

¹⁴ Kathy Lee Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: NYU Press, 1997); Robert M. Lewis, *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ The history of vaudeville I retrace in this section gathers information from the following texts: Joe Laurie, *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Holt, 1953); Charles W. Stein, *American Vaudeville*

wide chains of theatres but also gather under the same roof middle and working-class audiences, men and women, Americans and foreigners. To do that, vaudeville businessmen such as Benjamin F. Keith, Edward F. Albee, Morris Meyerfeld, and Martin Beck emphasized the serialized uniformity of the acts presented across their theatre circuits—a staple and warranty of their shows’ quality and respectability—while also advertising their diverse programs as offering “something for everybody.”

Managers had their schemes to unite diverse vaudeville audiences under the same national banner, yet they also gave artists great freedoms to design their acts, as long as spectators were pleased, billing conventions respected, and basic principles of decency maintained. This offered the many immigrant performers a platform to easily express their original performance cultures and identities as new Americans. In fact, artists had a role that is seldom acknowledged by vaudeville historiography: vaudeville’s franchising project could not have succeeded without the artists’ efforts to recognize the desires of their very heterogenous audiences. Artists could achieve this goal because they were as racially, ethnically, and socially diverse as their audiences—in other words, they were able to offer “something for everybody” because their performance cultures and immigrant experiences matched those of their immigrant spectators. This makes vaudeville the most suitable environment to investigate performances of

as Seen by Its Contemporaries (New York: Knopf, 1984); Alison M. Kibler, *Rank Ladies Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 2000); Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895–1915* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2004); Arthur Frank Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Leigh Woods, *Transatlantic Stage Stars in Vaudeville and Variety: Celebrity Turns* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Marlis Schweitzer, “A Failed Attempt at World Domination: ‘Advanced Vaudeville,’ Financial Panic, and the Dream of a World Trust,” *Theatre History Studies* 32, no. 1 (September 11, 2013): 53–79; David Monod, *The Soul of Pleasure: Sentiment and Sensation in Nineteenth-Century American Mass Entertainment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016); David Monod, *Vaudeville and the Making of Modern Entertainment, 1890–1925* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

race and issues of national integration during the peak decades of immigration in the United States. In this section, I survey the history of vaudeville and US immigration to highlight their parallel evolutions and codependence. This background will build the foundations for interpreting the artists' racial impersonations in later chapters.

In terms of performance format, vaudeville reworked a repertoire that had been successful for decades in variety theatre and olio sections of minstrel shows. Participating artists were responsible for the transposition—in fact, as the Irish case studies in this project demonstrate, minstrels and variety artists were able to rotate engagements seamlessly throughout the 1870s and the 1880s. While genres were familiar, in terms of business operation, vaudeville administrators accomplished something that had never been seen before: a fully centralized organization that by reducing the downtime between engagements to a minimum, enhanced profits for both artists and venue's managers. While minor chains established their presence in the Midwest and Southern United States, by the end of the nineteenth century the Orpheum Circuit in the West and the Keith and Albee Circuit in the East became the two major enterprises.¹⁶ Eventually, they combined forces and, together with other sixteen theatre owners, they formed the Association of Vaudeville Managers (AVM). By 1902, the AVM represented

¹⁶ I have counted ten smaller chains beyond the Orpheum and the Keith and Albee circuits: Marcus Loew and Adolph Zuckor's, Tony Pastor's, Oscar Hammerstein's, and Frederick Freeman Proctor's on the East Coast and especially New York City; Sylvester Poli's in New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania; Edwin Stair and John Havlin's in Illinois and Michigan; Marc Klaw and Abraham Lincoln Erlanger's in New York City, New Orleans, and Chicago; Sam and Lee Shubert's in Boston, Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago; Alexander Pantages's in California, Washington State, Oregon, and extending into Western and Central Canada; and the Interstate Circuit, managed by Karl Hoblitzelle in Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas. With the rise of the Orpheum and Keith and Albee circuits, these enterprises either died (Stair and Havlin, Pastor, Loew and Zuckor) or tried to diversify their offerings. "Diversification" meant targeting specific audience groups. This was achieved by booking either lesser-known artists for cheaper prices (Pantages and Klaw and Erlanger followed this strategy) or celebrities from overseas to be showcased for higher prices, as did Hammerstein and the Shubert Brothers. The majority among these theatre empresarios had only recently immigrated to America. Pastor and Poli were Italian, Pantages was Greek, Loew, Zuckor, Hammerstein, Klaw, and Erlanger were German Jews, and the Shubert Brothers (Shubert at arrival) were Russian Jews.

sixty-two theatres from New York to San Francisco and guaranteed artists forty to fifty weeks on the road for a 5% commission fee.

This alliance soon turned into what Arthur Wertheim defines as “vaudeville wars.” By the end of 1904, the eastern and western managers had divided into two separate booking circuits, the Western Vaudeville Managers’ Association and the Keith’s Theatres and Vaudeville Booking Circuit. In 1906, they tried a second alliance, the “Combine” or United Booking Office (UBO). Again, there was an eastern and western division, with Keith and Albee and Meyerfeld and Beck controlling, respectively, houses in the East and West. Their different cultural backgrounds translated into different business strategies. Meyerfeld and Beck, who were first-generation German Jewish immigrants, privileged geographical expansion and real estate investment over supervising the artists’ bookings or the quality of their stage work. Keith and Albee, who were genteel New Englanders, focused their efforts on defending New York and Boston from outside investors and policing the artists’ creative work. Several immigrant entertainers considered Keith and Albee’s tactics tyrannical and after World War II, looking back on their experiences, they referred to the UBO as “Albee’s Gestapo.”¹⁷

In the meantime, Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger, second-generation Jewish owners of legitimate theatres, hired William Morris, a well-known Jewish manager of vaudeville talents, to expand their business. In 1907, they founded the United States Amusement Company (USAC) with the Shubert brothers, also second-generation Jewish theatre owners, to produce “Advanced Vaudeville,” or sensational entertainment in lavish venues. In 1908, Morris announced his own independent vaudeville circuit, a chain of theatres stretching from New York to Chicago. To

¹⁷ Groucho Marx, *Groucho And Me* (New York: Hachette Books, 2009), 137.

oppose the UBO, Morris offered his booking services for a smaller fee and focused on bringing international headliners to the United States. Among his most renowned artists were singing comedians Eddie Cantor, Sophie Tucker, and the Scottish Harry Lauder, whom he brought to Chicago several times in the 1910s. To drive Morris out of business, Keith and Albee blacklisted acts that played his circuit. Due to his opposition to the UBO and support of performer's rights, Morris had a friendly relationship with the major fraternal association of vaudeville artists, the White Rats. However, many performers feared the consequences of being excluded from UBO's bookings and renounced Morris's services. To avoid bankruptcy, Morris sold his circuit to Marcus Loew, another Jewish German American, who converted his theatres into a cheaper enterprise (so-called small-time vaudeville) and motion pictures venues.

From 1907 to 1911 the UBO was busy fighting the performers' response to the blacklist. To strengthen the White Rats, the board of directors hired a labor organizer, Harry Mountford, an Irish immigrant who had been involved in the music hall performers' union movement in England. Strikes, cartels, and closed shops resolved in favor of vaudeville managers who, as soon as Mountford resigned and conflicts dwindled, started to battle each other again. At the end of 1911, Meyerfeld and Beck obtained their first piece of property in New York City. They started to build the Palace Theatre on Broadway and 47th Street, which caused the relationship between the Orpheum and the Keith and Albee circuits to further deteriorate. Once Meyerfeld and Beck realized that renewing the partnership with the UBO was more important than having a theatre on Times Square, they sold their stakes to Keith and Albee, leaving only 25% for themselves. Beck accepted the agreement under the condition that he could book some Orpheum artists to play the Palace, including Jue Quon Tai in 1915.

New challenges to the UBO and Orpheum circuits came from small-time theatres when these started to convert into even cheaper vaudeville houses showing motion pictures at the beginning and end of each program. In 1913, Alexander Pantages, a Greek immigrant, had twenty-eight theatres on his popular-priced circuit between San Francisco and Chicago. Vaudevillians found his route grueling, since they were guaranteed only a maximum of seventeen consecutive work weeks and would often have to move to a different town every three days. This was the case for Lee Tung Foo, who complained extensively about the impact that such a schedule had on his health and the quality of his performances. Gradually, small-time venues were converted into movie theatres while big vaudeville investors began to turn to Hollywood and radio for more substantial profits. With assets of \$80 million, the Radio-Keith-Orpheum Corporation (RKO) was officially established in 1928 to produce sound film, radio, and theatre. Many artists in the last generation of vaudeville performers, Sophie Tucker and Eddie Cantor among them, did not end their careers with the demise of vaudeville, but thanks to a cooperative booking service, were able to transition into RKO's radio shows and films.

The history so far outlined only considers "white" vaudeville. African American artists were mostly excluded from performing on the Orpheum and Keith circuits, especially when their routes approached the southern half of the country. In 1921, two white theatre owners from Tennessee, Milton B. Starr and San Revin, formed the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA) to manage vaudeville bookings for African Americans. TOBA was soon joined by the competing Southern Consolidated Circuit and one of its leaders, the African American Sherman H. Dudley, became TOBA's co-director. By 1923, TOBA extended to eighty-five theatres in the South and Midwest. These were all-Black, segregated houses where working conditions were exacting and pay much lower than on "white" circuits. A number of blues and jazz musicians

found work on the TOBA circuit, including Ma Rainey, Ethel Water, and Bessie Smith.

However, the steady decline of the vaudeville industry and, by the beginning of the 1930s, the aftermath of the Great Depression, made it hard for African American vaudeville artists to obtain steady work.¹⁸

Like vaudeville history, the history of American immigration is one of progressive advancement followed by an almost sudden halt. After 1880, farming improvements in Southern and Eastern Europe, anti-Semite pogroms in Russia, and large steam-powered ships generated, respectively, labor surpluses, populations needing asylum, and affordable travel. These factors led to a flood of immigrants—over twenty million between 1880 and 1924—principally from Italy, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania, Poland, and Russia. Concurrently, immigration from China completely stopped. This was due to the enforcement of the first immigration restriction laws in 1875 and 1882. In 1875, the Page Act banned “undesirable” immigrants, defining these as forced laborers and prostitutes from East Asia; in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act outlawed the immigration of all Chinese laborers and the naturalization of any Chinese nationals already living in the United States. These were the first two of a long series of laws that between 1875 and 1924 progressively reduced foreign admittance (see table 2).¹⁹As I will discuss further, immigration laws not only prevented new immigrants from entering the country, but with their racist underpinnings, they also impacted the life of those already living in the US.

¹⁸ Thomas L. Riis, “Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930.”

¹⁹ National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2002/summer/immigration-law-1.html>; Migration Policy Institute, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/timeline-1790>; US Citizenship and Immigration Services, <https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history/overview-of-ins-history/origins-of-the-federal-immigration-service>

	Year	Law	Description
E x p a r i s i o n	1790	Naturalization Act	No restriction on immigration; citizenship limited to "free white men" after 2 years of residence.
	1795	Naturalization Act	No restriction on immigration; residency requirement for citizenship increased to 5 years.
	1798	Naturalization Act	No restriction on immigration; residency requirement for citizenship increased to 14 years.
	1802	Naturalization Act	No restriction on immigration; residency requirement for citizenship reduced to 5 years.
	1868	14th Amendment to the Constitution	Citizenship rights are granted to "all persons born or naturalized in the United States."
	1870	Naturalization Act	Citizenship rights extended to persons of African nativity or descent (but no other non-white group).
R e s t r i c t i o n P e r i o d	1875	Page Act	Ban on contract laborers and prostitutes from East Asia.
	1882	Chinese Exclusion Act	Ten-year ban on all Chinese laborers; ban on the naturalization of Chinese nationals; deportation procedures provided by the law.
	1885	Alien Contract Labor Law	Ban on all foreign contract labor.
	1891	Bureau of Immigration established within the Treasury Department	
	1892	Geary Act	Chinese Exclusion Act extended indefinitely.
	1898	<i>United States v. Wong Ark</i>	<i>The Supreme Court rules that the children of Chinese nationals born in the US are American citizens.</i>
	1903	Immigration Act	Ban on "anarchists, epileptics, beggars, and importers of prostitutes."
	1906	Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization established independent of the Treasury	
	1907	Immigration Act	Restriction on certain classes of disabled people.
	1917	Barred Zone Act	Ban on Asian immigration, covering British India, East Asia, and the Middle East; English literacy test required for all immigrants over the age of 16, except for wives of immigrants and elderly.
1921	Emergency Quota Act	Yearly quota for admission is established: 3% of each nationality's proportion of the foreign-born US population as indicated by the US 1890 census.	
1924	Johnson-Reed Act	150,000 total annual quota is established; within this number, 2% of each nationality's proportion of the foreign-born US population as indicated by the US 1890 census (which had fewer Southern and Eastern Europeans than the 1910 census).	

Table 2: US immigration and naturalization laws, 1790–1924.

During the expansion period from the 1870s to the early 1920s, vaudeville and immigration grew in parallel and fed off each other. America's exceptional transatlantic immigration rates (peaking in the first decade of the twentieth century) coincided with the consolidation of vaudeville management houses into a national league. Artists from different parts of the world easily found employment on vaudeville circuits. Likewise, vaudeville impresarios counted on the foreign workforce to meet the increasing demand from foreign publics. After two decades of steady advancement, both vaudeville and immigration rates contracted. With the advent of radio and film, several vaudeville managers began to search for alternative investment opportunities. While the highest number of immigrants in US history reached American shores, House representatives, Senators, and even Supreme Court Justices worked their hardest to curtail new entries and either strip immigrants of their newly acquired citizenship rights or prevent naturalizations altogether. With the passing of the Barred Zone Act in 1917 and the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924, both transpacific and transatlantic immigration came to a sudden, almost complete stop. Also in the year 1924, Martin Beck's bitter retirement—he was resentful of the advent of moving pictures, so he started to invest in musical theatre—has been interpreted as a clear sign of the demise of vaudeville.

Theories Informing the Project

This project's theoretical structure brings together ideas from different disciplines and traditions and tests their cogency in historical contexts. To analyze the dramaturgy of racial impersonations, I draw from post-colonial and post-structuralist studies. To evaluate the impact of immigrants' racial impersonations on understandings of race and formulations of American citizenship, I draw from theories of American nationalism in popular culture. A materialistic

approach to cultural studies highlights the cultural dimension of the performances examined.

Lastly, theories of repertoire frame hypotheses regarding audience reception.

Since corporeality cannot escape what Franz Fanon calls the “epidermal racial schema” of society, performance is a primal technology to make racialized bodies legible.²⁰ Racial impersonation is based on but also complicates this statement. First, by revealing identity and the *performativity* of identity to be mutually constitutive dimensions of the self, racial impersonation shows how admittance into or exclusion from the American mainstream are often a matter of presentation and reception.²¹ I explain racial impersonation’s blurring of identity boundaries by referring to the mutability of referential systems.²² Characters and voices performing as referential signs for racial identities can express either transgression or regulation depending on specific historical, political, and cultural circumstances. Racialized characters and voices can ridicule, assert difference, or imply competition, but also gesture towards identification, be a mode of self-mockery, or subvert racist beliefs. Through a variety of performance strategies, the racial impersonations I engage with produce a multiplicity of meanings because they manage to detach signified and signifier while maintaining the essence of the sign system intact. Clowning techniques (Kate Elinore and Eddie Cantor were talented clowns) are a good example: due to their seeming foolishness, clowns are granted special license, including revealing truths that

²⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, white Mask*, Richard Philcox trans. (New York; Berkeley: Grove Press, 2008), 92. Harvey Young’s *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010) has provided a crucial example for how performance functions in making bodies racially legible.

²¹ I employ the concept of performativity as in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

²² Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

nobody else recognizes.²³ Spectators trust the clown's truth because they can separate appearance from actions: they laugh *with* the clown, not *at* the clown, but they also take the clown seriously.

Secondly, by being built around the unvarnished repetition, subtle modification, or original interpretation of racial stereotypes, racial impersonation exposes the degree to which understandings of race go deeper than performers' skin. Like stereotypes, racial meanings are culturally determined. As such, to paraphrase from Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, racial meanings change according to the cultures producing or receiving them.²⁴ This study places equal emphasis on the production and reception of racial performance. In so doing, it demonstrates how racial performance is always a collaboration between the performer and their audience. I base this idea on Michael Omi and Howard Winant's definition of "racial formation," which is put in action by the cultural absorption of "racial projects," not through the stated intentions of those who produce them.²⁵ As my performance and reception analyses in Chapter 2 ("Irish American Racial Impersonators") make clear, cultural absorption resides in the audience, but it only gets triggered by performance. Thus, body and culture—"epidermal racial schemas" and racial stereotypes—*together* aid the performer in materializing racial projects on their own skin and in the minds of their spectators.

To paraphrase Jeffrey D. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor's opening of *Performing America*:

²³ Veronica Coburn and Sue Morrison, *Clown Through Mask: The Pioneering Work of Richard Pochinko as Practised* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2013); Jon Davison, *Clown: Readings in Theatre Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

²⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture / With a New Preface by the Author* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004).

²⁵ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, Second Edition (New York; London: Routledge, 1994), 56.

Cultural Nationalism in American Theater, American identity is an evolving question, a formulation rather than a received truth. People's identities and cultures constitute nationhood in a dynamic process, especially in those territories characterized by the continuous absorption of foreigners. Nationhood is therefore "an invention," the consequence of imagination, and as such a particularly suitable subject for theatrical representation.²⁶ This study conceptualizes immigrant racial impersonations as a cultural practice that helped artists and audience members define borders of racial belonging and parameters of American nationality. Specifically, in chapter 3 ("Chinese American Racial Impersonators") I demonstrate how racial and national belonging were defined at the intersection of performance and immigration law. As Joshua Chambers-Letson argues in *A Race So Different*, "popular aesthetic performances function as agents of the law, circulating legal narratives through the bloodstream of popular culture."²⁷ In other words, popular performance gives body to the racial categories established by immigration law and makes them legible by creating storylines and characters that explain the law's proscriptions. My analyses of Lee Tung Foo and Jue Quon Tai prove that the inverse relationship is also true: not only popular performance attends to the circulation of legal notions, but legal notions (and their enforcement) are shaped by popular performance.

From the point of view of materialist cultural history, this study draws from two theories concerning subordinate classes' production of culture: Susan Willis' "subculture theory" and Henry Bial's concept of "dominant minority." Subculture theory postulates that disfranchised groups exploit mass culture as sites for collecting remains of mass-produced commodities and

²⁶ Jeffrey D. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor eds., *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 2.

²⁷ Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *A Race so Different: Performance and Law in Asian America* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 22.

originate new meanings from them.²⁸ While I acknowledge the influence of dominant groups over immigrants' cultural production, I highlight how immigrant racial impersonators purposefully constituted new repertoires from the "remains" of white racial mimicry. Eddie Cantor's and Sophie Tucker's use of blackface fall under this category. By recycling blackface's white repertoires, they rendered themselves legible to white publics, yet they also created a completely original conception of Jewish Americanness. Here I rely on Tracy C. Davis' definition of repertoire as "a collective entity constituted from many singular events" that derives its meaning from quotidian acts of trope-recognition.²⁹ From this perspective, immigrants' racial impersonations were legible for broad national audiences precisely because they were not extemporaneous. They "involve[d] processes of reiteration, revision, citation and incorporation" of tropes of race, nationality, gender, and sexuality originated by white performers. Such tropes had existed since the time of minstrelsy and continued to be used well into the twentieth century, at which point they shared the stage with immigrants' own revisions.³⁰

Henry Bial's concept of "dominant minority" is particularly helpful to define immigrant groups that are caught in the middle between their assimilation and dissimulation processes.³¹ The Jewish American artists I investigate in Chapter 4 found themselves in such stage: they were both foreign and prominent in American entertainment—a religious and ethnic minority in

²⁸ Susan Willis, "Memory and Mass Culture," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 178–87.

²⁹ Tracy C. Davis, "Introduction: Repertoire," in *The Broadview Anthology of Nineteenth-Century British Performance* (Peterborough, Ont: Broadview Press, 2012), 12.

³⁰ Tracy C. Davis, "Nineteenth-Century Repertoire," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 36, no. 2 (November 1, 2009): 6–28, 7.

³¹ Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

America but one that was dominant in the vaudeville industry. By arguing that not all minorities produce “minoritarian” art, Bial reacts to José Muñoz’s definition of “minoritarian” as cultural products that are in some way subversive or revolutionary: “the Jewish minority, which we might call a dominant minority [in theater], is not looking to overturn the entire applecart; its political activism as played out in theater is limited largely to addressing issues of racial and ethnic discrimination.”³² In the following analyses, I recognize the impact of immigrant racial impersonators on “addressing issues of racial and ethnic discrimination,” but I also acknowledge that they were not “looking to overturn the entire applecart.” In fact, at least initially, most of my case studies exploited racial impersonation to access an entertainment industry that was built on the reiteration of racialized repertoires. However, by disassembling and reassembling those same repertoires, they updated conceptions of racial subjectivities and suggested new ways to “belong” to the American national ethos.

Archival Issues, Theatre Historiography, and Immigrant Identities

This study is the outcome of several months of archival research at different institutions and types of collections across the United States: National Archives and Record Administration (NARA) branches in Chicago, New York City, San Francisco, and Seattle; University Special Collections at UC Los Angeles, UC Berkley, University of Southern California, University of Rochester, University of Arizona, and Harvard University; public libraries and museums such as the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the California State Library, the Museum of the City of New York, and the San Francisco’s Museum of Performance + Design; and private

³² José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish*, 8.

institutions such as the Shubert Brothers Archives.

I situate racial impersonation into the realm of social and cultural practices, thus questions such as who was performing, why, for whom, and with what effect inform my selection of archival materials. Theatre reviews are exhaustive sources to reconstruct the dramaturgy of racial impersonations and their audience reception. The most extensive performance reviews can be found in national theatre weeklies such as *Billboard*, *Variety*, and *Theatre Magazine*. Scripts and jokebooks are similarly unique resources, however, they are rare finds for historians studying a prevalently improvised performance form such as racial impersonation. Pat Rooney's published jokebook and Kate and May Elinore's handwritten scripts are the only two I consulted for this project.

Facets of acts' visual elements survive in the artists' stationery and publicity photographs. Stationery was used as an advertising strategy within the artists' network of colleagues, theatre managers, and booking agents. Photographs can be located alongside shows' reviews, in newspapers' advertising sections, and in postcards that fans used to exchange or collect. The acts' sonic dimension is preserved in sheet music and, more rarely, in digitalized recordings. The University of California Los Angeles' Sheet Music Collection has been recently reorganized and is now searchable by "racial types" as referenced in the songs' titles and lyrics.³³ Recordings reveal the quality of performers' timbre and diction, two additional elements often racialized in performance. The University of California Santa Barbara's Cylinder Audio Archive is a valuable resource to study the sound of racial impersonation.

Lastly, artists' private lives can be glimpsed through newspaper interviews,

³³ Asian and Asian Americans (208 songs), African and African Americans (657 songs), Irish (11 songs), and Jewish (50 songs) are among the groups represented.

autobiographies, and immigration records. Typically, interviews and autobiographies narrate performers' "rags-to-riches" stories in an effort to depict their careers as exceptional. For this reason, I handle them as somewhat unreliable and, when possible, I crosscheck the biographical details they contain with the artists' correspondence (e.g. Lee Tung Foo's letters to his voice coach and Eddie Cantor's and Sophie Tucker's telegrams to the Shubert Brothers' management office) and other scholars' reconstructions (e.g. late vaudeville scholars Arthur Wertheim and Armond Fields, whose private archival collections document their research on, respectively, Pat Rooney and Sophie Tucker). The immigration records I consulted include identification cards, birth certificates, passengers' lists, visa applications, re-entry permits, and transcripts of border patrol interviews. These materials have been particularly useful to reconstruct the lives and careers of Chinese American racial impersonators. Due to regulations around international travel for people of Chinese descent during the Chinese Exclusion era, Lee Tung Foo and Jue Quon Tai gave the Bureau of Immigration a wealth of documents and released depositions before and after their vaudeville tours abroad. This has made up for the scarcity of records regarding early-twentieth-century Chinese American performance in traditional theatre archives.

According to Thomas Postlewait, the work of the historian involves several steps. Historians must determine their records' reliability and turn them from "artifacts into facts;" acquire supporting evidence to place facts within their suitable historical contexts; and "confront organizing assumptions and categorical ideas" to build plausible historical arguments.³⁴ In Michel de Certeau's definition, history becomes historiography in this last step: "Historiography (that is, *history* and *writing*) bears within its own name the paradox—almost an oxymoron—of a

³⁴ Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

relation established between two antinomic terms, between the real and discourse. Its task is one of connecting them and, at the point where the link cannot be imagined, of working as if the two were being joined.”³⁵ Conducting archival research for this project, I became aware that only by confronting the “organizing assumptions and categorical ideas” intrinsic in the archives I visited could I make the connection between the “real” experience of and the “discourse” around the racialization of American immigrants, their performance cultures, and the historical records that they left behind. Being able to compare modes of acquisition and preservation of records, degrees of institutional accessibility, and which types of materials are held at which institutions, I recognized the “organizing assumptions and categorical ideas” that have shaped my work.

My earliest archival “confrontation” concerns what I describe as *levels of primariness*, or the distance between the performers and the records I investigated. For Sophie Tucker and Eddie Cantor, I was able to read the artists’ letters, autobiographies, and even consult the archival collections that they personally assembled. Coming of age in the 1910s, both Tucker and Cantor were able to join the vaudeville industry at its peak expansion and while it was managed by other Jewish immigrants. During their “dissimilation” process, their art turned from “disadvantages to distinctions,” thus allowing them to achieve stellar popularity and preserve their legacies in the most accessible and well-funded research institutions in the country. Starting in 1949, Tucker donated her 345 scrapbooks to the New York Public Library, where they could be available to theatre historians and aficionados while she was still alive. For her private papers (early school notebooks, family photographs, and her personal collection of sheet music) Tucker indicated the Museum of the City of New York as a potential receiver in her testament. The museum acquired

³⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, Tom Conley trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), xxviii.

the collection soon after Tucker's death in 1966, and since then it has celebrated Tucker's legacy by planning exhibitions and digitizing all her photographs. Eddie Cantor directed his daughters to donate his papers to UCLA's Library Special Collections, where researchers can consult it alongside one of the most extensive repositories on early Hollywood film in the country. Thus, Tucker's and Cantor's *prime* careers guaranteed the "primariness" of their archival materials, the accessibility and prestige of the archiving institutions, and the extensiveness of the historiographies produced at these sites.

Pat Rooney and the Elinore Sisters were recognized as foundational figures of American entertainment only after they passed away. Archival materials related to their stage careers were gathered by the secondary hands of private collectors and librarians either as a pastime or for educational purposes. Rooney's and the Sisters' stage work can be reconstructed today through vast newspaper clipping collections—the Robinson Locke and Chamberlain-Lyman Brown collections at the New Public Library, both assembled by theatre professionals—and, in the Sisters' case, through handwritten script books purchased by the University of Rochester to augment their theatre and performance holdings.

Lastly, for Lee Tung Foo and Jue Quon Tai I could only retrace what I call *accidental sources*: documents that were produced by a tertiary individual or institution for purposes completely unrelated to the preservation of the artists' legacy. Lee Tung Foo's letters to his voice coach are technically a primary source, yet they would not be available to researchers today were it not for his teacher's reputation as a Californian talent and her decision to preserve the letters among her papers at the California State Library. Similarly, Jue Quon Tai's immigration documents at NARA were produced independently of Jue's career in entertainment and collected with the sole purpose of vigilantly enforcing Chinese Exclusion laws.

My sources' level of primariness also reveal the strict correlation between the performers' race, level of dissimilation, exclusion, or assimilation, and the type of archival institution holding their records. This relation can be outlined as follows. *Primary* sources belong to "dissimilated" Jewish American artists who created their own archival collections and donated them to the most accessible public institutions or largest university's special collections on popular entertainment in the United States. *Secondary* sources belong to "assimilated" Irish performers and were gathered by theatre managers and library staff for record-keeping or educational purposes. These documents are held at small university libraries and can be accessed by researchers who bring proof of academic affiliation. Lastly, information about "excluded" Chinese American artists is largely contained in *accidental* sources held within another person's collection or immigration records at National Archives, the least accessible sites I visited due to their limited hours of operation, inconvenient locations, and impenetrable finding aids.

Unsurprisingly, due to the different amounts of primary information contained, my sources' level of primariness produced more or less detailed analyses. For instance, Chapter 4 on Sophie Tucker and Eddie Cantor includes a plethora of information on the artists' private lives that is absent from Chapter 2 on Pat Rooney and May and Kate Elinore. However, because Tucker's and Cantor's biographical sources are for the most part self-created and directed at their fans, I consider them as less reliable than, for instance, the depositions that Lee Tung Foo and Jue Quon Tai released with the Bureau of Immigration. While other case studies *also* produced "accidental" records at the theatre management offices where they were employed, the work of Chinese American vaudevillians can be retraced *exclusively* from records that they had no power over creating. Comparable to Michael Foucault's prison archives, immigration files preserve

“nameless misfortunes and adventures gathered into a handful of words.”³⁶ Yet, without the act of power that transformed Chinese American lives into objects to circumscribe and regulate, they would have vanished without a trace.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, “The Lives of Infamous Men,” in *Power, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, James D. Faubion ed. (New York: The New Press, 1967), 156–75, 156.

Chapter 2: Irish American Racial Impersonators

The American Irish: Immigration, Racialization, Assimilation

The history of Irish immigration to the United States includes three major waves before, during, and after the potato blight struck in Ireland. From 1821 to 1850, about one million Irish people emigrated to America. During the Famine years only, between 1845 and 1854, over 1,250,000 Irish took refuge in the US.¹ Later census statistics provide evidence of growing Irish numbers: while migrations continued, by 1870 American-born descendants of Irish nationals already exceeded the total number of Irish who had settled in the US since 1821.² These were crucial years for debates on the meaning of American citizenship. During the Reconstruction period, Americans for the first time were called to consider themselves as part of a national community rather than members of a State, region, or territory. The Fourteenth Amendment (1868), which defined new parameters of American citizenship to include “all persons born or naturalized in the United States,” was soon challenged by a number of Supreme Court cases (including, famously, *Plessy v. Ferguson*) ruling against the preservation of “privileges and immunities” of certain racial groups.³ During these years, the gap between American *citizenship*

¹ U.S. Immigration Commission, *Statistical Review of Immigration 1820–1910: Distribution of Immigration 1850–1900* (Washington D.C.: 1911); John R. Commons, *Race and Immigrants in America* (New York: McMillan, 1907), 122; Frances Morehouse, “Irish Immigration of the Forties,” *American Historical Review* 33 (1928): 579–92.

² 1870 United States’ Census: <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1872/dec/1870a.html>

³ The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution was adopted in 1868 and included four major clauses: The Citizenship Clause, Privileges or Immunities Clause, Due Process Clause, and Equal Protection Clause. The Naturalization Act of 1790 enabled “free white persons” and persons “of good moral character” who had resided in the country for at least two years to apply for citizenship. Revisions to the Act in 1795 and 1798 increased the residency requirement first to five and later to fourteen years. The residency requirement was again lowered to five years in 1802. Chinese and Japanese immigrants were never considered white, thus only their American-born children were allowed to acquire American citizenship. The Supreme Court cases that challenged the meaning of

and American *identity* became wider than before slavery was abolished. Being born on US soil or having naturalized after living in the US for five years made one a citizen, yet citizenship did not equate to protection from discrimination or violence when not perpetrated directly by the federal government. During these tumultuous times, the Irish were considered a “race apart” and thus a low priority among the American citizens whose “privileges and immunities” were protected by the Fourteenth Amendment.⁴ Nativist and anti-Catholic perceptions held that the Irish were a “dark” race possibly hailing from Africa, and political cartoonists emphasized the racial ambiguity of Irish people by portraying them as simian-looking.⁵ For instance, when a couple of chimpanzees arrived at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1888, the city’s newspaper named them Mr. and Mrs. Rooney after Pat Rooney and his wife.⁶

While during the Famine years married couples with children immigrated more readily, single women became the largest Irish group to settle in the US after 1854.⁷ The pre-Famine land-tenure system imposed in Ireland by the British contributed to this immigration trend. As Irish nationals were prevented from owning land, the more prosperous families rented lots from

“all persons born or naturalized in the United States” were the *Slaughter-House Cases* in 1873, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which allowed racial segregation in private establishments, in 1896, and *Lochner v. New York* in 1905.

⁴ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 133.

⁵ Several of these cartoons are reported on pages 156–7 in Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in the Antebellum America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988). See also Peter O’Neill’s chapter “Laundering Gender: Chinese Men and Irish Women in Late-Nineteenth-Century San Francisco” in *The Black and Green Atlantic: Cross-Currents of the African and Irish Diasporas*, Peter D. O’Neill and David Lloyd eds. (Basingstoke, UK; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁶ “Receiving Callers: Mr. And Mrs. Pat Rooney at the Zoo—a remarkable couple which has come to Cincinnati to live—chimpanzee who have almost as much sense as human beings—the highest order of brides, who do everything but talk—valuable acquisition to the gardens arrive from New York,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 13, 1888, 8.

⁷ Hasia R. Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 33.

British landowners while the poorest peasants worked those same fields as the renters' sharecroppers. In exchange for their labor, sharecroppers were permitted to cultivate small gardens where they grew potatoes, their almost exclusive food supply. These families were hit the hardest by the potato blight and many did not survive. It is estimated that between half a million and three million people perished directly as a result of the mass starvation. Tenant farmers, on the other hand, preserved their families by holding onto their land rentals. To avoid splitting the land among all the children, families would choose one son to inherit the rental. Whatever had been saved would make for one daughter's dowry, while all other siblings would take positions in the clergy or seek employment in nearby cities. Employment was harder for single women to get and especially for those living in the counties of Munster and Connaught, where urban centers were fewer. Many Irish daughters ended up choosing between a religious life or migration. Many moved to Belfast or Dublin for more urban job opportunities, while others sailed for the United States helped by a network of benevolent associations, family connections, and "recruitment" agencies looking for single women to employ as domestic servants.⁸

The US Immigration Commission's Statistical Review reported more Irish female immigrants than males from 1875 to 1879, 1884 to 1886, and consistently from 1890 to 1910.⁹ From 1899 to 1910, no other immigrant group in the United States contained as many women as the Irish. German women made up 40% of the total immigration from Germany, whereas Irish

⁸ Kevin O'Neill, "'Man Overboard:' Change and Stability in Post-Famine Ireland," in *From Paddy to Studs: Irish American Communities in the Turn of the Century Era, 1880 to 1920*, Timothy Meagher ed. (Westport: Praeger, 1986), 27-51.

⁹ United States Immigration Commission, *Statistical Review of Immigration, 1820-1910. Distribution of Immigrants, 1850-1900* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1911), 47.

married and single women accounted for 52%. Compared to the Italians and Greeks, the gap was even wider: in 1907, the peak year of US immigration, 21% of the Italian and only 5% of Greek newcomers were female.¹⁰ According to Hasia Diner's comparative study of marriage trends in the United States between 1877 and 1910, a great majority of Irish women came to America unmarried and opted to marry much later than other American-born or immigrant women.¹¹ This trend might justify the staggering percentage of Irish female domestic servants. The year 1890 is illustrative: of the 1,871,509 US residents who were born in Ireland, 46% were Irish servant women.¹²

Irish women went into domestic service for a number of cultural and economic reasons. First, domestic work was often better paid than factory work. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the New England rate for female mill workers was \$0.45 per day. On average, mill girls in Lowell, Massachusetts earned \$0.50 per day, the equivalent of \$3 per week and \$12 per month. Domestic servant women in New York City earned between \$10 and \$14 per month according to the *Report on the Condition of Woman and Child-Wage Earners*; thus, by living with their employers' families, domestic servants who had no close family with whom to split living expenses not only cut down on accommodation costs but on a monthly average earned more than some female factory workers.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, 46–7.

¹² 1890 US Census: <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>

¹³ Stanley Lebergott, "Wage Trends, 1800–1900," in *Trends in the American Economy in the Nineteenth Century*, The Conference of Research on Income and Wealth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960); *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners in the United States* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910–3), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/osu.32435026689497>

Secondly, in-house domestic service opportunities were easy for Irish women to get because very few other women would or could have lived in other people's homes. Italian, Greek, and Eastern European women came to America with their husbands or, if they married in the US, they moved from their parental home straight into married life. This pattern did not allow for working and earning independently outside of family networks, much less living away from home. African American women did not compete significantly against immigrant servants in Northern cities until the Great Migration in the 1920s.¹⁴ Lastly, many native-born Protestant women avoided paid domestic labor, as the idea of domestic work fundamentally contradicted the notion of "true womanhood" (as piety, grace, and female pride). These women thought paid domestic work was so beneath their sense of self that they would sometimes take lower-paid jobs in mills and factories rather than humiliate themselves in someone else's home. As the proto-feminist Catharine Beecher asserted in *True Remedy for the Wrongs of Woman*, "so long as the servitude places a woman in the lowest and most despised rank, no consideration of health and no pecuniary offers will draw American women into it, if they can escape it."¹⁵ Helen Campbell's 1887 sociological study *Prisoners of Poverty: Women Wage Workers, Their Trades, and Their Lives*, confirmed this stance. One of Campbell's interviewees confessed that her main objection to domestic work was the "humiliation" and the fact that, increasingly, "the cook and the waitress here [are] just common, uneducated Irish."¹⁶

¹⁴ David M. Katzam, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981); Peter O'Neill, "Laundering Gender," in *The Black and Green Atlantic*, 115.

¹⁵ Catharine Esther Beecher, *The True Remedy for the Wrongs of Woman: With a History of an Enterprise Having That for Its Object* (Boston: Phillips & Sampson, 1851), 39–40.

¹⁶ Helen Campbell, *Prisoners of Poverty: Women Wage Workers, Their Trades and Their Lives*, 1887 (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1900), 228–29.

Considering the dearth of native-born domestic servants, Irish women were able to find employment as soon as they landed on American shores. Diner states: “The shortage of domestic servants is a theme that consistently runs through the history of work in America. The difficulty that American housewives had in finding suitable ‘help’ can be traced back to the earliest years of European settlement in the New World.”¹⁷ Being such a high-demand occupation in a low-competition environment, domestic service soon became Irish women’s unspoken monopoly. No matter how inept rural Irish women might have been at running urban affluent homes, and despite the religious discrimination often causing Protestant families to avoid hiring Catholic servants, upper-middle-class Americans depended heavily on the Irish domestic work force.¹⁸ As an article titled “Which Is Mistress?” explained the readers of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, “the poor little mistress yields trembling, because it would be too dreadful if Bridget were to leave.”¹⁹ The Irish domestic servant, it was said, knows that “no ‘character’ is needed to find a new place; so if her tea is not strong, her mattress not of good hair, if breakfast is ordered too early, or dinner kept waiting, she packs up her traps, demands her wages, and off she goes.”²⁰ Depictions of inept but fussy Irish servants abounded in comic cartoons, early film, and popular theatre.²¹ Perhaps the most infamous Irish maid act in vaudeville was the “Irish Servant Girls” by the Russell

¹⁷ Diner, *Erin’s Daughters*, 80.

¹⁸ Mary Dean, “The Goings and Doings of Hired Girls,” *Lippincott’s* 7 (1877): 589–96.

¹⁹ Christine Terhune Herrick, “Which is Mistress?,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* 3, no. 5 (1886): 7.

²⁰ “American Hotels, by a Cosmopolitan,” *Putnam’s Magazine: Original Papers on Literature, Science, Art and National Interests* no. 5 (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1870), 30.

²¹ One popular scene involved a maid wreaking havoc as she tries to light fire in a stove. *The Finish of Bridget McKeen* (Edison, 1901) shows Bridget struggling to set a fire. After several attempts, she pours kerosene into the stove and provokes an explosion. Similarly, *How Bridget Made the Fire* (Biograph, 1900) showed what happens when an “uncivilized” Irish woman must figure out how to “make fire.” The greatest human discovery is not within her competencies; in fact, she only creates destruction.

Brothers. With broom-and-mop fights and lines such as “Maggie, Maggie! Put the horse in the kitchen and give him a bushel o’ coal,” the cross-dressed Brothers popularized an image of the Irish maid as masculine, ridiculous, and incompetent.²²

Perhaps incompetent at first, as in-house domestic servants, Irish women learned the social rules of well-off families and quickly adapted to American ways. In addition, not having children to support or rent to pay, they were able to set aside large sums of money and steadily climb the socio-economic ladder. For example, in the Irish enclave of Dubuque, Iowa, the largest property owner in the 1860s was Ellen Sullivan, a former Irish servant woman.²³ In 1871, the representative of the railway and steamship interests in Massachusetts testified to the Committee of State Charities in favor of the “Freedom of Immigration at the Port of Boston” by citing his own Irish domestic servant: “At the end of a year she has received \$260, and her maintenance. She is able to place \$200 in the savings bank. At the end of five years she has a thousand dollars. Is not that woman worth a thousand dollars to the country, who can accumulate in the course of four or five years a thousand dollars?”²⁴ Considering that in the 1870s the cost of passage from Ireland was between \$16 and \$20—the equivalent of less than one month salary for a servant woman in a well-to-do household—even those who came unsponsored could offset the initial travel expense and quickly start saving.²⁵

²² Cited in Jennifer Mooney, *Irish Stereotypes in Vaudeville, 1865-1905* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 136.

²³ Diner, *Erin’s Daughters*, 103.

²⁴ *Arguments in Favor of the Freedom of Immigration at the Port of Boston: April 1871: To the Committee on State Charities of the Massachusetts Legislature*. 25.

²⁵ Polly Beckham, “A Little Cache of Green: The Savings Habits of Irish Immigrant Women in 1850 Philadelphia,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 69, no. 2 (2002): 230–65, 251–2.

While most Irish domestic servants would send their savings back to Ireland, many others invested in US land and real estate, contributed to the establishment of Catholic parishes, and brought assets to their late marriages. The Irish American children born from these late unions started life as rather privileged citizens. Many boys became business owners and bankers while a great number of girls became professional nurses and schoolteachers.²⁶ Irish mothers taught an important lesson to their children: financial stability is the first step toward social and professional mobility. Marrying a wealthy, older Irish woman became the theme of popular jokes, a testament to the prevalence of the phenomenon. The *Irish World* summarized the importance of a woman's money over her youth or looks as it told the story Maggie O'Brien from Omaha. Her aunt never married and willed her a fortune. "Miss Maggie has suddenly grown as beautiful as she is rich," the reporter joked.²⁷ The comedy of the Elinore Sisters, as I shall illustrate, was often built on similar situations. In *Dangerous Mrs Delaney*, the title character (Kate Elinore) is a wealthy Irish widow. She is not looking for love and will re-marry only if that will bring more money to her family. The skit opened with Mrs. Delaney singing directly to the girls in the audience: "Girls I'm as happy as I can be / An old man with money has proposed to me / I can tell by his looks that he's not very strong / And between you and me I don't think he'll last long."²⁸

Financially speaking, Irish women pushed their marriages until after their prime working age in order to preserve their earning capacity. Statistics show Irish married women to make up

²⁶ Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, 52, 99–105.

²⁷ *Irish World*, February 8, 1873, 8.

²⁸ Carroll Fleming and Mr. Jerome, *Dangerous Mrs. Delaney*, first produced at Nelson Theatre in Springfield, Massachusetts, September 1902. Elinore Sisters Vaudeville Act Papers B1 f 1, Rush Rhees Library, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, University of Rochester.

for the absolute lowest rates of working women in the US at the end of the nineteenth century; thus, unless they became entrepreneurs, marriage forced women to leave the workforce and prevented them from accumulating wealth. Custom only partly explains this trend. While traditional Irish culture stressed the centrality of the woman in her home, her advanced age more pragmatically justified the fact that she should leave her job to be able to bear all her children in quick succession.²⁹ This not only excluded women from the workplace for extended periods; it also put their accumulated wealth at their husbands' disposal. Worst of all, because the majority of Irish men were employed at the bottom of the production chain, they were also more likely to be victims of work accidents. Irish wives were the fastest to become widows and the least likely to benefit from life insurance policies. Unions and charities often stepped in to help provide for them, especially when they were left with small children to raise.³⁰ Mutual aid notwithstanding, their lives would be forever marked by financial insecurity, which, as statistics from almshouses, mental hospitals, and detention centers indicate, increased the chances for substance dependence, mental illness and, ultimately, crime.³¹ Dependence on alcohol and episodes of violent public disturbance were two of the most recurring tropes in Irish comedy. Interestingly, in several of the Elinore Sisters' sketches these were coupled with representations of spinsterhood and widowhood as strategies to preserve women's independence and accumulate wealth, a perspective that suggests late- and non-marriage to be deliberate feminist stances for some Irish American women.

²⁹ Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, 51–2.

³⁰ Society for Helping Destitute Mothers and Infants, "Report of Aid Given to Destitute Mothers and Infants" (years from 1874 to 1890 are available in digital format on Archive.org)

³¹ Mary Roberts Smith, "Almshouse Women," *Quarterly Publication of the American Statistical Association* 4 no. 31 (1895): 219–62.

Since the 1970s, scholars such as Lawrence McCaffrey and David Doyle have emphasized the limitations to economic and social success confronting Irish immigrants in the United States.³² These can be summarized in three points: the lack of opportunity due to recurrent nativist assaults; the competition from other immigrant groups, especially Protestant Germans and Swedes; and the conservative Catholic clergy who opposed materialism and the accumulation of wealth. As McCaffrey claims, these difficulties overwhelmed the Irish in New England and the Midwest. Economic and social advancement there were sluggish, and it was not until the last decade of the nineteenth century that the Irish community found ways to distinguish itself in business and politics. This happened especially thanks to the efforts of Irish nationalists and Catholic educators. Irish American nationalism became the link to the Democratic political machine in cities such as New York and Chicago.³³ In Chicago, the Clan Na Gael, a group devoted to the violent overturning of British colonial rule in Ireland, had powerful connections to the city's Democratic representatives and police department, a third of which was Irish.³⁴ Across the nation, Catholic churches strengthened the Irish sense of community while also encouraging the integration among Catholics of different nations. In fact, according to McCaffrey, Catholic education fundamentally distanced Irish students from their ethnic roots by emphasizing "Catholic, Continental, and Anglo-Saxon histories at the expense of Irish culture."³⁵ This played

³² Lawrence McCaffrey, *The Irish Catholic Diaspora in America* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997); David Doyle, *Irish Americans, Native Rights, and National Empires: The Structure, Divisions and Attitudes of the Catholic Minority in the Decade of Expansion, 1890–1901* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 86–95, 182–200.

³³ Thomas N. Brown, *Irish-American Nationalism, 1870-1890* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966), 23.

³⁴ Ellen Skerrett, "The Development of Catholic Identity, among Irish American in Chicago, 1880 to 1920," in *From Paddy to Studs*, 127.

³⁵ McCaffrey, *The Irish Catholic Diaspora*, 175–6.

an important role in the assimilation of second-generation Irish American children and stimulated their socio-economic success.

The West Coast, and San Francisco in particular, offered Irish immigrants a completely different experience. In the decades following the Gold Rush and the annexation of California in 1848, San Francisco, the “instant city,” grew fast and freely. The Irish were the largest ethnic group in the second half of the nineteenth century, with German and Italian Catholics closely following.³⁶ As late as 1880, San Francisco’s population was still evenly divided between American- and foreign-born, and both groups found economic and political opportunity in equal measure.³⁷ As William Shannon wrote in *The American Irish*, “at a time when hundreds of thousands of Irish were packed in the slums of Boston’s North End and New York’s East Side [...] other Irish of identical background were amassing millions from the Comstock Lode, running the government of Nevada and California, and setting the social tone of San Francisco’s Nob Hill.”³⁸ Data on San Francisco’s white collar and trading professions supports this view. In 1880, San Francisco had 41 Irish lawyers and 71 Irish stockbrokers out of a total of 30,721 Irish residents. That same year, Boston, where the Irish would grow to be the most populous immigrant group, had 18 Irish lawyers and 14 Irish stockbrokers out of a total of 64,793 Irish. Thus, the percentage of Irish residents who were lawyers in San Francisco was four times the percentage of the Irish who were lawyers in Boston. The same computation shows an even wider gap for stockbrokers, with the percentage of Irish who were brokers in San Francisco being ten

³⁶ In 1880 there were 75,000 first and second-generation Irish in the city. See 1880 census at <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>

³⁷ Timothy Sarbaugh, “Exiles of Confidence: The Irish-American Community of San Francisco, 1880 to 1920,” in *From Paddy to Studs*, 161–179.

³⁸ William Shannon, *The American Irish* (New York: MacMillan, 1963), 86.

times that of Boston.³⁹ Irish people in California and San Francisco were as prosperous financially and professionally as they were successful politically. After only six terms since the annexation of California, John Downey became the first Irish State governor. In 1865, Frank McCoppin became the first Irish mayor of San Francisco, a whole eighteen years before Hugh O'Brien was inaugurated mayor of Boston.⁴⁰ Irish politicians in San Francisco were unique compared to their counterparts in Eastern and Midwestern cities. "There was no Tammany Hall West," wrote James Walsh, meaning that San Francisco politics was not organized around a defensive reaction to ethnic marginalization, but was instead built on confidence and advocating for the common good for both ethnic and American-born groups.⁴¹

One exception was the growing Chinese population, which was consistently excluded from socio-economic advancement in San Francisco. In 1880, one-tenth of San Francisco's population was Chinese-born and roughly one-third of that number were employed in traditionally female lines of work, either as domestic servants or launderers. Specifically, census data shows that domestic service was the largest source of employment for the whole Chinese population in the city and that almost all of these domestics were men.⁴² As I will further detail in Chapter 3, this phenomenon is explained by the passing of the Page Act, a law that barred Chinese women from settling in the United States unless they came as wives of merchants or

³⁹ 1890 US Census: <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>. See pages 540, 864, 902. Less competition from American-born and other immigrant groups, as well as a higher number of fellow Irish natives might explain Irish professional and economic success in San Francisco. As the 1880 Census reported, Irish-born immigrants constituted 13% of the total population of San Francisco while only 7.5% of the total Boston population.

⁴⁰ Sarbaugh, "Exiles of Confidence," 162.

⁴¹ James Walsh, "Machine Politics, Reform, and San Francisco," in *The San Francisco Irish*, James Walsh ed. (Berkeley: University of California, 1980), 59–73.

⁴² See 1880 census at <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>

diplomats.⁴³ The fact that many Irish women continued to be in-house servants well beyond marriageable age, often chose work over marriage, and financial independence over family life—all atypical behaviors for nineteenth-century women—contributed to masculinizing Irish women, especially those who were domestic servants, in the public imaginary. In San Francisco, the masculinization of Irish women was emphasized by the contrast with the Chinese male servant. Reality, folklore, and comedy blended to originate the character of the Irish hag: a single or widowed older woman who drank, swore, and fought like a man. In *The Adventures of Bridget McGuire*, Kate Elinore played such a role. Her masculine behaviors include bossing around her husband, who, due to an identity mix-up, is forced to act as her incompetent domestic servant.⁴⁴

In a despicable history that would require more space to tell in detail, it was often the Irish who led the movement in support of Chinese Exclusion laws. Denis Kearny, born in Cork, and Frank Roney, born in Belfast, were just two among the several anti-Chinese Irish leaders of the Workingmen Party of California, the most powerful group lobbying for Exclusion laws. In her 1909 exposé *Chinese Immigration*, Mary Coolidge wrote:

The preponderance of Irish names in the leadership mobs, anti-coolie clubs, persons arrested for attacks upon the Chinese, and also among legislators and municipal officers, bear witness to the rapidity of their assimilation—but it was the great misfortune to the Chinaman. The enforcement of anti-Chinese legislation before 1882 by state officers and the administration of the exclusion laws since that time, has also been on the hands of men of Irish birth or parentage.⁴⁵

⁴³ Page Act of 1875: An Act Supplementary to the Acts in Relation to Immigration. 43rd United States Congress, March 3, 1875. Pub.L 43–141; 18 Stat 477, Chap. 141.

⁴⁴ Eugene Ellsworth, *The Adventures of Bridget McGuire*. ESVAP, B 1 f 10.

⁴⁵ Mary Roberts Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1909), 270.

Already in 1909, Coolidge was able to make the connection between the assimilation of one ethnic group and the exclusion of or violence against another. For both Irish men and women, labor competition was a major source of concern, but certainly not the exclusive factor motivating their mobilization against Chinese people. A less tangible but equally pervasive incentive was the “the rapidity of their assimilation” or, to put it in more contemporary terms, their access to white privilege.

Since the foundation of Critical whiteness Studies in the 1990s, scholars such as Noel Ignatiev and David Roediger have explained the phenomenon of ethnic groups accessing the privileges of whiteness as imbricated in the development of industrial capitalism, the formation of the waged proletariat, and the exclusion—by both American-born factory owners and ethnic factory workers—of African Americans.⁴⁶ The same argument can be made about whiteness in relation to Chinese immigrants. In fact, as white-looking ethnic workers across the United States were eventually accepted as white by distancing themselves from Blacks, so Irish workers in California protected their jobs, became political leaders, and administered state laws by excluding Chinese people.

In Noel Ignatiev’s words, this was part of the process of the Irish “becoming white.” Since Ignatiev’s theorization, the idea of whiteness as a journey toward inclusion has shown its limitations; in fact, such an idea wrongly assumes that whiteness is “welcoming,” and that it is a static, everlasting condition one can work to access. David Lloyd’s articulation of Irish success in the United States moves beyond the “inclusion” paradigm and offers a clear argument against whiteness as a static condition. He writes:

⁴⁶ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London; New York: Verso, 1991).

Unhappily, the Irish success in the US lay in part in their ability to extend and transform those informal functions into *institutions*, contributing to the formation of a new racial state. It is not, then, so much that the Irish “became white,” as if whiteness were a stable and permanent condition, but that in their entry to the United States, they transformed the constitution of whiteness and simultaneously the meaning and function of race itself—and along with it the meaning of Irishness.⁴⁷

In the United States, Lloyd argues, Irish immigrants were despised for the same qualities that ultimately guaranteed their economic and political success. Their clannishness, readiness for violence, loyalty, and organizational capacities enabled them to play a foundational role in transforming “informal functions” into political machines such as Tammany Hall, trade unions, and police departments. As members of these institutions, they also “transformed” “the meaning and function of race.” Seen from this perspective, race is not simply an identifier of national and cultural belonging. Thanks to these institutions controlling access to the “white racial state,” race designates the jobs that minorities are not allowed to do, the neighborhoods where they are not allowed to live, and the socio-economic resources they are not allowed to claim.

Irish immigrants to the United States transformed whiteness in two ways: by actively excluding other racial minorities, especially African Americans, from the manufacturing working class, and by participating in blackface minstrelsy as writers, performers, and producers. Let us consider Irish involvement in manufacturing first. As Ignatiev claims, the “magic formula” of factory trade unionism exploited the impression that white men would not work with African Americans, thus employers had to “defend” the white majority in order to ensure smooth production.⁴⁸ A large number of Irish factory workers were involved in trade unionism and

⁴⁷ David Lloyd, “Black Irish, Irish whiteness and Atlantic State Formation,” in *The Black and Green Atlantic; Cross-Currents of the African and Irish Diasporas*, Peter D. O’Neill and David Lloyd, eds. (Basingstoke, UK; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 17. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 111.

utilized their organizational skills to mobilize against the hiring of African Americans. Their motivation was not simply to decrease labor competition—in fact, Black workers were barely present in manufacturing. As David Lloyd suggests, Irish workers “exercised their organizational strength to contain, on behalf of a white racial state, a Black population regarded as *never to be ready* [for citizenship] even after their formal emancipation.”⁴⁹ In other words, by excluding the group that the white majority in the US considered the most unfit for citizenship in urban industrial America, Irish immigrants were able to distance themselves from the widespread assumption that, similarly, they would not have easily adapted to industrial life.

Irish immigrants had huge stakes in distancing themselves from African Americans because in the American popular mind the affinity between the two groups was apparent. As Robert Cantwell observes, in the middle of the nineteenth century, “smoked Irishman” became the rural slang for “Negro.”⁵⁰ Such equations were ubiquitous in America, including in dramatic works and among theatre professionals. In *The Irishman in London; Or, the Happy African*, William Macready’s adaptation of a farce that became popular on both sides of the Atlantic, the marriage plot is displaced from the British romantic heroes onto the Irish servant Murtoch Delaney and his lover Cubba, a Black slave.⁵¹ For the Catholic Murtoch, Cubba’s “white heart” deserves to be married to a Pope. For the African Cubba, Murtoch’s stories about the beauties of Ireland are fascinating.⁵² Actress Fanny Kemble also noticed a remarkable resemblance between

⁴⁹ Lloyd, “Black Irish, Irish whiteness,” 17.

⁵⁰ Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 262.

⁵¹ William Macready and James Whiteley, *The Irishman in London; or, The Happy African. A Farce* (London: T. N. Longman, 1799), 32–3. <http://archive.org/details/irishmaninlondon00macriala>.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 33. “Cubba: No matter, my colour, if me do right—Good black face be happier den bad white. / Murtoch: Troth and I believe she may be the daughter of a king, for she has the mind of a Prince—If her face was but as white

the “low Irish” and the Black slaves when she visited her husband’s rice plantation in Georgia. She discovered that the “Irish hate the Negro more even than the Americans do.” She believed that “the despised and degraded condition of the blacks” presented Irish immigrants with an “ugly resemblance to their own circumstances in Ireland.” This ignited in the Irish “disgust and contempt of which they themselves are very habitually the objects;” in fact, Kemble presumed, “such circular distribution of wrongs may not only be pleasant, but have something like the air of retributive right to very ignorant folks.”⁵³ Kemble’s reasoning aligns with Lloyd’s argument above. Irish-on-Black violence was not just out of fear of labor competition; rather, it was a redress strategy to assert their superiority and “readiness” for life in America. Kemble wrote three decades before the Fourteenth Amendment was signed, but her point was certainly even more true once “all persons born or naturalized” in the United States—African Americans, naturalized immigrants, as well as the American-born children of immigrants, were recognized as American citizens.

Another way that Irish immigrants “transformed whiteness” was by participating in blackface minstrelsy. In the United States, blackface performance began as entr’acts of solo songs and dances in legitimate theatres and beer gardens. Its evolution into the “national pastime” was quick and partly aided by the 1838 panic.⁵⁴ To fight the financial crisis, Mitchell’s

as her heart, she’d be a wife for a pope. / Cubba: You tell a *Syman* fine story about your country, me like to hear. / Murtoch: Och honey! She likes my history, she sweet crater, she’s choaking [*sic*] with sense; then you shall have it.”

⁵³ Frances Ann Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838–1839*, John A. Scott ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 105–4, 123–4. In January 1839, Kemble noted that “two planters of the neighbourhood [...] have contracted to dig a canal, called Brunswick Canal and not having hands enough for the work, advertise at the same time for Negroes on hire and for Irish labourers.” Blacks and Irish were to work on two separate sites since, it was believed, “there would be tumults, and risings, and broken heads, and bloody bones and all the natural results of Irish intercommunion with their fellow creatures.”

⁵⁴ Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), xi.

Olympic Theatre in New York City cut its admission prices by limiting productions to “tragico-comico-illegitimate” performances.⁵⁵ The circumstance sustained especially cheap burlesque companies and blackface artists. Several theatres followed Mitchell’s example and contributed to the popularity of blackface performance by attracting low-paying working-class audiences. In the early-1840s, these theatres were able to host entire blackface ensembles (calling themselves “minstrels”) featuring songs and skits.⁵⁶ Blackface minstrelsy quickly turned into an extremely lucrative and fast-paced enterprise. To grasp its magnitude and overall profitability it is useful to look at the ensembles’ programs: the same performers’ names appeared on different cast lists at very short time intervals, which suggests quick turnovers and high competition among the blackface artists.⁵⁷ Many of these names were Irish, as Alexander Saxton’s survey of several minstrel figures demonstrates.⁵⁸

Genealogical studies of the form have shown the eclectic provenance of blackface minstrelsy’s characters, songs, dance steps, and humor.⁵⁹ Eric Lott emphasizes the mix of Irish and Black performance traditions as follows:

⁵⁵ Peter Buckely, *To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 383.

⁵⁶ Before the advent of blackface minstrelsy, “minstrelsy” connoted traditional music, sacred or secular, unified under the ethnological idea of the “folk.” This is the meaning of the word that presumably blackfaced performers meant their musical work to evoke. Tracy C. Davis, “I Long for My Home in Kentuck,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 57, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 38–65, 43.

⁵⁷ On the evolution of blackface minstrelsy, see Robert C. Toll, *Blacking up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 115–131; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁵⁸ Alexander Saxton, “Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology,” *American Quarterly* 27, no.1 (1975): 3–28.

⁵⁹ See especially Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962) and Toll, *Blacking up*.

Black lore interspersed with southern humor (itself often interracial in creation); black banjo techniques and rhythms interrupting folk dance music of the British Isles (as it has been taken up by whites in the United States); the vigorous earth-slapping footwork of black dances warring with the Irish lineaments of blackface jigs and reels. The very instrumentation of minstrel bands followed this pattern: the banjo and jawbones were black, while the fiddle, bones, and tambourine (derived perhaps from an instrument called the bodhran) were Irish.⁶⁰

The contributions of many Irish composers and performers—Stephen Foster, Dan Bryant, Joel Walker Sweeney, and George Christy were all of Irish parentage—likely account for the Irish nationalist songs and the incorporation of Irish brogues and themes into lyrics and comedy material centered on African American life.⁶¹ The Irish elements of blackface minstrelsy certainly invited broad Irish participation from both audience members and performers. As Lott claims, “the Irish ascendancy within the minstrel show” afforded Irish immigrants “a means of cultural representation from behind the mask.”⁶² In other words, while dissolving their ethnicity into the whiteness hidden behind the black mask, Irish minstrels also made their Irishness visible by performing distinct repertoires of Celtic songs and dances.

While originally the primary audience of blackface minstrelsy were Northeastern urbanities, most of the shows’ song and comedy contents evoked the Plantation South.⁶³ References could be to traditional Southern pastimes like corn shucking competitions, locales

⁶⁰ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 94.

⁶¹ Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 118.

⁶² Lott, *Love and Theft*, 95.

⁶³ Consensus has been achieved regarding the urban background of minstrelsy audiences, but scholars are divided on the matter of class. Eric Lott and David Roediger focus on the working-class origins of the form, while David Monod, Stephen Johnson, and Tracy C. Davis show how minstrel shows’ musical repertoire, especially the most sentimental songs, made the genre appealing to the middle class as well. Stephen Johnson, “Testimonials in Silk: Juba and the Legitimization of American Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain,” in *Testimonial Advertising in the American Marketplace: Emulation, Identity, Community*, Marlis Schweitzer and Marina Moskowitz eds., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 23–49; Davis, “I Long for My Home,” 46–9; David Monod, *The Soul of Pleasure: Sentiment and Sensation in Nineteenth-Century American Mass Entertainment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 61–7.

such as the lowly slave cabin or agricultural festivals, or Southern endemic flora and fauna such as magnolia trees and possums.⁶⁴ Christy Minstrels' playbills summarized the program as featuring the "Life Among the Happy," "Pourtraying [*sic*] the peculiarities of the Southern or Plantation Negroes in their Holiday Pastimes."⁶⁵ The eulogized locales often had real names ("I Long for My Home in Kentucky") yet their goal was to create a universal contrast between urbanity and cosmopolitanism on one hand and rurality and the pastoral on the other.⁶⁶ Thus, on stage, the American South was signified explicitly, yet it became a zone of agrarian elementalism in the popular mind, a Lefebrian *space*, rather than a place, where time stopped in a simpler Past and people's emotionality was not tainted by the modern metropolis.⁶⁷

Tracy C. Davis explains how blackface minstrelsy could express the ethos of the slaveholding Plantation South while simultaneously inspiring empathy for slaves and even inviting participation in the anti-slavery movement.⁶⁸ Davis's research focus on how British audiences were accustomed to seeing blackface minstrelsy "as tied to both abolitionist arguments and a range of pejoratively racialized and formulaically sentimentalized African American characters."⁶⁹ Following Kallen Hoxworth's latest study, this argument may be applicable to

⁶⁴ Tracy C. Davis, *The Broadview Anthology of Nineteenth-Century British Performance* (Peterborough, Ont: Broadview Press, 2012), 268–70. On opossums as signifiers of Americana, see Tracy C. Davis, "Acting Black, 1824: Charles Mathew's Trip to America," *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 2 (2011): 163–89, 172.

⁶⁵ Cited in Davis, *The Broadview Anthology*, 270.

⁶⁶ Davis, "I Long for My Home," 61.

⁶⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991). Sociologist Henry Lefebvre suggests that socially produced *space* is imposed over *place* and is maintained through administrative policies, social conventions, and technological systems for living. In my view, theatre is another tool that transforms place into space, both in the physical auditorium and the fictional locales that are represented on the stage.

⁶⁸ Davis, "I Long for My Home," 49.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

blackface minstrelsy performed in the United States as well. In fact, “the transoceanic traffics of early blackface minstrelsy” created connections between US racial formations and the Anglophone imperial formations of the Global South.⁷⁰ Formally, blackface minstrelsy’s musical repertoire was a clear engagement with the musical forms of modernity, especially opera, symphonies, and ballet. In the United States specifically, “modernity” was evoked through other non-musical performance forms as well, most notably, mesmeric demonstrations, automaton exhibitions, and lectures on the “progress of humanity.”⁷¹ Thus, as abolitionist arguments and racist imagery existed side by side, so modern (urban) performance forms and timeless (rural) references in song and comedy provided a space for simultaneously engaging modernity and finding refuge from it.

Just as minstrel shows held out the possibility that whites could be Blacks for a while, they also suggested that, by confining it to the realm of Blackness, pre-industrial rural culture could survive amidst modern industrial capitalism. The skill of minstrels was to be able to both display a natural, rural self and reject the same as “just” a mask. In no way was this a small task. In the United States, there was a marketing advantage in demonstrating cultural authenticity; in fact, minstrels often emphasized their work (real or fictional) collecting songs, dances, and bits of dialogue from Southern slaves.⁷² Minstrels claimed to have learned the “rural fun” and emotional pathos from “authentic negroes,” but they also made it abundantly clear that they were

⁷⁰ Kellen Hoxworth, “The Jim Crow Global South,” *Theatre Journal* 72, no. 4 (2020): 443–67.

⁷¹ Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 230; Vera Brodsky Lawrence, *Strong on Music: The New York Music Scene in the Days of George Templeton Strong, 1836–1875*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 232.

⁷² Toll, *Blackening up*, 50; Howard L. Sacks and Judith Rose Sacks, *Way up North in Dixie: A Black Family’s Claim to the Confederate Anthem* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

urban whites.⁷³ On playbills, their pictures in stage makeup and *au naturel* in elegant tuxedos appeared side by side. Jokes made the point even more directly: like widows, they wore black only for a short time!⁷⁴ This strategy allowed the ethos of both rural and urban America, the rowdy working class and respectable middle class, to express itself without conflicts. As a *London Illustrated News* article aptly summarized, “with white face the whole affair would be intolerable. It is the ebony that gives the due and needful color to the monstrosities [and] the breeches of decorum.”⁷⁵

Due to their rural provenance and desire to demonstrate their fitness for American industrial and urban life, Irish immigrants might have been the group who benefitted the most from participating in such racial disguises. To use George Lipsitz’s terminology, the Irish “natural self” could survive behind the mask while their “normative self” adapted to urban, capitalist America.⁷⁶ In blackface minstrelsy, this could happen especially thanks to the allusive elasticity of nostalgia and its ability to join the trauma of urbanization and migration in what Alexander Saxton calls “psychological identification.”⁷⁷ The black mask aided this identification by creating a “type” that, while black on the surface, could represent any of the uprooted members of the audience. Songs such as “Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny” and “Good News

⁷³ Toll, *Blacking up*, 38–9.

⁷⁴ Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 117.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Carl Frederick Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 54.

⁷⁶ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages, Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 64.

⁷⁷ Saxton, “Blackface Minstrelsy,” 14–5. Saxton points out that the psychological identification included also those who journeyed West during the Frontier expansion: “Underlying the sociological congruency between city and frontier was a psychological identity between traveling to the city and traveling west. Each, for the individual who undertook such a transition, was a journey involving a traumatic break with a previous situation.”

from Home” evoked a specific racial and cultural identity (Southern, rural, Black), yet the heartache that the singer expressed being parted from home was recognizable to many and especially the Irish émigrés whose home was not just far away but usurped by colonizing Britain.⁷⁸ Interestingly, nostalgic songs about the beauty of Ireland or loved ones left behind made for a large part of Irish musical repertoire in vaudeville, including Pat Rooney’s acts.

Pat Rooney and the Elinore Sisters: A Short Note on Method

The transition from blackface minstrelsy to variety theatre and, later, vaudeville, was an easy one for Irish performers. Not only did minstrel shows increasingly include other ethnic characters, performed mostly by Irish comics, who naturally morphed into variety comedy, but Irish minstrels also continued to profit from imitating Black characters on stages outside of the minstrelsy circuit.⁷⁹ From the 1870s throughout the 1880s, Black, German, and Irish were the most popular racial and ethnic comedy acts in vaudeville. According to vaudeville performer and historian Douglas Gilbert, vaudeville programs were packed with Irish performers presenting selections of Irish songs and dances in ethnic costumes. Kitty O’Neal, John W. Kelly, Tim Rogers, Sam Ricky, and Pat Rooney were some of the most popular among them. In the category of Irish comedians, Maggie Weston performed the first “Biddy” servant character, the Russell Brothers cross-dressed to play the “Irish Servant Girls,” and Maggie Cline alternated between

⁷⁸ Anonymous, “Carry Me Back to Ole Virginy,” also known as “De Floating Scow” (Baltimore: F. D. Benteen, 1847). There is a better known “Carry Me Back to Old Virginy,” written by James A. Bland in 1878, that became the state song of the Commonwealth of Virginia in the 1940s. “Good News from Home” was part of the Christy Minstrels’ repertoire. Sheet music reproduced in Davis, *The Broadview Anthology*, 286.

⁷⁹ According to Michelle Granshaw, “the close relationship between blackface and Irish stage representation started in minstrelsy.” Moreover, depending on the availability of jobs, Irish American artists working across minstrelsy and variety facilitated the forms’ influence on each other. Michelle Granshaw, *Irish on the Move: Performing Mobility in American Variety Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 52.

bantering and singing in the first Irish comic singing act. There were also Irish double acts, featuring two comedians rather than a comic-and-straight-man pair; some examples include McNulty and Murray, Clooney and Ryan, and Needham and Kelly. Finally, Irish family acts such as the Four Mortons and the four Cohans were among the most acclaimed. One of the Cohan children, George Michael, became the most prolific American playwright, composer, and lyricist of the early twentieth century. Early in his career, he wrote skits for vaudeville such as the Irish farce *Dangerous Mrs Delaney* for the Elinore Sisters; later, he demonstrated his assimilation to America by composing patriotic songs such as “You’re a Grand Old Flag” and “The Yankee Doodle Boy.”⁸⁰

By focusing on Irish American variety and vaudeville artists, this chapter reveals the Irish foundations of American popular entertainment while also filling a gap in the historiography of Irish Americans more broadly. My case studies are Pat Rooney Sr., impersonator, singer, and dancer of traditional Irish steps, and the Elinore Sisters, an Irish comedy duo. Rooney emigrated to America in 1867 at nineteen years of age. Kate and May Elinore were born in Brooklyn in 1865 and 1872 respectively from parents who were Irish Famine survivors. In the years between the 1870s and the 1910s, both Rooney’s and the Sisters’ careers spanned the transition from blackface minstrelsy to variety theatre to vaudeville. Pat Rooney started as a solo Irish impersonator in minstrel shows and variety theatres and eventually toured with his own variety company on vaudeville circuits until his death in 1892. The Elinore Sisters quickly moved from variety theatre into vaudeville, where they performed both comedy sketches and Irish-themed

⁸⁰ Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville, Its Life and Times* (New York: Dover Publications, 1963), 357–65; Joe Laurie, *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York, Holt, 1953), 143–7, 319–20, 507. George M. Cohan, *Dangerous Mrs. Delaney*, first performed at Tony Pastor’s 14th St. theatre, New York City, on December 19, 1898. ESVAP, B 1 f 10; George M. Cohan, “The Yankee Doodle Boy” & “You’re a Grand Old Flag” (New York: F.A. Mills, 1904 & 1906), Notated Music, Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.100010512/>.

short musical farces from 1894 to 1909.⁸¹ Both Rooney's and the Sisters' performance styles can be described as "transitional" or, using Robert Snyder's articulation, as "both urban and ethnic—a testimony to their passage from being rural immigrants to being at home in American cities."⁸² This passage was not exclusively an assimilation process; in fact, a strong argument can be made that once Irish immigrants settled in the United States they "became American" by discovering their Irishness—in other words, as they sought ways to define their ethnic identity in the new country, they circulated Irish cultural forms while also adapting to American ways of life.

As historian Kevin Kenny writes in *The American Irish*, "most immigrant groups have not only discovered their 'ethnicity' in America, but [...] the development of some forms of ethnic identity has been an integral part of the process through which immigrants have normally become American."⁸³ As this chapter illustrates, in the entertainment industry this was a two-step process: in blackface minstrelsy between the 1870s and the 1890s, Irish immigrants injected their Irishness into a non-descriptive whiteness hidden behind the black mask; in variety theatre and vaudeville between the late 1890s and the 1910s, they explicitly performed their Irishness by impersonating stereotypical Irish characters but also by dancing traditional Irish steps and singing nationalistic Irish songs. Due to its legacies of racism and abuse, it is hard to accept today that racial impersonation was a presentation strategy for many newly arrived immigrants. However, both Pat Rooney and the Elinore Sisters demonstrate that Irish stereotypes, tropes, and

⁸¹ After they separated in 1909, both Kate and May continued to perform for another decade initially as monologists and eventually each with their husbands. Archival sources suggest that the sisters did not separate in good terms. May's diary tells of a lawsuit against Kate for supposedly stealing comedy material that the sisters had purchased jointly. Judging from later reviews, both Kate and May recycled jokes and characters from old sketches. The diary concludes before telling the outcome of the lawsuit. ESVAP, B1 f 12.

⁸² Robert W. Snyder, "The Irish and Vaudeville," in *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, J.J. Lee and Marion R. Casey eds. (New York; London: New York University Press, 2006), 407.

⁸³ Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History* (Harlow, UK: Routledge, 2000), 148.

authentic cultural forms often coexisted in the same act and *jointly* assisted Irish immigrants in “discover[ing] their ‘ethnicity’” in America.

One fundamental question for scholars of racial performance is how minority groups have chosen to represent their own and other races or ethnicities. In blackface scholarship, the shared opinion is that by appropriating and often denigrating Black culture, American ethnics were able to define themselves as white.⁸⁴ But why did American ethnics often denigrate their own ethnicity? For instance, why did George M. Cohan write about and the Elinore Sisters play an Irish vulgar widow with the propensity for drink and violence in *Dangerous Mrs Delaney*? Or why did Pat Rooney play corrupt Irish politicians in songs such as “When McCormick Rules the State?”⁸⁵ Irish variety and vaudeville performers were responsible for the majority of Irish stereotypical representations or, to put it in another way, the performance of Irishness remained under the purview of artists of Irish nativity or parentage. To contemporary observers, these rarely seem productive ways to “become American.” Yet these portrayals were often praised as true to the Irish spirit in the United States and were enjoyed by both Irish and non-Irish audiences of the time.

Pat Rooney’s Irish impersonations and dancing were admired respectively for their humanity and grace. Despite some prejudiced references in his songs, his unpretentious costumes, realistic acting, and elegant dancing contributed to make him a suitable representative of Irish culture in America. The comedy of the Elinore Sisters was built on a series of

⁸⁴ Lott, *Love and Theft*; Michael Rogin, *Blackface, white Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Douglas A. Jones, *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2014).

⁸⁵ The chorus of “When McCormick Rules the State?” sang: “There’ll be no smoked Italian congressmen, / The Chinese must emigrate; / There’ll be no four-dollar cigars to smoke / when McCormick rules the State.”

widespread Irish stereotypes. Kate played uncouth masculine Irish women opposite May who fulfilled one of two roles: the Anglo-American stiff matron or the assimilated Irish American daughter with aspirations for social recognition. Both characters were portrayed mockingly—Kate’s for her lack of refinement and May’s for her arrogance. Yet not a single reviewer across the United States accused them of insensitivity. This is particularly striking considering that on January 24, 1907, when the Sisters were at the height of their careers, the Russell Brothers were hissed off the stage in New York City for working in the same line of stereotypical Irish comedy.⁸⁶ Gender certainly played a role here: while masculine women were still portrayed by women in the Elinore Sisters’ acts, with the Russell Brothers the masculinization of the Irish woman was achieved through cross-dressing. Perhaps the Elinore Sisters were tolerated because the public’s anger was clearly directed at the Russell Brothers’ act. However, this does not explain why the Sisters’ act never received even mild criticism during its entire run.

I argue that only by focusing on the performances’ aesthetic elements over content, and by situating Irish impersonation within the long history of Irish entertainment in the United States, can we grasp the role that these depictions played in “the process through which immigrants have normally become American.”⁸⁷ Pat Rooney’s realistic costumes and superb dancing skills compensated for the sometimes racist allusions in his song lyrics and provided a unique alternative to the stage Irishman, a variety stock character known for his outrageous red wigs and trivial knock-about comedy. This conclusion can only be reached by analyzing Rooney’s songs as an oeuvre rather than discretely, and by understanding racial impersonation as

⁸⁶ “Hooted Off the Stage,” *Gaelic American*, February 2, 1907, 5.

⁸⁷ Kenny, *The American Irish*, 148.

a complex performance genre that produced meaning through both textual (jokes and song lyrics) and visual (costumes, makeup, and dance techniques) elements. Similarly, though neither the stereotypes of the uncouth Irish widow nor the pretentious Irish daughter were redeemed, the Elinore Sisters were able to manipulate these images to invert conventional social, gender, and ethnic hierarchies in favor of working-class female Irish immigrants. Theatre critics used to define the Elinore Sisters' (and especially Kate's) performance aesthetic as grotesque. My own analysis adopts Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of "grotesque" as expressed in the free format of "carnavalesque" artforms, festivals, or performance events: as eccentric, misaligned, profane, and inverted behaviors.⁸⁸ I argue that, in the carnival-like, relatively free format of vaudeville shows, the Sisters' grotesque eccentricities in costume, makeup, and humor not only sold tickets but established direct lines of communication with multiethnic audiences. This created a sense of community and belonging among the immigrants in the audience and contributed to redeem female ethnic comedy from its vulgar reputation. Visual records documenting costume choices, Irish traditional dances, or a type of grotesque comedy that, as a reviewer noted about the Elinore Sisters, "never hurt the feelings of anyone" are challenging for performance historians to recover.⁸⁹ However, they are the key towards understanding the social function of racial impersonation in American popular entertainment.

⁸⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Helene Iswolsky trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

⁸⁹ "Mrs. Delaney of Newport,' a Society Satire," *Baltimore American*, Undated. ESVAP, B 3 Vol 3.

Pat Rooney, “A Fine Delineator of the Usually Ill-used Irish Character”⁹⁰

Pat Rooney was born in 1848 in Birmingham, UK.⁹¹ According to Frank Cullen, Rooney’s parents moved from County Cork, Ireland, one of the areas most affected by the Famine.⁹² In the new industrial context, and pre-labor rights, they likely took low-paid manufacturing jobs and encouraged their children to follow the same path starting at a young age. This might be why Pat Rooney never learned to read and write. As his daughters Julia and Josie later revealed, “he wasn’t much at arithmetic or making change either. Whenever he wanted to buy cigars he’d throw down a dollar and take no change. Anybody could have shortchanged Pat Rooney and he knew it. So he’d never wait for the change; he’d just walk away and wink his eye and say, ‘They can’t fool the Irish.’”⁹³ Education was one remedy for the Irish not to “get fooled” in the new country. For this reason, his son Pat Jr. recalled him saying: “my boy, you must go to school first. The first business of your life is to study. After that if you want to be a performer, suit yourself.”⁹⁴

⁹⁰ “Macauley’s Theatre,” *New York Clipper*, December 21, 1878.

⁹¹ Arthur Frank Wertheim Papers, B 13 f 3, University of Arizona Libraries. The collection includes typescripts of research notes that Prof. Barbara Bair took while working on the Pat Rooney Collection at the Harry Ransom Center for Research in the Humanities, The University of Texas, Austin. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my own research trip to the Ransom Center was cancelled. I use Bair’s notes to reconstruct part of Pat Rooney’s biography and career. I refer to this source as “Bair’s notes.”

⁹² Frank Cullen, *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 961. For data on the geography of the Famine, see the Relief Commissioners’ fifth, sixth, and seventh reports, Enhanced British Parliamentary Papers on Ireland (1845–7).

⁹³ Ashton Steven, “A Chat with the Daughters of Pat,” *The San Francisco Examiner*, undated, AFWP.

⁹⁴ Pat Rooney II, “Pat Rooney the First, By Pat Rooney the Second,” *Variety*, December 20, 1912, 38. Pat Rooney’s son and grandson were both named after him. Before the grandson was born, Rooney “father” was referred to as Pat Rooney Sr., while his son was Pat Rooney Jr. When the grandson was born, he was initially referred to as Pat Rooney III, but once audiences had started to forget about Pat Rooney Sr., Pat Rooney Jr. became “Pat Rooney” and his son became Pat Rooney Jr. This has caused confusion among researchers. In this chapter, “Pat Rooney” always refers to Pat Rooney Sr. and Pat Rooney Jr. always refers to his son.

With no schooling but a penchant for public recognition, Pat Rooney tried to earn his living as a boxer.⁹⁵ But once he moved to New York City in 1867, his prizefighting career plunged.⁹⁶ According to his son's retelling, Rooney turned to the stage the night he "was given an opening at Miner's Bowery by Henry Miner, who had little faith in his ability."⁹⁷ Miner's variety show opened in the Bowery district of Manhattan about two decades after Rooney arrived in New York, thus either father or son constructed this anecdote. The theatre was known for its "hook" technique: Miner encouraged anyone to perform on amateur nights, but on audience's demand, bad performers were removed from the stage by yanking them off with a wooden hook. This method became so popular that it originated the expression "give them the hook" to signify the "removal" of a performer from the stage.⁹⁸ While Rooney might not have debuted at Miner's, "ability" at any other performance venue in the working-class immigrant Bowery area mostly meant to keep the overzealous, majority male audience entertained. Pat Jr. recalled: "His first audience was a 'tough' one. There was no 'polite vaudeville' in those days. The crowd brought a wealth of garden truck along and stood prepared to express their disapproval by heaving it on the stage."⁹⁹ As Sophie Tucker would discover half a century later, rule number one of popular entertainment was to show the audience that you are "one of them."¹⁰⁰ To win his "tough"

⁹⁵ Cullen, *Vaudeville, Old and New*, 961.

⁹⁶ Bair's notes.

⁹⁷ Rooney II, "Pat Rooney the First."

⁹⁸ "Miner's Bowery was a Landmark," *New York Times*, August 11, 1929, 147.

⁹⁹ Rooney II, "Pat Rooney the First."

¹⁰⁰ Sophie Tucker, *Some of These Days; the Autobiography of Sophie Tucker* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1946), 40-1.

spectators, Rooney did exactly that: when he “gave friendly greeting to the audience, most of whom were of the Old Sod [Ireland], they gave him a chance.”¹⁰¹

Julia and Josie Rooney told the same anecdote but added one crucial detail. Pat Rooney, they claimed, “came to America and discovered the Bowery without make-up.” Later someone “dared him to do his songs and dances with comic make-up, and he took the dare.”¹⁰² Since that day, “managers fought for him,” which allowed Rooney to quickly increase “his salary from \$75 a week to \$1,000, a record for stage earnings in those days.”¹⁰³ According to his daughters, Rooney had not intended racial impersonation to be the vehicle for his songs and dances. But in post-Civil War America and at the height of blackface minstrelsy’s popularity, singing and dancing *au naturel* might have been too common. Minstrel shows increasingly included a variety of stereotypical ethnic types besides blackfaced performers. Variety theatres and later vaudeville simply adapted to feature a genre that was becoming more and more widespread;¹⁰⁴ in fact, both blackface performers and “ethnic delineators,” as they became known, moved freely between minstrelsy and variety theatres to maximize their employment opportunities. Pat Rooney’s career is a good case in point. The few secondary sources available only focus on his later vaudeville years, but newspapers of the time reveal constant crossovers between minstrelsy and variety until at least 1876. The most recent notice is from June 20, 1876. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* reviewing Hooley’s Minstrels wrote: “Pat Rooney, to our mind, is the best delineator of Irish character that

¹⁰¹ Rooney II, “Pat Rooney the First.”

¹⁰² Stevens, “A Chat with the Daughters of Pat.”

¹⁰³ Rooney II, “Pat Rooney the First.”

¹⁰⁴ Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 62.

comes here. His walk and swagger border on caricature without overstepping the bounds of the imitators' art. Rooney is also what most of his rivals are not, an exquisite dancer."¹⁰⁵

Pat Rooney's calibrated swagger—funny but not crude, caricatural but not distasteful—was noticed on several occasions over the years. His “exquisite” clog dancing became a trademark and certainly distinguished him among the many non-Irish impersonators of “Irish types.” Irish traditional step dances such as the double jig and the hornpipe contributed to the popularity of Irish impersonation while preserving a space for authentic cultural expression within stereotypical ethnic acts. These dances were performed with the upper body stiff, arms along the sides, and the whole action taking place in the legs and feet. Special dancing shoes with wooden soles commonly referred to as clogs amplified the sound of the footwork.¹⁰⁶ From a Vitaphone video fragment of his son and grandson tap dancing in 1935, we may imagine Pat Rooney's clog dance to be similarly “smooth,” or not as vigorous as the traditional Irish “battering steps.”¹⁰⁷ No documentation relating to Pat Rooney's dance training survives, but the compliments he received throughout his career indicate a high level of skill. In fact, considering that Irish steps were a standard interlude for Irish singers, those reviewers who focused on

¹⁰⁵ “Hooley's Minstrels,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 20, 1876.

¹⁰⁶ John Cullinane, *Aspects of the History of Irish Dancing in Ireland, England, New Zealand, North America and Australia* (Cork City, Ireland: John P. Cullinane, 1987), 68–9.

¹⁰⁷ *All-Star Vaudeville*, directed by Roy Mack, Vitaphone, 1935. According to Constance Valis Hill, “tap dance has been historicized as having a neat tripartite parent-age of English, Irish, and African musical and dance traditions. The resulting narrative ignores tap's more complex intercultural fusions, which occurred through the interaction of Irish indentured servants and enslaved West Africans in the Caribbean during the 1600s, African American folk and Irish American laborers in the southern United States during the 1700s, and African American freemen and Irish American performers in northern urban cities in the 1800s.” Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), xiv.

Rooney's dancing must have written about it to set his execution apart from the common walkarounds of non-professional dancers singing Irish songs.¹⁰⁸

Pat Rooney not only danced beautifully but also authored most of his songs. His lyrics further linked the Irish origin of his dances to the characters he played.¹⁰⁹ In "Biddy the Ballet Girl" he sang from the perspective of Biddy's father, "a day-laboring man." His

Beautiful daughter never cared much for to work,
'Twas her mother's own wish that she oughta.
Somehow she took the stage,
So I granted my daughter's request,
And now she's a great Ballet dancer,
And dances along with the rest."¹¹⁰

Between this verse and the chorus, Rooney would wear a tutu skirt over his work clothes and burlesque the ballet in his clog shoes. The Irish identity of both dance and character was eventually sealed by the chorus, which sung: "On the stage she is Mamselle La Shorty; / Her right name is Bridget McCarthy."¹¹¹

According to his son, in the early 1870s Pat Rooney "was established as an entertainer almost over night [*sic*]."¹¹² He proved so popular that Henry Miner made him a resident performer and partner. The partnership lasted for five years, until a disagreement led to their separation. This resulted in a similar agreement with New York City's competing impresario James Donaldson. At Donaldson's London Theatre, Rooney was a featured performer for a

¹⁰⁸ Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 62–5.

¹⁰⁹ Several of Pat Rooney's lyrics were published in *Pat Rooney's 'Star Combination' Songster. Containing the Very Best Collection Ever Made of the Songs of This Famous Vocalist and Great Delineator of the Bright and Humorous Side of Irish Eccentric Character* (New York: Clinton T. De Witt, 1879).

¹¹⁰ Cited in Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*, 66.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Rooney II, "Pat Rooney the First."

share of \$800 per month—\$300 more than his share at Miner’s.¹¹³ After these experiences, Rooney formed his own company, the “Pat Rooney’s All Stars Combination,” and took it on the road. Between the 1870s and the 1880s, “combination” companies transformed traditional family-run dramatic ensembles into packaged variety shows. In place of the more or less typified roles of Tom shows and other melodramas of the antebellum period, combination performers showcased a selection of comedy, song, and dance “specialties” similar to minstrel shows’ olio acts. As networks of booking agents and theatre impresarios developed into what became known as vaudeville circuits, the specialty program typical of vaudeville shows was already put on by combination troupes. Tony Pastor, whom theatre historiography names “the father of vaudeville,” led a combination company before settling in New York and turning it into a resident show.¹¹⁴ What these performance experiments tell us is that, contrary to established historiography, vaudeville was not “invented” by theatre managers and agents.¹¹⁵ Managers and agents should be credited for connecting theatres across the country and starting the two- or three-a-day format, which allowed the same artists to perform for different audiences twice and even three times in one day. Yet the idea of putting together different performance specialties in one plotless program came from the artists themselves and originated with minstrelsy and combination companies. The specialties they most commonly performed—song and dance,

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Armond Fields, *Tony Pastor, Father of Vaudeville* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007).

¹¹⁵ Besides the Armond Fields’ book on Tony Pastor cited above, other prominent studies that originated the idea of vaudeville as the “managers’ creation” are: William Moulton Marston and John Henry Feller, *F.F. Proctor, Vaudeville Pioneer* (New York: R.R. Smith, 1943); Charles Samuels, *Once upon a Stage: The Merry World of Vaudeville* (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1974); Judy Alter, *Vaudeville: The Birth of Show Business* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1998).

comic sketches and, of course, racial impersonation—became the blueprint for vaudeville programs in the 1880s and onward.

Pat Rooney's combination troupe members changed frequently over the years but consistently included one or two clog dancers and/or Irish impersonators besides Rooney, at least one "child prodigy" performer, a double act of so-called "Dutch comedians" impersonating German characters, and at least another pair of "eccentric character artists" whom we may assume performed some type of racial, ethnic, or gender masquerade.¹¹⁶ At some point in the late-1870s, Rooney and company ended up in Baltimore. Here Rooney met his future wife, Baltimore-resident Josie Granger, also a first-generation Irish immigrant. She was a dancer in Tony Devere's burlesque *Humpy Dumpy* and, according to Pat Jr., had performed in one of the many productions of the *Black Crook*, a burlesque considered the first "leg show" in America.¹¹⁷ Josie had an eight-year-old daughter, Katie, from a previous marriage.¹¹⁸ Josie and Katie both joined the All Star Combination shortly after Rooney and Josie married. When not touring, the Rooneys' residence was at 60 Third Avenue, New York City, just a few blocks north of the Bowery district where Pat had started his career.¹¹⁹ When stationary in New York, the company would alternate engagements between new vaudeville theatres, such as Tony Pastor's on

¹¹⁶ "Success Crowns Our Efforts: Terrific Receptions Given to the Great Pat Rooney N.Y. Star Combination," *New York Clipper*, December 21, 1878; "Macauley's Theatre," *New York Clipper*, December 21, 1878; "Macauley's — Pat Rooney's Troupe," *New York Clipper*, December 21, 1878; "Pat Rooney at the Howard," *Boston Daily Globe*, May 18, 1886, 5; "'Pat's Wardrobe' and Pat Rooney," *Boston Daily Globe*, May 10, 1887, 8.

¹¹⁷ Cullen, *Vaudeville, Old and New*, 962. On the *Black Crook*, see Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 108–17.

¹¹⁸ "Katie Rooney In Jail," *New York Times*, January 17, 1886, 2; "Katie Rooney's Troubles: How Comedian Pat Rooney Abused his Step-Daughter," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 4, 1888, 3.

¹¹⁹ "Pat Rooney Robbed in a Fight," *New York Tribune*, June 1, 1883, 8.

Fourteenth Street, and established variety houses such as the refurbished Thalia Theatre at 46 Bowery.¹²⁰

As was typical of Irish American late marriages, Josie and Pat Rooney had all their children in quick succession: Mattie, born in 1879; Pat Jr., born in 1880; and Josie and Julia, born just eleven months apart in 1881.¹²¹ In his draft autobiography, Pat Jr. remembered his father smoked cigars and drank heavily. He also gambled with “heavy losses to horses, cards, and whatever else he bet on.” Pat Jr. and his sister Mattie were afraid of their father, and “when he’d had whiskey and came home” they would hide under the bed from him.¹²² Backed by several news reports about Pat Rooney’s private life, this information builds the picture of a dysfunctional family afflicted by addiction, debt, and domestic violence. On several occasions Rooney used violence on his wife and stepdaughter. In a Cincinnati hotel their brawl caused a sensation. The hotel clerk reported “getting to the room of the belligerent guest” and finding Pat “choking his better half, who was trying her best to make herself heard a block away.” Once she recovered sufficiently to speak, Josie told the press that “her lord had been out until one o’clock in the morning renewing a few Cincinnati acquaintances.” He “had just commenced to talk love to his wife when his stepdaughter entered the room.” “Her presence seemed to excite the actor.

¹²⁰The “first appearance in New York of Pat Rooney with his own combination” is recorded at Tony Pastor’s in October 1879. “Amusements,” *Detroit Free Press*, October 4, 1879, 8. See also Cullen, *Vaudeville, Old and New*, 962.

¹²¹ Bair’s notes; Stevens, “A Chat with the Daughters of Pat.” Pat Rooney’s children all had careers in entertainment. Mattie teamed with Pat and later with her husband John Kennedy. Pat established a dance style all his own and starred in musical comedies with his wife Marion Bent. Julie and Josie worked as a sister act; when Josie married, Julia continued as a single and later with her husband Walter as the Clinton and Rooney duo.

¹²² Bair’s notes. On one occasion, Rooney bet on his own fame. on July 10, 1884 the *New York Times* reported: “Rooney bet Charles Evans that he drew more admirers to a certain Bowery theatre than were attracted thither by a combination of ‘stars’ to which Evans lent the effulgence of his genius. [...] The arbiter decided in favor of Evans [...] Rooney became angry and sued Evans for damages...” “A Receiver For Mr. Rooney: The Comedian Bets Too Rashly On His Drawing,” *New York Times*, July 10, 1884, 8.

[...] Finally he accused her [the stepdaughter] of undue familiarity with a member of his theatrical company, and this remark justly incensed both mother and daughter.” Strikingly, as soon as he realized the position he was in, Rooney behaved as nothing had happened; “he sneaked out of the house and started out with the intention of getting drunk [...] Rooney seemed to regard to whole affair as an everyday occurrence.”¹²³ Katie tried to run away from home a few times. While playing in Peoria, she tried to reach her mother’s family in Baltimore, but at her father’s request, the police intercepted her on the East-bound train and arrested her.¹²⁴ On a different occasion, Rooney even abused his stepdaughter. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported: “Rooney is said to be addicted to liquor. Katie said that he frequently struck her, and otherwise treated her outrageously. She charges him with coming into her room in a rage and tearing her wearing apparel to shreds.”¹²⁵ After this episode, an aunt was appointed Katie’s legal guardian. Exactly a year after, Rooney’s manager quit and the company disbanded after Rooney, “while drunk [...] at a hotel, went to the room of Mrs. Emma Howard, a member of his company, and abused her until she struck him over the head with a chair.”¹²⁶

Pat Rooney was known to be an unreliable company leader. However, after this incident he was able to assemble a new cast and resume his tour for two more seasons. By this point, his Star Combination had turned their variety program into a musical farce: a series of song and dance specialties with more set and costume changes, the addition of group choreographies, and

¹²³ “Pat Rooney’s Racket: The Irish Comedian Creates A Sensation in a Hotel,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 27, 1887, 4.

¹²⁴ “Katie Rooney in Jail,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1886, 2.

¹²⁵ “Katie Rooney’s Troubles: How Comedian Pat Rooney Abused his Step-Daughter,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 4, 1888, 3.

¹²⁶ “An Actress Hits Pat Rooney With a Chair,” *New York Tribune*, March 11, 1889, 1; “Pat Rooney’s Company Disbands,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 12, 1889, 2.

a simple comic plot to tie everything together. No scripts survive, but a description of *Pat's*

Wardrobe by the *Boston Daily Globe* gives a sense of the genre:

The theatre was of course crowded, but the piece itself hardly needs much consideration being a decidedly absurd affair with few good features. The plot is weak and deals with the entanglements caused by a mistaken identity. Without the Pat O'Houlihan of Mr. Rooney it would be practically worthless. Many specialties, which form a feature of the sketch, are as familiar as the popular Pat himself, the musical portion with a low execution is taken from the least enjoyable portions of old operas and the company, saving Katie Rooney who is cast for Christopher, is hardly remarkable.¹²⁷

As is clear from the above, the whole show was a delivery mechanism for its star. Although many specialty numbers were recycled from previous shows and the musical bits were as poorly executed as they were unoriginal, the theatre was packed to capacity. The same was said on several occasions about the Elinore Sisters' own musical farces: despite the poor quality of the music and writing, the Sisters' shows were praised for their high production value and overall hilarity.

While touring with a farce, Pat Rooney died unexpectedly. His son claimed that "during the final season of *Lord Rooney* he had in preparation a new piece, an Irish light opera." However, toward the end of the tour, he fell ill with pneumonia. From Wilmington, Delaware, he was transported back to New York in critical condition. "The journey was too much for him. He died in the Pennsylvania depot," Pat Jr. recalled.¹²⁸ We can only imagine what an "Irish light opera" would have looked like. I visualize it as a precursor to Joe Weber and Lew Fields' ethnic burlesques: if Rooney had not passed away at only forty-four years of age, he might have

¹²⁷ "'Pat's Wardrobe' and Pat Rooney," *Boston Daily Globe*, May 10, 1887, 8.

¹²⁸ Rooney II, "Pat Rooney the First."

managed a theatre and resident company like Weber and Fields did at the Musical Hall on Broadway.

The scarcity of records makes the analysis of Pat Rooney's performance style a challenging task. The lyrics to fifteen songs, one stage photograph, and a few full-length reviews are all that remains. To contemporary readers, many of the lyrics appear stereotypical if not racist, yet the photograph and all but the one review cited in the introduction depict Rooney as a proper, creditable performer of Irish characters.

Rooney's songs are either in the first person or tell the story of people closely related to the narrator. They cover a variety of themes more or less stereotypically representative of the Irish experience in the United States. Their characters can be generally divided into two groups: the "rough" and the "respectable" Irish. Among the "rough" characters, Rooney impersonated racist laborers, abusive husbands, and drunk baseball players. Among the "respectable," we find a proud policeman, nostalgic migrants, and men who despite some trying hardships live an honest life. In between these two contrasting categories, there is a host of politically involved Irish men. "Respectable" only on the surface, they plan to benefit themselves and their community through questionable means, by either harming other marginalized groups or exploiting the support of the most vulnerable Irish.

In "Dick Darby the Cobbler," Rooney played the cobbler of the title. He has "served up" his time for being "an ould agitator" but now has "resolved to repent." He has "travelled this whole world all over / all with the contents of [his] pack" to look for work as a handyman. His family is not exemplary: his "father was hung for sheep stealin'" and his mother "was burned as a witch." But his sister is "a dandy housekeeper" and himself "a handy ould switch." His wife is "humpy she's lumpy [...] she's the divil, she's black," meaning he has married an African

American woman whom he considers ugly and evil. However, this woman is the perfect sexual partner for Darby, as he says, “everything I may do with her / her voice it goes ‘clickity clack,’” a sound that recalls his work utensils. But this is not enough to keep them together. The song’s finale alludes to both baptism and widespread episodes of Irish-on-Black violence: “It was early one fine summer’s morning / a little before it was day / well I dipped her three times in the river / and I carelessly bade her ‘good day.’”¹²⁹

Husband and wife relationships are explored with a similar violent outcome in “Purty Pat, the Masher.” The song features a spoken section in which Rooney explained that he would be happy with his life except that he has married a “red-headed jealous wife.” One night, she finds him drinking with another woman and tells him:

I’ve caught you Patsy
 You can’t fool Mary Ann
 Its queer tricks you are playing
 For an ould married man
 Come home and rock the cradle,
 You know the twins are sick
 Or I’ll crack your thick skull
 With the soft end of a brick.¹³⁰

This image of a controlling, violent wife was widespread in Irish comedy; yet, what is different in these few lines is the appeal “You know the twins are sick,” which reminds the listener that behind a drunk unfaithful husband, and a domineering furious wife, is a life of worry due to poverty and disease. This was reflected by Rooney’s own life. As Pat Jr. recalled, he was often sick as a child, a circumstance that must have certainly concerned his travelling parents.¹³¹

¹²⁹ “Dick Darby the Cobbler,” *Pat Rooney’s ‘Star Combination’ Songster*.

¹³⁰ “Purty Pat, the Masher,” *Murphy and Mack’s Jolly Sailors Songster* (Pittsburgh: American Publishers, 187?)

¹³¹ Bair’s notes.

Rooney's songs about Irish baseball players deal more with their hot temper and excessive drinking than the game they are playing. In "The Day That I Played Baseball," a gang "filled with whiskey, gin and rum" takes O'Houlihan, the narrator of the song, "out in the broiling sun to play a game of ball." The game does not go well for O'Houlihan: a ball hits him in the eye, the umpire calls strikes on him, and when he finally starts running bases, "the gang set up a terrible howl: 'O'Houlihan, you struck a foul.'" The catcher claims he saw O'Houlihan steal bases and dumps him in a keg of beer. The unfortunate O'Houlihan gets "stone-blind drunk" and finally falls in the gutter.¹³²

In "The Day I Walked Against O'Leary," Rooney played McGinty, an Irish man who came to America with "O'Leary, the walker." The song is built on the double meaning of the verb "to walk," which in street slang means to avoid criminal prosecution despite committing a crime while in baseball jargon describes the walk (as opposed to the run) to first base as the result of a base on balls, or the batter's four consecutive successful receptions. As in the previous song, a gang goes to pick up McGinty. They "sot" him tight and take him "to a great big field, / And with alcohol set [him] crazy." Then they strip him naked and ask provocatively: "Who is the terrier going to walk?" The expression "terrier" or "Bowery terrier" was used derogatorily to describe Irish American men who drank vast amounts of alcohol and pushed their physical powers to the limits, especially when fighting other men or pestering women with unwanted attentions. Interestingly, the *New York Tribune* reported that when someone called Rooney a "Bowery terrier" in real life, a fist fight ensued.¹³³ The epithet similarly pushes the McGinty of

¹³² "The Day That I Played Baseball," *Irish Song Book, no. 3: Containing a Choice Collection of 171 Songs* (New York: Wehman Bros, 1909), 81.

¹³³ "Pat Rooney Robbed in a Fight," *New York Tribune*, June 1, 1883, 8.

the song into a fight which he loses miserably. The gang wants him to pay for “that day [he] walked against O’Leary,” so they sprinkle salt on the tracks and make him “walk,” this time literally, until the judge tells him “it was time to stop, / As around the track like a chicken [he]’d flop.” This conclusive line recalls both a chicken slaughterhouse and the Victorian practice of making criminals “walk” on penal treadmills. Penal treadmills were common at Irish and British workhouses for the poor and petty violators; the prisoners’ toil might be a form of punishment or a way to generate income (the energy thus produced was generally used to mill corn or pump water) and pay for bail. For McGinty, the “walk” was certainly a punishment for “that day [he] walked against O’Leary” and a reference to what Americans considered an Irish cruel practice.¹³⁴

Rooney’s respectable Irish characters came in the form of proud policemen, nostalgic migrants, and men trying to live righteous lives despite economic hardships. In “McCormack the Copper” Rooney played a brave and “dandy copper on the Broadway squad.” His respectability is established by “high-toned antecedents,” his courage, and good manners with women. The chorus sang: “If there’s a murder or a fight about, / You’ll always have me near; / And as I pass the ladies say: / ‘Ah! Isn’t he a dear.’” Unlike the violent and unfaithful husbands of previous songs, McCormack “of love always speaks.” He frequently visits the collar shop where his sweetheart works and makes sure to “acquaint her with all the acknowledgements, / Which from the public I receive. / And tell her how they’ll sigh and sob, / When the force I’d have to leave.” It is unclear why McCormack would have to leave the force, but in the context of the love talk,

¹³⁴ “The Day I Walked Against O’Leary,” *Irish Song Book, no. 2: Containing a Choice Collection of 171 Songs* (New York: Wehman Bros, 1909), 52–3; Anthony Vaver, “Prisons and Punishments: The Failure of the Treadmill in America,” *Early American Crime: An Exploration of Crime, Criminals, and Punishments from America’s Past*. Retrieved April 10, 2021.

we might imagine him promising the shop girl to find a more family-oriented occupation once they are married.¹³⁵

Being family-oriented is the primary quality of respectable men in the several migration songs featured in *Lord Rooney*, the musical farce that the Rooney Combination Company was touring when Pat died. In “A Letter to His Dad” Rooney sang from the perspective of the letter writer. He emigrated to America, leaving his old folks in Ireland. He writes “just a few lines” to send his “kindest love to all at home” and share some good news that will make his father’s “heart so glad.”

I’m writing now from my own home,
And our baby’s on my knee.
Tell mother dear it’s her own image,
His prattle makes us glad,
If I could only see you all,
I’d not ask more, dear dad.

Despite the melancholic ending to the refrain, the letter writer has reasons to rejoice. He is pleased that he is now in a position to show his family that he has made it in America. His success is measured by the fact that he has a child and a home of his own. This news, he says, will “please the dear old man” because it demonstrates that he has chosen to be a respectable family man.¹³⁶

Similarly, “in moments of sorrow” the protagonist of “A Mother’s Appeal to Her Boy” remembers the values his Irish family instilled in him. When feeling “a lone exile,” “his heart would be cheered” thinking about “the parting advice” his mother gave him. She said: “Be faithful and fearless, devoted and true, / Be manly in sorrow or joy; / In trials remember ‘tis

¹³⁵ “McCormack the Copper,” *Pat Rooney’s ‘Star Combination’ Songster*.

¹³⁶ “A Letter to His Dad,” *Pat Rooney Comedy Company Songster*, 11.

darkest ere dawn, / Was a mother's appeal to her boy." The boy treasures this advice because it was given "with the love that only a mother can feel;" in fact, that unconditional love encourages him to never deviate from those recommendations. Mother and son "never more met, but he never more forgot / The appeals she made to her boy."¹³⁷

Lastly, respectability is exemplified by tales of survival in which the protagonists hold on to a righteous path. In "Playmates," Rooney told two contrasting stories that together caution against falling low in life. In the first, the narrator remembers an old friend named Henry Dare. Dare was "everybody's idol," the typical handsome boy who, when he "got in mischief everybody took his part." When the narrator meets him again after many years, Dale turns the other way. The reason for such behavior must be shame, as we learn that "years ago he'd rob employers, been in prison as a thief / Sought in drink and dissipation what he ne'er could find—relief." This story is countered by one of success in the third verse. One day, as the narrator wanders "past a mansion in the West," he recognizes an old playmate, now a wealthy doctor and owner of a big house. "Johnny Jasper, my old playmate, don't you know me?" the narrator appeals. "Look once more, / I am starving, cold and homeless, help me, hear my piteous tale!" But Jasper does not have any pity. His reaction is "No! [...] I pay my taxes, seek the poor-house or the jail!" The narrator's old friends stand at the opposite ends of the success spectrum: Henry Dale is a thief and alcoholic, while Johnny Jasper is a doctor who lives in a mansion. The narrator has himself "sometimes [...] grown a-weary of the world and all its strife, / Out of work and out of money, black and dismal seemed this life." But unlike Henry Dare, he is a sober and honest man. He may not have the money his doctor friend has—in fact, "fortune has not deigned

¹³⁷ "A Mother's Appeal to Her Boy," Ibid, 23.

to hear me, tho' my level best I've tried." But he is a kind person who would never deny assistance to an old friend.¹³⁸

In "He Was a Pal of Mine," the narrator provides this assistance to Ned, the "youthful friend" he left behind in Ireland many years prior. He still remembers Ned squeezing his "hand at parting, and whispering in his ear, / 'Though I am far away, old friend, in mem'ry keep me near.'" In name of this friendship, the narrator does not judge Ned's present situation and instead tries to help him.

Discouraged by misfortune, downward he was led;
 Poor lad, he had been drifting upon life's troubled stream,
 And o'er his darken'd pathway hope shed not a single beam;
 No friendly hand to stay him, he had reached destruction's brink,
 Discarded by the world, he sought forgetfulness in drink;
 I found him by the road side there, mocked by the rabble's jeers,
 And as a man should do, I raised my friend of other years.

The narrator does not question Ned's integrity and instead focuses on the discouragement one inevitably feels when "no friendly hand" offers any support. "Mocked by the rabble's jeers," Ned has fallen too low to be able to help himself. But the narrator offers that hand—"as a man should do"—meaning that generosity towards others is what makes one a decent man. Even when Ned is "disgraced, a thief, a vagabond, by all the world denied," the narrator does not abandon him. In the courtroom where the judge sentences Ned to "a prison cell for years," the narrator stands by his side and is "the only friend to speak for him."¹³⁹

Analyzed as a corpus rather than discretely, these songs indicate that there was no univocal way to narrate the Irish experience in America. Moreover, by focusing on the contrast

¹³⁸ "Playmates," Ibid, 24.

¹³⁹ "He Was a Pal of Mine," Ibid, 12.

between characters—racist laborers versus brave policemen, abusive husbands versus decent family men, and aggressive baseball players against generous men helping destitute friends—it is easier to explain how racial impersonation could be perceived simultaneously as typecasting and representative of an ethnic group. This reception ambivalence is best illustrated by Pat Rooney’s Irish politicians, as they bring together some of the “rough” and “respectable” features that I have so far traced across different songs.

As Jerry McCormick in “When McCormick Rules the State,” Rooney was “an Irish Politician! Yes, a man of integrity and fame” whose political program favors the Irish working class in a variety of ways: “I’ll have the white House painted Green, / coal and wood I’ll give away; / There’ll be money found upon the street; / I’ll raise the laborers’ wages to five dollars a day.” However, McCormick would procure these changes by harming other politicians and ethnic groups. Those in power will have to “carry the hod” and give up their expensive cigars: “there’ll be no smoked Italian congressmen,” and “the Chinese must emigrate [...] When McCormick rules the State.”¹⁴⁰

Similarly, Terence O’Reilly is a respected “man of renown.” He campaigns for no fares on the railroads, “nothing but Irishmen on the police,” and St. Patrick’s Day as national holiday. If he were the President of the United States, he would “defend workingmen’s cause,” “New York would be swimming in wine,” and “a hundred a day [would] be very small pay.” While this program would have pleased many Irish voters, one wonders whether O’Reilly’s means would be as widely accepted. To “defend workingmen’s cause” he proposes to “manufacture the laws;” to affirm Irish superiority over other racial groups, he wants to get “a thousand infernal machines

¹⁴⁰ “When McCormick Rules the State,” *Ibid*, 84.

/ To teach the Chinese how to die.” In the jargon of the time, “infernal machines” were homemade dynamite bombs that members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, otherwise known as Fenians, built for their revolutionary urban bombing campaigns.¹⁴¹ Thus, this line not only referenced Irish-on-Chinese violence in the United States but also connected Irish American politicians to the violent Fenian movement in Ireland. Today’s readers will find this reference shameful but also confusing, especially since O’Reilly’s mother is the “Queen of China,” as he sings in the previous verse. But that is precisely the point: the distinction between “respectable” and “rough,” legitimate and illicit, or Irish and Chinese in some extreme cases is not always clear for Irish Americans trying to adapt to the new country.¹⁴²

As Muldoon “the solid man,” Rooney played a slightly less arrogant “man of great influence.” From the “lodging house” and “city road” where he first “was situated,” “by perseverance” he “elevated / Straight to the front just like a solid man.” This ability to rise to the top is what should convince his followers that he deserves their trust. The chorus sings: “So come with me and I will treat you decent / I’ll set you down and I will fill your can / And along the street all the friends I meet / Say ‘There goes Muldoon, he’s a solid man.’” Unlike O’Reilly

¹⁴¹ Niall Whelehan, *The Dynamiters: Irish Nationalism and Political Violence in the Wider World, 1867–1900* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2. The Irish Republican Brotherhood was committed to achieving an independent Irish republic through insurrectionary means. According to Niall Whelehan, between the 1867 and 1916 insurrections, Irish nationalists experimented with a variety of violent strategies, the most spectacular being urban bombings. These explosions were orchestrated by a faction of the Fenian movement based in New York City that advocated “skirmishing.” Skirmishing was conceived as a way of applying new technologies to win the goals of revolutionary nationalism. While insurrection caused more hardship to the Irish than the authorities, dynamite bombs would only disrupt political and economic life in Britain. Whelehan argues that, “unlike insurrection, the skirmishing or dynamite campaign was not vindicated by the rebels of the past, suggesting that revolutionary nationalism was not always moved by its own history. Instead, [...] the rebels’ actions may be better grasped if placed in concurrent contexts and in connection with transnational milieux.” The Fenians were not alone in thinking that violence would bring about a new society. Contemporaneous movements opposing capitalism and colonialism shared similar views. Indeed, the 1881 assassination of Tsar Alexander II with homemade bombs (mentioned in Chapter 4) began a discussion about revolutionary violence just a few months afterwards at the International Social Revolutionary and Anarchist Congress in London.

¹⁴² “Is That Mr. Reilly,” *Irish Song Book*, no. 3, 90.

or McCormick, Muldoon does not explicitly encourage racial conflicts; in fact, when called to address a meeting, “With no regard for clique or clan / I read the Constitution with great elocution / Because you see, I am a solid man.” Yet, just like any other corrupt politician, Muldoon has his own questionable ways of benefitting his community. He controls “the Tombs” and “the Island;” his “constituents they all go there / To enjoy their summer’s recreation / And to take the enchanting East River air.” “The Tombs” was the nickname for the three city-run jails and Hall of Justice in the Five Points district of lower Manhattan, where a high concentration of fresh-off-the-boat Irish settled between the 1850s and the 1880s. “The Island” was the colloquial for Roosevelt Island on the East river across from Midtown and Queens. Between 1821 and 1861, it became the base for a penitentiary, a “lunatic” asylum, a workhouse for petty violators, and Renwick’s hospital for New York City’s poorest population and prison inmates. Staggering statistics showed a predominance of Irish Americans in prisons, asylums, and workhouses, hence Muldoon’s assumption about his “constituents” going to Roosevelt Island “to take the enchanting East River air.”¹⁴³ In the song, to “control the Tombs” and “the Island” referenced the reality of Irish economic, social, and mental hardships. But beyond the sad joke, the reference also implied that Irish politicians exploited the support of the most vulnerable class of Irish Americans to achieve their political goals.¹⁴⁴

Pat Rooney’s character variations and, in the case of his Irish politicians, their simultaneously respectable and ethically questionable nature, released spectators from the need of expressing definitive judgments or taking sides. Tracy C. Davis employs Baz Kershaw’s

¹⁴³ Howard Bodenhorn, Carolyn Moehling, and Anne Morrison Piehl, “Immigration: America’s Nineteenth Century ‘Law and Order Problem’?” *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working paper 16266, August 2010. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w16266>.

¹⁴⁴ “Muldoon the Solid Man,” *Good Old-Time Songs* (New York: Wehman Bros, 1914), 104–5.

notion of the “edge phenomenon”—“highly energized forms of life that prosper when two ecosystems rub up against each other”—to explain how blackface minstrelsy could express the ethos of the Plantation South while simultaneously inspiring empathy for slaves. Comparably, Pat Rooney’s vaudeville act brought together “rough” and “respectable” characters to please those audiences expecting conventional ethnic denigration as well as the Irish spectators looking for fair representation. Racialist and assimilationist discourse were both perceptible; in fact, they expressed the “two ecosystems”—the racialization and incorporation of immigrants—increasingly “rubbing against each other” in late-nineteenth-century United States.¹⁴⁵ Rooney’s balance was just right: as the *New York Clipper* put it, “his character bits are whimsical and very funny, with just enough grotesque in movement and expression to give them comic color and dialect spice.”¹⁴⁶

To maintain this balance, Rooney made sure that the gracefulness of his dancing, faithfulness of his interpretations, and precision of his intonation were as evident as the “rough” edges of some of his characters. In a different article, the *New York Clipper* stated: “Pat Rooney is a fine delineator of the usually ill-used Irish character, and his very movement is mirth provoking and graceful.”¹⁴⁷ As I explained, clog dancing contributed an authentic piece of Irish culture to ethnic comedy acts. In Rooney’s performance, the movement was so “graceful” that beyond his character renditions he deserved to be taken seriously in his craft and praised as an

¹⁴⁵ Davis citing Kershaw, “I Long for my Home,” 49.

¹⁴⁶ “Success Crowns Our Efforts: Terrific Receptions Given to the Great Pat Rooney N.Y. Star Combination,” *New York Clipper*, December 21, 1878.

¹⁴⁷ “Macaulay’s Theatre,” *New York Clipper*, December 21, 1878.

“exquisite dancer.”¹⁴⁸ The *New York Clipper* critic continued: “although a specialist in Irish songs, he is never harsh. His impersonations are true to the life in every lineament, movement and intonation of voice, yet he is so graceful and easy that the artistic sense of his auditors is fully satisfied and never shocked.” By using a double concessive clause—“although a specialist in Irish songs” and “yet he is so graceful”—the reporter suggested Rooney’s deliberate departure from the conventional stage Irishman. In fact, “he has recognized the prevailing fault of Irish artists, and has smoothed it away,” the critic concluded. The logic behind such a comment cannot be fully grasped unless we analyze Irish songs and character impersonations as complex performances that might have left space for artistic expression. The “fault” of many Irish artists was to emphasize the songs’ and comedy’s content more than the execution. But as Pat Rooney’s reception indicates, “true-to-life” acting, good intonation, and graceful dancing were adequate correctives to distasteful stereotypes, besides being the proof that, as the *New York Clipper* admitted, “there is some outcome in the variety theatre after all.”¹⁴⁹

This view was confirmed by Rooney’s fans years after he passed away. In 1920, Pat Rooney Jr. asserted that “old timers remember father for his famous walk, neat dancing, which has, by the way, never been successfully imitated, and for his singing.”¹⁵⁰ Demeanor, dancing, and singing skills were the performance elements that fans celebrated and memorialized. In fact, by 1920 theatregoers had already forgotten that Rooney was an Irish impersonator. Pat Jr. made sure to nuance his father’s legacy. He added: “The *real* basis for his nation-wide success was the innate humanity of his delightful humor and skillful delineation of the real Irish character. His

¹⁴⁸ “Hooley’s Minstrels,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 20, 1876.

¹⁴⁹ “Macauley’s Theatre.”

¹⁵⁰ Rooney II, “Pat Rooney the First.”

characterizations had that intimate touch of human reality without which no comic presentation of a type can be more than crude burlesque.”¹⁵¹ This was not meant to discount the memories of Rooney’s old-time fans; Pat Jr. simply emphasized the fact that Rooney’s Irish character delineation, gracefulness of movement, and pleasing intonation could not be evaluated separately. Rooney was fundamentally a delineator of the “Irish character,” yet his humor was “delightful” and his Irish personae so “real” and “intimate” that his spectators could forget about the role-playing and focus on enjoying the dancing and singing.

In *Censoring Racial Ridicule*, Alison Kibler provides numerous examples of stage Irishmen who did not please their audiences, especially the Irish. The comedy’s content was rarely the issue; more offensive was the appearance of these characters as vulgar, preposterous, or sexually promiscuous.¹⁵² Because they are all concentrated in costuming and gesture, these aesthetic characteristics are hard to recover from textual evidence. The one surviving photograph of Pat Rooney in costume (fig. 2.1) offers a visual support to the positive criticism he received. His attire only nears what John J. Jennings describes as the typical stage Irishman garb: “a gorgeous plaid suit with baggy trousers and a short coat topped by [...] a polished and towering stove-pipe hat.”¹⁵³ Rooney’s plaid vest and worn-out pants are decidedly not gorgeous, and his top-hat looks tattered rather than polished. The poor fit and cheapness of the clothing indicate his role as a comedian, however not the outrageous kind who would wear a suit made entirely of

¹⁵¹ Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹⁵² M. Alison Kibler, *Censoring Racial Ridicule: Irish, Jewish, and African American Struggles over Race and Representation, 1890–1930* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015), 51–81.

¹⁵³ John J. Jennings, *Theatrical and Circus Life* (Chicago: Globe Publishing, 1886), 417–20.

tartan and a towering, polished hat.¹⁵⁴ Besides, two fundamental items are missing from the conventional get-up: bushy whiskers and a cane. Irish comedians frequently wore side whiskers called “donegals” (after the Irish town of Donegal) or all-round chin whiskers known as “Galway sluggers.” Red wigs were also common, and the more extravagant versions might even sport green whiskers. Canes, according to Jennings, were “used for thumping the floor of the stage,” and since “this class of comedians always travel in pairs,” they were often turned into weapons with which to bang each other for comic effect.¹⁵⁵

An example of such depictions is in the theatrical poster in figure 2.2: here, a “rough” Irishman in unflattering work clothes and bright-orange chin whiskers admires the stickpin of an exuberantly dressed “respectable” Irishman. The laborer has a pickaxe and dinner pail by his side; the over-the-top Irishman wears a tailed coat and carries a walking cane. Compared to the characters in the poster, Rooney’s whiskers look natural; in fact, I suspect they were his own. His chin rests between his thumb and forefinger as he looks pensively to his left, striking a rather quizzical pose. His facial expression recalls that of an intellectual busy with his thoughts. From this gesture, one would not expect Rooney’s humor to be the knock-about, cane-slapping, “falling and tumbling” of the “class of comedians” Jennings and the poster seem to describe.

¹⁵⁴ Rooney’s costume might suggest a “tramp” role. According to Michelle Granshaw in *Irish on the Move*, the comic tramp sketches with the longest runs and most revivals in late-nineteenth-century variety theatre featured Irish American characters. The tramp was originally a blackface type but “became Irish” as it transitioned to variety theatre. Granshaw argues that as social reformers assumed most tramps in America were Irish immigrants, so stage representations of unemployed, itinerant men came to coincide with representations of poor Irish Americans. This process, Granshaw writes, “was less a whitening of the comic tramp than an erasure of black mobility” (33). In fact, during and after Reconstruction, when white anxieties surrounding the expansion of black rights arose, white representations of the tramp on one hand supported an image of the Irish as lazy, lacking responsibility, and peripatetic in nature yet, on the other hand, affirmed whites’ access to mobility over African Americans.

¹⁵⁵ Jennings, *Theatrical and Circus Life*, 421.

Coincidentally, the “respectable” Irishman of the poster also rests his chin on his hand, yet notice the difference between his wide, proud smile and Rooney’s subdued expression.



Fig. 2.1: Pat Rooney, publicity photograph, undated. “The Original Pat Rooney, father of Pat Rooney of Rooney and Bent.” The Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library Digital Collections



Fig. 2.2: “Irishman in work clothes admiring well-dressed Irishman’s stickpin,” poster. Russell-Morgan Print, c. 1899. 7584 U.S. Copyright Office, Theatrical Poster Collection, Library of Congress. Comparing this poster with similar ones in the same collection, the white top banner seems to be covering the title of the production. No information is provided about the production that the poster advertised. It is my guess that this image was a modifiable blueprint sold by Russell & Morgan to a number of different companies working in Irish comedy.

By putting these two renditions side by side one might visualize the distinction that Pat Jr. drew between his father's "intimate touch of human reality" and what he called "crude burlesque." While many of Rooney's lyrics might be perceived as stereotypical for the theatrical standards of the time, his realistic costume and interpretation nuanced the racial clichés. As with his Irish dances, costumes also had to look authentic. In "The Fine Irish Gents," Rooney sang:

It's a shame on the stage, how they mimic our race,
 In a style that's a mystery to me,
 How the people in front, will stand such insult;
 Receiving such blockheads with glee.
 If they went to old Ireland they'd find their mistake,
 For our boys and our girls are well dressed.
 In manners as well to you I will tell,
 For they stand in the land with the best.¹⁵⁶

Rooney's song claims that dressing poorly or inappropriately is not just an "insult" to the community but a "mistake" in the representation. In Ireland, boys and girls dress well and "stand with the best." Irish immigrants in America should know that, thus it is "a mystery" how some receive "such blockheads with glee." Comedy overstates some aspects of reality, but it always originates from elements that people would recognize. To paraphrase Sigmund Freud, jokes are the expression of thoughts that society suppresses; they might diverge from reality a little, but they are tolerated because, fundamentally, they expose truths and allow people to overcome the inhibitions that they recognized as being imposed by society.¹⁵⁷ According to Rooney, Irish disgraceful portrayals in costume and gesture cannot be tolerated because they are not founded in reality. By contrast, Kate Elinore made her name by creating completely

¹⁵⁶ "The Fine Irish Gents," *Pat Rooney's 'Star Combination' Songster*, 21.

¹⁵⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1905 (New York: Norton, 1960) <http://archive.org/details/jokestheirrelati0000freu>.

unrealistic looks. Surprisingly though, she “never hurt the feelings of anyone” thanks to a carefully studied grotesque aesthetic that allowed audience members to feel part of the joke.

Kate Elinore, “The Goddess of the Grotesque”¹⁵⁸

As an anonymous newspaper article from 1903 stated, “the Elinore Sisters are not the Elinore Sisters at all.”¹⁵⁹ The “secret” was revealed by Kate herself: “My real name is Savage, Kate Savage, and my sister is May Savage, or Mary, if you want to be plain. Elinore is my middle name, and as we wanted to keep in the middle name for the road, Elinore sisters we became.”¹⁶⁰ Kate and May Elinore were the daughters of William and Catherine Savage, two Irish Catholic immigrants who fled the aftermath of the Famine by sailing to the United States in 1850.¹⁶¹ William was initially a laborer and, later, a police officer in Brooklyn, where the family eventually settled.¹⁶² Mrs. Ladye Whitehead Wright for *The Montgomery Times* claimed that William moved to Brooklyn from New Orleans. His brother Patrick was “one of the most noted newspaper men of the South, part owner and associate editor of the *New Orleans Delta*, now *The*

¹⁵⁸ “Poli’s,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 1917.

¹⁵⁹ Research on Kate and May Elinore has been carried out at University of Rochester’s Rush Rhees Library, where the Elinore Sisters Vaudeville Act Papers (ESVAP) are housed. The collection includes comedy material for their acts, scrapbooks with reviews, scripts, and photographs. Some additional reviews can be found in the Elinore Sisters File part of the Robinson Locke Collection of theatre scrapbooks (RLC), Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (NYPLPA). Secondary sources reconstructing the life and career of the Elinore Sisters are: Alison M. Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Armond Fields, *Women Vaudeville Stars: Eighty Biographical Profiles* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006); and Rick DesRochers, *The New Humor in the Progressive Era: Americanization and the Vaudeville Comedian* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁶⁰RLC, undated.

¹⁶¹ “Records for Passengers Who Arrived at the Port of New York During the Irish Famine, created, 1977–1989, documenting the period 1/12/1846–12/31/1851,” Electronic Records, NARA at College Park, Maryland.

¹⁶² Fields, *Women Vaudeville Stars*, 155.

Times.”¹⁶³ Kate confirmed that they had an “illustrious uncle,” Patrick Savage, although she situated him in Delton, Louisiana, not New Orleans.¹⁶⁴ Thus, the sisters had two successful examples of Irish upward mobility in the family: their father, who rose from laborer to police officer, and their “illustrious” newspaper editor uncle.

William and Catherine Savage started their family in Brooklyn. In the years preceding the consolidation of New York City’s boroughs in 1898, Brooklyn was the fourth most populated independent city in the United States.¹⁶⁵ Compared to other large cities, Brooklyn was also the least diverse. Home to the movement against consolidation, the majority in Brooklyn fought for their local independence out of fear of ethnic and racial minorities corrupting the mostly homogenous Protestant identity of the city.¹⁶⁶ Kate and May were born in 1865 and 1872 respectively.¹⁶⁷ We do not know much about their childhood in Brooklyn, but we can imagine them to have experienced the isolation and financial difficulties typical of ethnic and religious minorities in a large and quickly developing city. According to New York City’s court records, the family endured some hard times as the girls were growing up. In 1877, their father filed a lawsuit against a certain Thomas Farrell, claiming that he had made his wife Catherine an

¹⁶³ Mrs. Ladye whitehead Wright, “Social and Personal: The Elinore Sisters,” *The Montgomery Times*, undated.

¹⁶⁴ RLC, Undated.

¹⁶⁵ 1870 United States’ Census: <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1872/dec/1870a.html>

¹⁶⁶ As census data suggest, Brooklyn was a tough place for newcomers to get acclimated to. In 1870, while 45% of the population in Manhattan was foreign-born, only 36% of the Brooklynese were foreign. In Brooklyn, immigrants also naturalized faster. Compared to the 34% of alien and 57% of naturalized residents in Manhattan in 1880, Brooklyn had 27% alien and 62% naturalized residents. Among the resident alien, Brooklyn’s non-English speakers were half the number of non-English speakers in Manhattan. See 1870 and 1880 at Census: <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1872/dec/1870a.html> and <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>

¹⁶⁷ Fields, *Women Vaudeville Stars*, 155.

alcoholic. In response, Farrell filed suit against Mrs. Savage for assault.¹⁶⁸ Catherine may have become addicted to alcohol, jeopardized her marriage, and assailed a man. While the outcome of the suit is unclear, the situation reveals a turbulent domestic environment that, sadly, upholds statistics reporting large numbers of Irish women dealing with alcoholism and battery charges.¹⁶⁹ These were serious causes of distress for countless Irish families, including the Savages. Yet the Elinore Sisters exploited the too-common image of the Irish woman drinking and fighting likely because, as with Pat Rooney's most stereotypical characters, it still created community through self-identification.

The Elinore Sisters first performed together in vaudeville on July 30, 1894. The "eccentric comedy act" they presented in Atlantic City was "reputed to be the first act of the kind to be shown."¹⁷⁰ Sister singing and dancing acts had been popular in variety and vaudeville theaters since the 1870s, but *comedy* sister acts were just starting to appear.¹⁷¹ In fact, as the Sisters often asserted, they were determined to "carve out a new pathway" for themselves as

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Statistics report Irish women suffering from alcohol addiction and accused of battery to be overrepresented in New York City's almshouses, asylums, and correction facilities. To be sure, figures on mental illness, addiction, and criminality are fraught with inconsistencies. The lack of partiality on the part of the police and the Court when dealing with immigrants and the poor has been documented by both contemporary observers and historians of crime. Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, 111.

¹⁷⁰ Dixie Hines and Harry Prescott Hanaford, *Who's Who in Music and Drama* (New York: H. P. Hanaford Publisher, 1914), E11.

¹⁷¹ Anna Madah and Emma Louise Hyers, two African American singers from Sacramento, should be credited with morphing singing the sister act from the concert stage to vaudeville. They debuted at the San Francisco Metropolitan Theatre in 1867 and were active for over twenty years. In 1877 they found their own theatre company and produced three touring musical shows with mixed-race casts. Peter Hudson identifies the Hyers Sisters as some of the earliest "crossover artists" who "transgressed the boundaries between low and high culture by playing the marginal American concert stages as well as minstrel and vaudeville shows" in an attempt to bypass the racial restrictions of white American theatres and touring circuits. Peter Hudson, "Opera," in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr. eds. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 1460. See also Jocelyn L. Buckner, "'Spectacular Opacities': The Hyers Sisters' Performances of Respectability and Resistance," *African American Review* 45, no. 3 (2012): 309–23.

female Irish comedians, a pathway that according to the anonymous reporter at their debut, “women had never before trodden.”¹⁷² While many theatre managers doubted the audience would ever stand for women doing an Irish comedy sketch, Tony Pastor gave Kate and May their first encouragement. From 1896 to 1909, they appeared with Pastor’s combination company and other well-known traveling troupes, notably, James Hide’s Comedians, Harry Williams’ Own Company, and Hopkins’ Trans-Atlantics. They eventually joined the vaudeville industry, travelling on both the Stair and Havlin and Orpheum vaudeville circuits.¹⁷³

According to vaudeville critic Caroline Caffin, Kate Elinore’s “face is one broad, expansive smile which seems to radiate from the top of her little knob of hair, tightly screwed to the size of a shoe-button, right down to the sole of her formidable looking boots, and from every angle of her square-built frame” (fig. 2.3).¹⁷⁴ The syntactical structure and tone of this passage have a flattering quality, yet the word choice is unusual and not exactly complimentary. Kate has a “little knob of hair,” “formidable looking boots,” and a “square-built frame:” she is bizarre, unfeminine, but also remarkable. These are some of the key features of the grotesque aesthetic. Kate Elinore, “goddess of the grotesque” as the *Washington Post* labeled her, did all she could to win the title: according to the *Newark Evening News*, her Irish characters were “loud of voice, strenuous in action, vigorous in speech, ignorant of the refinements of life, but determined to flaunt [their] wealth in the face of the public and to advance [their] social position by vulgarities

¹⁷² RLC, undated.

¹⁷³ Hines and Hanford, *Who’s Who*; Fields, *Women Vaudeville Star*, 155.

¹⁷⁴ Caroline Caffin, *Vaudeville* (New York: M. Kennerie, 1914), 211–2.

and eccentricities in dress and deportment.”¹⁷⁵ Such renditions were “as exuberantly droll and irresistibly humorous” as they were unusual and somewhat baffling.¹⁷⁶ As the reporter for the *Detroit Free Press* concluded, “just what she calls it does not matter, but it is a *grotesque* jumble of questions and answers, unusual makeups and a way of doing that needs no copyright.”¹⁷⁷



Fig. 2.3: Kate Elinore, postcard, January 7, 1907. Elinore Sisters Vaudeville Act Papers, Rush Rhees Library, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, University of Rochester.

¹⁷⁵ “Poli’s,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 1917; “This Comedienne is Really Comic,” *Newark Evening News*, undated, ESVAP, B 3 Vol 3.

¹⁷⁶ “This Comedienne is Really Comic,” *Newark Evening News*, undated, ESVAP, B 3 Vol 3.

¹⁷⁷ “Temple—Vaudeville,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 4, 1913, RLC. Emphasis in original.

As the quotes above suggest, “grotesque” is a capacious category. In nineteenth-century Romantic culture, the grotesque belonged to the realm of art and aesthetics and defined entities veiled by mystery or producing a sense of shock.¹⁷⁸ Thanks to the work of Sigmund Freud at the turn of the twentieth century, the grotesque came to be understood as horrific, abnormal, or uncanny cultural projections of a psychic condition.¹⁷⁹ Kate Elinore’s “grotesque” performance seems to fall outside the scope of both shocking aesthetics and horrific mental projections. Her presentation was bizarre yet not quite appalling; aesthetically unpleasing yet not horrid. Eccentricity and ugliness did not trigger surprise or disgust in her audience; in fact, they made her act “irresistibly humorous,” according to the *Newark Evening News* critic.

For these reasons, I advance an interpretation of Kate Elinore’s grotesque performance as “carnavalesque.” In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin conceptualizes the carnivalesque as a space where “sacred” things may be temporarily stripped of their power and eccentricities may be revealed without consequences.¹⁸⁰ Kate Elinore’s preposterous Irish widows were eccentric in presentation and language, yet their lack of manners or social status did not prevent them from reaching the top of high society by means as absurd as winning the lottery or filing suit for their husbands’ death working on the New York City’s sewage system.¹⁸¹ For these widows, neither marriage nor mourning were sacred. As one of Kate’s songs framed it, “There’s

¹⁷⁸ On the evolution of the grotesque aesthetic in art and literature, see Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

¹⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, “On the Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, James Strachey ed., (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psychoanalysis, 1953–1974), 233–238.

¹⁸⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 19–30.

¹⁸¹ George M. Cohan, *Dangerous Mrs. Delaney*, first performed at Tony Pastor’s theatre, New York City, on December 19, 1898, ESVAP, B 1 f 10.

a saying with which we agree; There are good fish left as there's been caught in the sea; And should this new husband die off on me; I'll be out on the pier fishing again."¹⁸²

According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is “grotesque” because it involves the estrangement and inversion of conventional societal practices. As the purest expression of “the popular,” it reproduces cultural tools and institutions of the dominant classes in order to debunk them through mockery, satire, and travesty. Marriage is one such debunked institution in Kate and May Elinore’s Irish acts. May represents conventions: her dreams of upward mobility will come true by marrying a decent man and starting a family. But the “beaux” she routinely brings home are scared (and often even beaten) by her mother and end up running away. While for May “love is a dizzy flight in a balloon,” for Kate “marriage is the downward plunge into cold water.”¹⁸³ In Kate’s definition, marriage is a “solemn contract to quarrel with one person for life:” it “starts with silver and cut glass” “and ends with broken China.”¹⁸⁴ Not only marriage jokes make for the bulk of Kate’s comedy but weddings are described as nonsensical affairs. In *The Adventures of Bridget McGuire*, Bridget (Kate Elinore) and her husband Judkins “rushed up the aisle like a couple of mad dogs. He took my lily-white hands in his two big slabs looked into my auburn eyes I looked into his empty pockets and we blighted our broth.”¹⁸⁵

In purely aesthetic terms, Bakhtin’s grotesque entities are defined as breaking down the barriers between themselves and the outside world. Whereas the “classical body” is self-

¹⁸² Carroll Fleming and Mr. Jerome, *Dangerous Mrs. Delaney*, first performed at Nelson Theatre, Springfield, Massachusetts, in September 1902, ESVAP, B 1 f 10.

¹⁸³ May Elinore, “Act in One,” ESVAP, B 1 f 1.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Eugene Ellsworth, *The Adventures of Bridget McGuire*, ESVAP, B 1 f 10.

contained and static, the grotesque body is hard to contain, it blend[s] with the world, with animals, with objects.”¹⁸⁶ Kate and May Elinore’s costumes are the perfect materialization of this concept, as they literally “blended” with objects and animals. In her farcical rendition of the biblical Salome performing the striptease *Dance of the Seven Veils*, Kate recalled the Irish servant girl by wearing “gauze draperies spangled with small kitchen utensils.”¹⁸⁷ In a different act, May “wears an eccentric costume and a real chanticleer hat” to mock the fashion for feathered bonnets.¹⁸⁸ Her head is thus half woman and half rooster, human and animal (fig. 2.4).



Fig. 2.4: “May Elinore There with the Laugh.” Illustration of May Elinore in her “real chanticleer hat.” Clipping in scrapbook, Elinore Sisters Vaudeville Act Papers, Rush Rhees Library, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, University of Rochester.

¹⁸⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 27.

¹⁸⁷ “American Music Hall. Hypnotist Repeats Success—Kate Elinore Pleases—Other Numbers,” November 20, 1909, ESVAP, B 3 Vol 2.

¹⁸⁸ *Columbus News*, undated, ESVAP, B 1 f 4.

Mary Russo notes that the category of the grotesque is projected onto the female body precisely when this body is hard to contain. When women exceed conventional social limits with claims that are too bold, clothing that is too showy, or appetites that are too avid, they are called “grotesque” because their excess makes them “too visible.”¹⁸⁹ Taking cues from Russo, Kathleen Rowe distills eight sets of qualities that define the grotesque woman as excessive. I report them below and will reference them point by point in the play analyses that follow.

- 1) She creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate, men. She is unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place.
- 2) Her body is excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites.
- 3) Her speech is excessive in quantity, content, or tone.
- 4) She makes jokes, or laughs at herself.
- 5) She may be androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social construction of gender.
- 6) She may be old or a masculinized crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque.
- 7) Her behavior is associated with looseness and occasionally whorishness, but her sexuality is less narrowly and negatively defined than is that of the femme fatale. She may be pregnant.
- 8) She is associated with dirt, liminality (thresholds, borders, or margins), and taboo, rendering her above all a figure of ambivalence.¹⁹⁰

Kate’s Irish characters materialized all these features. In *The Adventures of Bridget McGuire*, a one-act sketch written for the Elinore Sisters by Eugene Ellsworth, an identity mix-up turns Bridget (Kate Elinore) into Mrs. Rapps’ rich aunt. Mrs. Rapps (May Elinore) has a house servant named Judkins. Coincidentally, Judkins is Bridget’s husband, but to keep up with the pretense, he must serve his wife as the house’s guest of honor.

¹⁸⁹ Mary J. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 53.

¹⁹⁰ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 31.

Bridget: I said where did you hire Jus?
 Mrs Rapps: He has been with me some time. Judkins I want you to do all in your power to make this lady comfortable—obey her orders as you would mine—she is my aunt.
 Judkins: Your aunt?
 Bridget: Yes didn't you know that [eats. Judkins stands dumbfounded]. Well what are you standing there for with your mouth open. What are you doing catching flies?
 Mrs Rapps: Judkins bring some celery for my aunt.
 Bridget: [aside] She's got him petrified. Look at that face and to think I married that—bring the celery (*Judkins never moves*). Will you bring the celery—oh he is a bum servant. Go before I kill you [hit him with roll]. Did you see Judkins hustle that time (*sit at table eat*). You'll have to discharge that fellow he's too freak.¹⁹¹

In this exchange, Bridget not only dominates the husband-wife dynamic (Rowe's point 1); thanks to the identity mix-up that put her in a position of superiority, she also inverts the conventional gender relations by having a man obey her orders.

Prior to Bridget's first entrance, Judkin tells the audience about their wedding. They were married hastily that same morning and now they must find a place to live. Until they resolve the situation, Judkins plans to hide Bridget in Mrs. Rapps' bathroom but Bridget is—literally, “unwilling to confine herself.” She is too hungry; thus, she leaves her hiding place in search of food. It is her inability to control her appetite (Rowe's point 2) that exposes her to Mrs. Rapps. But instead of being punished, Bridget is treated with reverence, a result that demonstrates how not following the rules might bring positive outcomes to those who are typically repressed by societal conventions.

Bridget: Judkins I'm that hungry I could float away in the steam of a beef stew (*sees flowers stares at them astonished*).
 Judkins: I'll arrange that presently [nervous] I've you stay in here [point to door] till my misses goes to bed and I'll bring up all the eatables I can find in the house.
 [...]

¹⁹¹ Ellsworth, *The Adventures*, ESVAP.

Judkins: These are your orange blossoms.
 Bridget: Orange blossoms and in my hand (*throws them on floor*). I'll have none of them I'm no Orangeman.
 Judkins: They are your wedding flowers.
 Bridget: I can't eat them can I.
 Judkins: No but they are the style.
 Bridget: Phwhat do I care for style. Oh if I only had about 5 lbs of corned beef and cabbage.¹⁹²

Judkins promises he will bring all the food he can find. But until Mrs. Rapps goes to sleep, Bridget will need to be quiet and remain hidden. To keep her company, Judkins gives Bridget her wedding bouquet. He must believe that memories from their wedding ceremony will help her forget about her hunger, but that is not the case. She bursts out: "I can't eat them, can I"—obviously, her wedding blossoms are not "5 lbs of corned beef and cabbage." She does not care about the flowers being "the style;" in fact, she does not care for style at all. The "excessive" language she uses (Rowe's point 3—5 lbs of corned beef and cabbage would be excessive for any stomach!) emphasizes her complete lack of refinement and adds to the comedy of the final punch line. Lastly, with her self-referential joke "I'll have none of them I'm no Orangeman" (Rowe's point 4) Bridget certainly means to be provocative. However, rather than laughing at herself for what she is, she stresses what she is *not*. In this way, she communicates to Judkins and the audience what she *really* is: a pragmatic, self-determined woman who does not care for romanticism.

The comedy reaches its grotesque peak when Bridget tries to understand Mrs. Rapps' Spiritualist practice, a contemporaneous trend among the well-to-do. Mrs. Rapps firmly believes

¹⁹² Ibid.

in her powers at connecting with the dead, hence her evocative last name. By contrast, the only “spirits” Bridget is interested in are those she can drink.

Mrs Rapps: I am a Spiritualist.
 Bridget: — a what List?
 Mrs Rapps: A Spiritualist [takes center]. I am blessed with the power of holding conversations with the spirits of the other world (*very dramatic*).
 Bridget: Now I know she is dotty.
 Mrs Rapps: Are you afraid of spirits auntie.
 Bridget: Not when I can get them by the neck (*shows decanter*).¹⁹³

As with food, Bridget’s drinking tendencies are out of place, especially considering that she is pretending to be a wealthy old lady (Rowe’s point 6). Yet, by setting her drinking against Mrs. Rapps’s Spiritualist practice, Bridget only emphasizes Mrs. Rapp’s pretentiousness. In a revised version of the script, Bridget responds to Mrs. Rapps’ dramatic definition of Spiritualism by asking “is that a new name for it I always thought it was called pocket picking.” With this joke, drinking is established to be a natural and innocuous thing to do, while Spiritualism is a practice for charlatans if not thieves.

Fleming and Jerome’s version of *Dangerous Mrs. Delaney* is another productive case to observe the female grotesque at work. In the sketch, Honora Delaney (Kate Elinore) is the “old, masculinized crone” that Rowe lists as number 6 in her definition (fig. 2.5). Mrs. Delaney uncovers her daughter Rose’s fiancé’s malicious intentions. The young man is after the money that she has made by suing the city for her husband’s death. Rose (May Elinore) explains: “Poor father she says he was struck by a car and broke his neck between 14th and 34th street she then sues the city and got 50000 dollars damages she says it was a great deal more than father was

¹⁹³ Ibid.

worth no wonder they call her the Dangerous Mrs. Delaney.”¹⁹⁴ Rose reveals her mother’s “scam”— she is not able to locate the car accident more precisely than “between 14th and 34th street,” yet gets the city’s money—and implies that she is the author of her father’s murder. These accusations become trivial when compared to the imminent threat to Mrs. Delaney’s wealth. In the end, Mrs. Delaney manages to save her money and daughter from the bad-intentioned fiancé. She displays her masculine biceps and shouts: “(with dynamite) where is the villain tell him I [will] extemporize him.”¹⁹⁵ Like with Irish nationalists belonging to the Fenian movement, who were known as “dynamiters” at the time, Mrs. Delaney’s “Irish” fury should be taken seriously.¹⁹⁶ However, with the malapropism “extemporize” she defuses the intimidation with laughter.

¹⁹⁴ Fleming and Jerome, *Dangerous Mrs. Delaney*, ESVAP.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Whelehan, *The Dynamiters*, 2.



Fig. 2.5: May (left) and Kate (right) Elinore in *Mrs. Delaney of Newport*, a musical farce based on the vaudeville act *Dangerous Mrs. Delaney*. Clipping in scrapbook, Elinore Sisters Vaudeville Act Papers, Rush Rhees Library, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, University of Rochester.

Rowe's point number seven—occasional “whorish” behavior but not as sexually charged as that of a “femme fatale”—is exemplified by a game that Kate frequently played with her vaudeville audiences. In a skit titled “It Was a Good Show, But...” she was reported to be “indescribably funny [...] in all her popular eccentricities even to the flirtation with the musicians in the orchestra.”¹⁹⁷ This was part of the performance: she would distract the musicians with some grotesque sexy moves just for the audience's amusement. Lastly, Rowe's point number 8—association with dirt, liminality and taboo—may be explained through some theatre critics' metaphorical portrayals of Kate Elinore's characters. At the Shea's Theatre in Buffalo, “the role she plays of Mrs. Delaney” was described as “a sort of female ‘Wild Man of Borneo.’”¹⁹⁸ The Wild Men of Borneo were two exceptionally strong dwarf men whom P.T. Barnum exhibited in his popular freak shows.¹⁹⁹ To associate Kate Elinore with these “curiosities,” as freak shows' performers were branded, was to question not only her female sex but also her humanity. Similarly, *The Youngstown Telegraph* published a photograph of Kate Elinore captioned “Kate Elinore the Human Billiken” (fig. 2.6).²⁰⁰ The Billiken was a monkey-like charm doll created by American art teacher and illustrator Florence Pretz.²⁰¹ Pretz claimed to have seen the mysterious animal in a dream. She designed it to have pointed ears, a mischievous smile, and a tuft of hair on its pointed head. The head and hair might have been the reason why

¹⁹⁷ September 22, 1908, RLC.

¹⁹⁸ “The Show at Shea's,” *ESVAP*, B 3 Vol 3.

¹⁹⁹ Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 70.

²⁰⁰ “Youngstown Favorite at the Park,” *Youngstown Telegraph*, December 4, 1914, RLC.

²⁰¹ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 230, 247.

this publication connected Kate Elinore with the subhuman doll; in fact, she often wore plumes and her hair in a tall bun. By associating Kate Elinore with dwarf “wild” men and a monkey-like monster, these reporters revealed their perception of Kate’s Irish grotesque femininity as neither feminine nor human. They exploited the logic by which Irish people were often denigrated as belonging to an inferior, “animal” race and consolidated a bias that held Irish people to be, in Rowe’s terminology, “figures of ambivalence.” But while these references might have felt insulting, they also proved that critics were receiving Kate’s grotesque performance exactly as she intended them to: as excessive but also liminal, grounded in reality and conventions but feeding off of oddities and absurdities.



Fig. 2.6: “Kate Elinore the Human Billiken,” illustration. *The Youngstown Telegraph*. Clipping in scrapbook, Elinore Sisters Vaudeville Act Papers, Rush Rhees Library, Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, University of Rochester.

Kathleen Rowe asks how these eight grotesque categories might be used affirmatively to destabilize the idealization of “proper” femininity. She finds the answer in women’s acts of “female unruliness,” especially when these acts claim the pleasure and power of returning the male gaze.²⁰² “Female unruliness” exploits the subversive potential of the grotesque aesthetic to negate female invisibility and emphasize alternative modes of being woman. I argue that Kate Elinore was able to negate female invisibility by making her grotesque aesthetic explicitly Irish and, vice versa, she emphasized her Irishness thanks to her loud, unruly femininity. While a grotesque aesthetic in gendered comedy has been recognized as a subversive form of empowerment for women, female *ethnic* comedy, especially when rendered through grotesque vocabularies such as eccentric costumes, malapropisms, and sexually overt jokes, has only been considered improper or distasteful. In Kate and May Elinore’s performances, ethnic comedy involved gender hierarchies just as gender comedy relied on ethnic stereotypes. The two reinforced one another, and not just for laughs. Their alternative modes of being women also showed alternative ways of being Irish. The “lace curtain Irish” might be more naive than exploitative in her attempts to climb the social ladder—in fact, she might even be the victim of a manipulative fiancé. Similarly, the woman who cannot confine herself might gain the power to order her husband around, and the uncouth Irish widow might have a sophisticated plan to preserve her family’s wealth.

The intentional, subversive goal of these portrayals becomes apparent once we account for two distinct but connected performance aspects: Kate’s resolution to become a female comic by “looking ugly,” and the Sisters’ reliance on what became known as vaudeville’s “New

²⁰² Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, 12.

Humor.” Laurence Senelick blames the lack of female comedians on the American nineteenth-century stage on the automatic eroticization of funny women by the largely male audiences.²⁰³ Senelick builds his claim on two assumptions: that theaters were mostly attended by men, and that actresses would become the center of men’s sexual attention especially when playing comedy roles. But by the end of the century, women began to patronize theatres and especially vaudeville houses in increasingly higher numbers, and female entertainers like Kate Elinore achieved popularity thanks to characterizations that would hardly incite the sexual desires of any man in the audience. Kate Elinore hid her feminine beauty away by wearing unflattering costumes, arranging her face to produce the nastiest grimaces, and singing in a “megaphone voice.”²⁰⁴ However, it would be reductive to conclude that Kate chose to stage masculine “hags” merely to avoid sexual objectification.²⁰⁵ Her performance of “female unruliness” returned the male eroticizing gaze and was purposeful in its intent to “do something different, something *grotesque*.”²⁰⁶ Beyond the determination implicit in her tone, Kate’s statement above is significant for two reasons: it asserts that her characters were “different” from the widespread

²⁰³ Laurence Senelick, “Variety into Vaudeville, The Process Observed in Two Manuscript Gagbooks,” *Theatre Survey* 19, no. 1 (May 1978): 1–15.

²⁰⁴ Undated, ESVAP, B 3 Vol 3.

²⁰⁵ In *Rank Ladies*, Alison Kibler discusses the interesting case of “corking girls”—white women in blackface who led groups of Black performers in so-called “pickaninny acts,” danced in large “plantation” numbers, or sang popular “coon songs” of the time. According to Kibler, black cork was not a strategy to avoid sexual objectification; rather, it helped unattractive women, particularly women who were fat, gain access to a sexist entertainment industry that only allowed participation from good-looking women (113). Through blackface, these women not only acquired comic license and inhibited physical expression as men in minstrel shows had; they also created space for themselves in the world of popular entertainment. In chapter 4, I interpret Sophie Tucker’s early blackface performance within Alison’s “corking girls” framework. Kate Elinore never performed in blackface: her Irish comedy did not require it, but I also wonder whether she avoided it not to suggest she was unattractive. Her comic makeup certainly made her look ugly, yet a number of reviewers noticed how that was a carefully crafted stage technique to “hide” a pretty face.

²⁰⁶ Undated, RLC. Emphasis in original.

Irish hag, and that she was “*grotesque*,” not just ugly. Her Irish impersonations were based on a recognizable stereotype but were also fundamentally and deliberately original; they were acts of grotesque “female unruliness” with which she “carve[d] out a new pathway” for herself and the women comics who followed in her footsteps. “My stock in trade is to be ugly and I do my best to live up to it,” she told her interviewer for the *Kansas City Journal*.²⁰⁷ Spoiling the symmetry of her face with dark makeup lines, looking taller by padding her shoulders and wearing a tall braid on top of her head, and pitching her voice to acquire a “dreadful masculine” tonality were all “business” strategies that she “spent a good many years” perfecting. In fact, coming from a woman who, according to the reporter, was “both young and pretty,” these were “rather startling” methods.²⁰⁸

Another factor supporting a view of the Elinore Sisters’ work as intentionally grotesque is a change in sense of humor at the turn of the twentieth century. Vaudeville historian Albert McLean was among the first to identify this transition as one of the manifestations of American modernity. He called it “New Humor” (capitalized in the original) and located it in popular entertainment, especially vaudeville immigrant acts. The “New Humor,” he wrote, was “more excited, more aggressive, and less sympathetic than [the humor] to which the middle classes of the nineteenth century had been accustomed.”²⁰⁹ As it was epitomized in the ethnic comedy of several immigrant vaudevillians (the Four Cohans, the Marx Brothers, or Eddie Cantor are great examples), the “New Humor” was physical and openly antagonistic. Slapstick and waggish

²⁰⁷ “Her Business to be Ugly —That is the Stock in Trade of Kate Elinore, and she is Too,” *Kansas City Journal*, undated, ESVAP, B 3 Vol 3.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Albert McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 107.

animosities between characters “hit the mark” more directly than verbal irony or sarcasm, especially with ethnically diverse audiences for whom sense of humor was as culturally specific as their national identities and languages.²¹⁰ Moreover, for immigrant spectators, comic antagonism was a way to narrate a shared experience of resistance to the non-immigrant majority. Thus, the “New Humor” came to be associated with the underclass of new immigrants who, according to American-born critics, were trying to replace the sophisticated witticism of Western European theatre traditions.²¹¹

The Elinore Sisters’ grotesque style of comedy both participated in and contributed to this change in sense of humor. Kate Elinore did not deal “in subtleties of any kind; her humor is the most direct, unvarnished brand imaginable,” wrote the *New York Star*.²¹² Similarly, an anonymous reporter for *The Newark Evening News* was struck by Kate’s “sense of the ridiculous, her ebullient spirits, the seeming spontaneity in her levity, her violent method, and her rawboned comicy.”²¹³ The effectiveness of the New Humor was especially apparent in multiethnic vaudeville theatre auditoriums on so-called “small-time” circuits, or networks of modest vaudeville houses offering unvarnished shows for small prices.²¹⁴ The Elinore Sisters performed on small-time vaudeville circuits their entire careers. They were especially acclaimed in working-class, majority immigrant towns such as Rochester, Pittsburgh, Wilkes-Barre,

²¹⁰ DesRocher, *The New Humor*, especially Chapter 2.

²¹¹ DesRocher, *The New Humor*, especially Chapter 3.

²¹² “Kate Elinore Without a Sister,” *New York Star*, Sept. 11, 1909, RLC.

²¹³ “This Comedienne is Really Comic,” *Newark Evening News*, undated, ESVAP, B 3 Vol 3.

²¹⁴ On the division between big-time and small-time vaudeville circuits, see Arthur F. Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Springfield (Massachusetts), and Greenpoint (a suburb of Brooklyn).²¹⁵ Interestingly, the same unrefined immigrant humor looked “American” to foreign observers. During their UK tour in 1901–1902, the Elinore Sisters were described as “an amusing pair, quick in that sharp repartee so essentially the quality of the American low comedian or comedienne.”²¹⁶ In Leeds, “The Elinore sisters introduced a good deal of Yankee humor—broad but not coarse, into their disputations.”²¹⁷ In the UK, the Sisters looked “Yankee,” not Irish. This supports McLean’s observation: regardless of specific ethnic provenance, vaudeville’s “more excited, more aggressive, and less sympathetic” humor was one of the manifestations of American modernity.

Thanks to its accessibility and specificity to the immigrant experience in America, this “New Humor” established an immigrant communal system of communication. In *The New Humor in the Progressive Era*, Rick DesRocher writes about the powerful connections that vaudevillians specializing in ethnic comedy developed with their audience.²¹⁸ He illustrates this point by citing early-twentieth-century vaudeville critic Caroline Caffin on Kate Elinore. Kate’s connection with the audience was witnessed when she used “a gesture” “to mark when she thinks her points have hit the mark.” She pointed “her finger, as though it were a pistol, at some individual in the audience,” screwed “up one eye as though to sight,” and clicked “with her

²¹⁵ Scrapbooks, ESVAP. I have not been able to find coverage from the town of Scranton, where Pat Rooney’s Irish impersonations were criticized as too vulgar. Taking Scranton as a case study for a comparison between Rooney and the Elinore Sisters would be particularly productive to assess the difference in reception between middle-class theatregoers and working-class communities.

²¹⁶ Liverpool, promotional brochure for *Bridget McGuire*, with quotes from UK and Ireland tours, 1901–2. ESVAP, B 1 f 8.

²¹⁷ Leeds, Ibid.

²¹⁸ DesRocher, *The New Humor*, 74.

mouth to make the sound of a shot.”²¹⁹ By pointing her pistol-like finger, Kate Elinore was able to reveal the direct link existing between herself, her jokes, individual spectators and, by extension, the audience at large. Kate’s gesture broke the aesthetic distance to declare: my joke hit you because we are the same, you and me, and the audience here tonight. As Caffin concluded, Kate’s audience “is speedily engulfed in laughter like a rock at high tide. And how she responds to and gloats over their mirth, and reabsorbs it to radiate it on them again.”²²⁰ In this communal system of communication, laughter is the exchange currency among fellow outsiders; once the performer ignites it, it keeps cycling between both sides of the footlights so that performer and audience laugh at themselves and with each other. As the *Washington Post* acknowledged, Kate Elinore “played with the audience as a child plays with mud pies.”²²¹ This remark points to Kate’s influence over the audience and skill at “manipulating” their reactions. She gained this influence through play and laughter; in other words, by playing *with* the audience, not at them or for them.

With this example, practitioners and scholars of clowning might recognize Kate Elinore’s gestural comedy as akin to the work of the fool. In 1935, Enid Welsford, one of the earliest historians of clowning, described the fool as ministering to the “vanities of the public” by being the butt of the joke. However, Welsford specifies, “if the fool is ‘he who gets slapped,’ the most successful fool is ‘he who is none the worse for his slapping.’ [...] The fool is now no longer a mere safety-valve for the suppressed instincts of the bully, he provides a subtler balm for the

²¹⁹ Caffin, *Vaudeville*, 212.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ “Poli’s,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 1917, RLC.

fears and wounds of those afflicted with the inferiority complex.”²²² To establish a deep connection with the public and allow laughter to circle back unremittingly, the fool cannot be the unidirectional target of the slap or the audience’s “safety-valve.” “The most successful fool” involves her audience in her troubles and shows strategies, however silly these may be, that she can use to get out unharmed or even enriched. In this way, the audience who are “afflicted with the inferiority complex”—“the greater part of humanity,” Welsford stipulates, “if we may believe our psychologists”—not only find affirmation for their own post-traumatic feelings, but share in the fool’s pride for overcoming them.²²³

Idiomatically, Kate Elinore “made a fool” of herself on stage and involved the audience in her troubles. Her scripted parts are filled with asides and gestural comedy aimed at keeping a point implicit to the other characters while making the audience feel they are the privileged receivers of the joke. In *The Adventures of Bridget McGuire*, the audience becomes Bridget’s partner in crime once she whispers: “She’s got him petrified. Look at that face and to think I married that—” Similarly, grabbing the decanter to show what real “spirits” are is a gestural statement she makes so that her spectators can partake in her feeling of superiority to Mrs. Rapps. Because their relationship is bidirectional, neither audience nor performer feels they are the butt of the joke. In fact, because laughter circles back in this relationship, “folly,” as Tim Prentki argues, can be safely used to express “outrageous opinions” and even “expos[e] false positions, hypocrisies and self-interest.”²²⁴ If the audience see themselves mirrored, they will not take it too personally or, as Welsford might say, they will not “be worse for the slapping.”

²²² Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (Gloucester: P. Smith, 1966), 318.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Tim Prentki, *The Fool in European Theatre: Stages of Folly* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 16.

A good example of how audiences received “outrageous opinions” is the sketch *Irish 400*. Kate plays Mrs. Murphy, a widowed mother, opposite May as her refined daughter. As May explains, “I’m educated in a convent, a member of the 400 [high society] and obligated to live on a floor over a saloon just because Ma is attached to the neighborhood and the neighbors—that’s not so bad it’s her going’s on that bother me most.”²²⁵ In a long monologue addressing the audience directly, May gives examples of her mother’s “going’s on” and sets them against her own pretentious entertainments. Like the joke about Spiritualism in *Bridget McGuire*, it is the pretensions of the upper classes (or the entitled second-generation Irish in this case) that are mocked in the comparison. Because Irish spectators would recognize Mrs. Murphy’s “going’s on” as typical Irish favorites, we might imagine their reaction: between drinking “Pussy-Cat Tail” cocktails and beer, going to the symphony and singing Irish songs in a pub, or going to the Turkish baths and riding the uptown tram feeling free to “expectorate” on the floor, spectators might have preferred to join Kate for a beer, Irish sing-along, or tram ride. These might sound “outrageous” entertainments for the well-to-do, but if spectators did any of these things, after watching *Irish 400* they might stop feeling guilty about it.

The way that the Elinore Sisters involved the audience in their comedy may explain why their work was successful while other Irish impersonators such as the Russell Brothers were censured by Irish anti-vice and nationalist groups. Not unlike wench performances in blackface minstrelsy, in “The Irish Servant Girls” the Russell Brothers impersonated rough Irish maids wearing ridiculous red wigs and green ribbons to decorate their wide aprons.²²⁶ They hit each

²²⁵ Maurice E. McLaughlin, *Irish 400*, first performed at Tony Pastor’s Theatre, New York City, on July 26, 1897, *ESVAP*, B 1 f 10–11.

²²⁶ Geraldine Maschio, “Ethnic Humor and the Demise of the Russell Brothers,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 26 no. 1 (Summer 1992): 82-92; Kibler, *Censoring Racial Ridicule*, 51–80.

other with brooms, winked lustfully at the men in the audience, and routinely “raised their dresses on stage” to expose the petticoats underneath (fig. 2.7).²²⁷ On January 24, 1907 the Brothers’ act was hissed off the stage. Over one hundred angry Irish American protesters stood up and yelled “Take them off!” Thomas P. Tuite, a devoted Irish nationalist, addressed the management and his fellow audience members: “Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! Or by the eternal we will stop it. For whenever you again bring it on you will be met by clean, manly men who will stop it if they have to stop you.”²²⁸ While the Elinore Sisters established a sense of community that allowed audience members to laugh safely, in maintaining a separation between themselves, their characters, and the public the Russell Brothers made spectators particularly sensitive to the crudeness of the representation. As a reviewer for the *Pittsburgh Sun* noted, the Russell Brothers did not care for their audiences, “laugh is what they go after and they don’t care a hurrah how they get it.”²²⁹ This approach was tolerated even less as women began to attend vaudeville theatres and the Irish nationalist movement was revived in the United States. By that point, it had become imperative to protect the image and reputation of Irish women. As the *New York Telegraph* exhorted, “Down with the Russell Brothers! They ridicule the honest, hardworking, Irish servant girl.”²³⁰

²²⁷ “Russell Brothers Make a Speech,” Russell Brothers File, card catalog, (NYPLPA).

²²⁸ “Hooted Off the Stage,” *Gaelic American*, February 2, 1907, 5. “The Russells Rebuked,” *Gaelic American*, March 16, 1907, 2. Tuite was the secretary of the United Irish American Societies, a collective of ninety-one Irish groups. The UIAS formed a special committee called Society for the Prevention of Ridiculous and Perverse Misrepresentation of the Irish Character. On January 24, 1907 representatives from the committee attended the Russell Brothers’ show with the intent of taking them down.

²²⁹ “Some Pretty Rough Comedy,” *Pittsburgh Sun*, November 2, 1906.

²³⁰ Quoted in Maschio, “Ethnic Humor,” 85.



Fig. 2.7: Russell Brothers as the Irish Serving Girls, publicity photograph. Marceau Studio. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

The *Baltimore American* explained the difference between the Elinore Sisters' and the Russell Brothers' comedy thus: "When a man attempts to portray an Irish on the stage there is apt to be an element of coarseness in it, there is always lacking that feminine touch which a woman alone can give it. It is for this reason that Kate Elinore's characterization in *Mrs. Delaney of Newport* always provokes the heartiest roars of laughter and never hurts the feelings of anyone."²³¹ The critic for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* similarly asserted: "There is an element of the harum-scarum hilarity in [the Elinore Sister's] act that made the Russell brothers famous, but it is toned down and refined to suit the most exacting audience."²³² Tellingly, when compared to female impersonators, the Sisters' comedy was less grotesque and more "refined." Despite playing masculine "grotesque" characters, Kate's comedy still had "that feminine touch that a woman alone can give." This comment should not surprise, especially after acknowledging the fundamental liminality that defines the female grotesque. The female grotesque might manifest in "unruly" behaviors, as Kathleen Rowe's work demonstrates, or invert social hierarchies and debunk conventions, as Bakhtin theorizes. But its goal is to fundamentally *challenge* and *redefine* meanings of gender (and ethnicity, in the Elinore Sisters' case), not *erase* femininity from the performance altogether. In the Russell Brothers' comedy, femininity was not challenged but simply denied. Similarly, Irishness was not redefined through parody, but ridiculed through caricature. Traditional Irish double acts like the Russell Brothers featured two comedians as opposed to a comic-straight pair. The exchange between the two performers would always be ineffectually oppositional, meaning that despite one acting as the smarter in the pair, the fights

²³¹ "'Mrs. Delaney of Newport,' a Society Satire, Scores a Great Hit," *Baltimore American*, undated, ESVAP, B 3 Vol 3.

²³² *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 15, 1895, ESVAP, B 3 Vol 3.

they occasion only reveal the basic ineptitudes of both characters. The Elinore Sisters were able to redefine gender and ethnic categories through comic dynamics that always produced a winner. The winner would consistently be the fool and her superiority would always be measured against the ineptitudes or pretensions of her straight counterpart, hence the “carnavalesque” inversion. Gender and ethnicity were neither denied nor openly mocked. Rather, the fight both reaffirmed and modified them—femininity as unrestrained boldness and Irishness as crafty pragmatism.

Performing Irishness, Becoming American

By focusing on Irish American variety and vaudeville artists, this chapter accomplishes two goals: it reveals the Irish foundations of what was becoming American popular entertainment, and makes a case for assimilation strategies that, since the earliest days of American mass immigration, have not completely erased one’s culture of origin. Kevin Kenny’s framing is worth repeating here: Irish American entertainment exposes how “the development of some form of ethnic identity has been an integral part of the process through which immigrants have normally become American.”²³³ Popular performance is a key site to watch this process unfold. Being bound up in corporeality, and since corporeality cannot escape what Franz Fanon calls the “epidermal racial schema” of society, performance is a primal technology to make bodies legible from a racial standpoint.²³⁴ In particular, *popular* performance in end-of-nineteenth-century America was built around the repetition of a repertoire of racial stereotypes that had been gathered from a variety of geographical and cultural locations and reworked into

²³³ Kenny, *The American Irish*, 148.

²³⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, white Mask*, Richard Philcox trans. (New York; Berkeley: Grove Press, 2008), 92.

mid-century blackface minstrelsy. Racial stereotypes—their unvarnished repetition, subtle modification, or original interpretation—are another crucial strategy to make race legible not only on the performers' bodies but in terms of what race means from a cultural perspective. Like understandings of race, cultural perspectives are everchanging and oftentimes personal. This chapter's emphasis on reception is not accidental; in fact, it demonstrates how racial performance is always a collaboration between performer and audience. To paraphrase Michael Omi and Howard Winant, racial formation is put in action by the cultural absorption of "racial projects," not through the stated intentions of those who produce them.²³⁵ Cultural absorption resides in the audience, but it only gets triggered by performance: the *body* and the *stereotype* aid the performer in materializing racial projects on their own skin and in the minds of their spectators.

By covering the long temporal span from blackface minstrelsy's widest diffusion in the 1860s to the consolidation of vaudeville in the 1900s, this chapter shows how the performance of "some forms" of Irishness has developed to be "an integral part of the process" through which Irish immigrants became American. We can observe change over time. Initially, Irish minstrels infused blackface characters with references to Irish cultural forms while stage Irishmen propagated Irish racist stereotypes. Subsequently, Pat Rooney put Irish stereotypes and authentic cultural expressions side by side. Finally, the Elinore Sisters challenged stereotypes through an explicitly grotesque aesthetic. Let us revisit this evolution in more detail.

Irish immigrants participated in blackface minstrelsy as performers and audience members. The eclectic cultural provenance of the many performance forms included in minstrel shows afforded Irish immigrants a space for cultural representation from behind the mask. In

²³⁵ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s.*, Second Edition (New York; London: Routledge, 1994), 56.

fact, while joking, dancing, and singing in blackface, Irish minstrels popularized brogues, Celtic jigs, and nationalistic songs such as “Erin! The Tear and the Smile in Thine Eyes” and “Lament for Ireland.”²³⁶ Minstrel shows increasingly included a number of stereotypical ethnic types besides blackfaced performers. So-called stage Irishmen impersonated Irish characters by wearing bright orange whiskers and brawling about nonsensical issues. These types easily transferred to variety and vaudeville stages: I have discussed two examples as means of comparison to Rooney’s and the Elinore Sisters’ aesthetics, a theatrical poster representing two characters in the typical stage Irishman’s attire and slapping cane, and the Russell Brothers, who cross-dressed to mock Irish servant girls and used broom sticks as their slapping weapons.

In Pat Rooney’s performances, derogatorily and humanely racialized characters, stereotypical songs and Irish authentic dances coexisted without apparent friction. Rooney’s songs alternated depictions of vulgar laborers, abusive husbands, and drunk baseball players with more “respectable” portrayals in the form of honorable policemen, nostalgic migrants, and men who despite some trying hardships live an honest life. In some cases, exploitative behaviors and decency concurred in the same character: Rooney’s Irish politicians provide a clear example of such combinations. Regardless of the songs’ topic, dance interludes were consistently praised for their gracefulness. Thus, Rooney’s dances not only presented an authentic piece of Irish culture but also smoothed his characters’ roughest edges away. For this reason, Rooney’s act can be theorized as the manifestation of two social tendencies rubbing against each other in late-nineteenth-century United States: the *racialization* and *incorporation* of immigrants into the

²³⁶ Thomas Moore, “Erin! The Tear and the Smile in Thine Eyes;” “How Dimm’d is the Glory that Circled Gael—Lament for Ireland,” Translated from the Irish by J. J. Callanan. For more Irish minstrelsy songs, see Alfred Moffat, *The Minstrelsy of Ireland: 200 Irish Songs* (London: Augener, 1897).

nation's social fabric.²³⁷ Accordingly, Rooney produced performances that satisfied both American-born and Irish immigrant spectators: as reviewers noted, although he was a "delineator of the usually ill-used Irish character," his dancing was "exquisite" and his renditions "true to the life" of the American Irish.²³⁸

In the comedy of the Elinore Sisters, "rough" and "respectable" forms of Irishness were similarly placed side by side. Yet, unlike Rooney's seamless alternations, Kate's "rough" and May's "respectable" characters constantly opposed one another. Their scuffles were comedic but different from those of stage Irishmen: while stage Irishmen fought to ridicule their ethnicity, the Elinore Sisters fought to fundamentally redefine it. Their stereotypical characters were not redeemed in the process but served a bigger purpose: they challenged both gender and ethnic categories by showing how the types of femininity and Irishness that won all the contests were unapologetic, rather than bashful, and astute, rather than impractical. The Sisters achieved this goal by employing a unique grotesque aesthetic and by connecting directly with their spectators. Kate's "female grotesque" triggered laughter but also inverted behaviors to demonstrate the inequity of social conventions and hierarchies. To involve her spectators, she addressed them through asides and gestural comedy. As the holders of Kate's secret scams or the privileged receivers of the joke, spectators sided with her even when she performed the most pejoratively racialized characters. In fact, in the Sisters' performance of what Tim Prentki calls the clown's

²³⁷ Davis, "I Long for my Home," 42–49.

²³⁸ "Macauley's Theatre," *New York Clipper*, December 21, 1878; Hooley's Minstrels," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 20, 1876.

“folly,” “outrageous opinions,” “false positions, hypocrisies and self-interest” can be expressed safely because the audience partake in the benefits that these behaviors ultimately produce.²³⁹

In the years between the 1860s and the 1900s, Irish immigrants performed Irishness in different modalities on American national stages. As Irish immigrants “became American,” popular entertainment absorbed and divulgated both authentic Irish cultural forms and stereotypical representations. Pat Rooney and the Elinore Sisters have shown how both authenticity and grotesqueness in form could remedy derogatorily racialized contents, thus revealing that the process of “becoming American” started with revising prior misrepresentations of Irishness. The vehicle through which these revisions were communicated to the audience was laughter. Laughter may generate divisions when only a section of the audience is entitled to it. In those cases, part of the audience feels they are the butt of the joke and cannot participate in the community that laughter creates. Pat Rooney and the Elinore Sisters were aware that for outsiders to become American, divisions had to be eliminated. Thus, both acts created safe environments for laughter to be enjoyed broadly. By never acting as the butt of the joke on stage, they did not make anyone in the audience feel they were being unjustly targeted. Because their characters represented different facets of the Irish American experience and were never unilaterally dumb or outrageous, different groups in the audience could safely laugh at themselves and with each other. By circling back unremittingly between performers and audience, laughter became the exchange currency among fellow outsiders and the cement for a diverse community of new Americans.

²³⁹ Prentki, *Stages of Folly*, 16.

Chapter 3: Chinese American Racial Impersonators

The American Chinese: Immigration, Racialization, Exclusion

In the preface to the second edition of *Strangers in the Land*, John Higham explains: “I regarded [nineteenth-century] opposition to certain non-European peoples such as the Chinese and, to a lesser extent, the Japanese, as somewhat separate phenomena, historically tangential to the main currents of American Nativism.”¹ This preface amended Higham’s first edition in two fundamental ways: it demonstrated how American Nativism and immigration policy evolved in parallel, and how they *jointly* effected immigrant communities beyond those explicitly targeted by the law. Particularly, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was not “tangential” to larger patterns of twentieth-century American anti-immigrant sentiment, but rather, was its state-sanctioned origin point.

Although in 1880 the Chinese composed only 0.002% of the nation’s population, the Chinese Exclusion Act suspended Chinese immigration to the United States and declared Chinese immigrants already in the country ineligible for naturalization.² The law prohibited the entry of Chinese laborers and all the Chinese suspected of “immoral behavior” or “likely to become public charges.” In practice, it annulled the Burlingame Treaty signed in 1868 between the US and the Chinese Emperor, an agreement that recognized the “inherent and inalienable

¹ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1974), 2.

² See 1880 census at <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

right of man to change his home and allegiance.”³ Already in 1884, the Chinese Exclusion Act was amended to include a detailed list of Chinese “classes” exempted from exclusion. With a so-called Section 6 certificate of identity procured from the Chinese government, Chinese diplomats, merchants, teachers, students, and temporary visitors were granted the right to reside temporarily in the US. Absurdly, members of the same groups who had established their American residence before the Exclusion law was passed were also required to obtain a Section 6 certificate in China. This forced them to travel to China before they could ever travel to any other destination. The Geary Act of 1892 extended the ban on Chinese immigration for ten additional years and required all the Chinese already in the US to carry special certificates of residence.⁴ This gave the immigration agency permission to verify Chinese residency rights at any time, which often resulted in violent raids of Chinese enclaves and imminent deportations. The law was extended indefinitely until the 1943 Exclusion Repeal Act. Chinese Americans challenged its constitutionality on the basis of discrimination, but their legal efforts repeatedly failed.

As the first law significantly restricting immigration to the United States, the Chinese Exclusion Act set important precedents for the development of US immigration policy and its administrative apparatus. Restrictions to Chinese immigration prompted the expansion of a federal bureaucratic machine to enforce the new law and effectively guard American borders. In fact, to paraphrase Lucy E. Salyer, law-making without law enforcement, a judicial system

³ Complete text at <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/47th-congress/session-1/c47s1ch126.pdf>. See also Sucheng Chan ed., *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882–1943* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991). The Burlingame Treaty was the amendment to the 1858 Treaty of Tientsin between the American and Chinese governments. The new treaty defined basic principles that aimed to ease Chinese immigration to the United States in exchange for American reduced interference in internal Chinese affairs.

⁴ Complete text at <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/52nd-congress/session-1/c52s1ch60.pdf>.

without an effective executive body, would not have been sufficient to limit immigration.⁵ At the foundation of this administrative expansion were complex debates on how one could even be defined Chinese, Asian, or white. Consider, for example, these two Supreme Court cases, *Ozawa v. United States* and *United States v. Thind*. In 1922, the Japanese Takao Ozawa was denied the right to naturalize under the Naturalization Act of 1906 due to his “Japanese blood” being “unamalgamable to the American national family.” Only a year later, Bhagat Singh Thind, a high-caste Hindu who was already naturalized, was stripped of his citizenship. Although high-caste Hindus were considered descendants of Aryans, the case was adjudicated against Thind on the argument that race was a social rather than hereditary condition. In both cases, Chief Justice George Sutherland cited the existence of a “common understanding” of racial difference which color or blood could not incorporate fully.⁶

I am referencing these court cases to foreground two essential attitudes towards race that were prominent at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. First, understandings of race seamlessly switched from bloodline to culture even in official settings such as the Supreme Court. Second, Chinese and Asian identities were challenging to define due to the ambiguity of definitions of whiteness and American citizenship in the first place. In the specific case of people of Chinese nationality or descent during the Chinese Exclusion era, this fluid “common understanding” of race influenced the way in which border crossing interviews, community raids, and the several appeals that ensued were managed. The first step toward enforcing the new law was to understand who was Chinese (as opposed to Chinese American),

⁵ Lucy E. Salyer, *Laws Harsh as Tigers: Chinese Immigrants and the Shaping of Modern Immigration Law* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

⁶ Supreme Court of the United States, Judge George Southerland, US Reports: *Ozawa v. United States*, Volume 260 US 178, 1922; *United States v. Thind*. Volume 261 US 204, 1923.

who could claim permanent or temporary residency rights due to their American nativity or exempt status, and who was barred from entering the United States completely. However, these categories remained unclear for decades after the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed and the debates that they spurred fed the anti-immigration sentiment influencing subsequent immigration restrictions.

Chinese nationals had been immigrating to the United States for over thirty years when the Chinese Exclusion Act became law in 1882. Like many other migrants, they were attracted to California by job opportunities in gold mining and railroad construction as early as 1848. In the 1850s and '60s, employers of Chinese labor in the US sent hiring brokers to China and provided "credit-tickets" for the passage of those who were otherwise unable to travel. These workers would repay the credit during their time in the US, thus they technically came as indentured servants.⁷ This system was legal and uncomplicated; in fact, after 1868 and until the Page Act banned contract laborers in 1875, it was formally based on the Burlingame treaty between the United States and China. When the gold was exhausted and the Transcontinental Railroad completed in 1869, an increasing number of Chinese people moved eastward to work in coal mining, farming, and service industries, especially domestic service.⁸ The US 1870 Census counted 46,274 Chinese workers nationwide, a staggering 37% of whom were miners. Right below miners were unspecified laborers (20%) and domestic servants and launderers (20%).⁹

⁷ David M. Brownstone, *The Chinese-American Heritage* (New York: Facts on File, 1988), 37–44.

⁸ Judy Chang, Gordon Chang, and Him Mark Lai eds., *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Though gold mining continued throughout the 1850s, it had reached its peak already in 1852. After 1852, the gold intake steadily declined until it almost completely stopped in 1855. The Transcontinental Railroad line was built between 1863 and 1869.

⁹ See 1880 census at <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1872/dec/1870a.html>. See Table XXVIX, "Persons in the United States, in each Occupation, with Age and Sex and Selected Nationalities."

The Chinese availability to take life-threatening or feminized occupations for small wages made them objects of racial discrimination. This and other factors, including their appearance, hindered their assimilation. The typical Chinese “queue,” for instance, was a Manchu grooming practice that males belonging to the Han ethnic group were forced to observe under penalty of decapitation until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1912. Thus, those Han immigrants who wished to return to China even for a short visit could not style their hair differently while living in the United States.¹⁰ The discrimination that this first wave of Chinese immigrants experienced in the US kept them isolated in city districts where they could find support among their own growing community. Their overall isolation can be grasped by looking at literacy numbers. It was estimated that in 1870, only 3 females and 128 males of Chinese nationality or descent had attended American schools.¹¹ With 62,722 Chinese-born and 517 American-born in this population, this meant that only 0.2% of the total Chinese residents in the US could read and write English.¹²

A severe depression in the nation’s economy between 1873 and 1878 resulted in unemployment and reduced wages, thus giving affected workers and labor unions cause to blame the situation in part on what they saw as low-paid foreign strike-breakers. As a result, the Workingmen’s Party rode the crest of anti-Chinese hostility and in 1878 won one-third of the seats in the California Constitutional Convention. The Convention issued an amended State

¹⁰ Weikun Cheng, “Politics of the Queue: Agitation and Resistance in the Beginning and End of Qing China,” in *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, ed. Alf Hiltebeitel and Barbara D. Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 123–42. The dominant ethnic group in China is the Han Chinese.

¹¹ See 1870 census at <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1872/dec/1870a.html>. See Table IX, “School Attendance and Literacy.”

¹² *Ibid.*, see Table VI, “Special Nationalities 1870, by State and Territory.”

Constitution the following year which denied people of Chinese descent the right to vote in state elections, forbade private corporations and public contractors to hire Chinese laborers, and gave cities the power to relocate Chinese residents to designated ghettos. In the late-nineteenth century, neither the Democratic nor the Republican Party had a decisive majority in Congress, and because California was known to be a swing state and a particularly sensitive one to anti-Chinese regulations, both party platforms called for a restriction of Chinese immigration in 1880. The step from here to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 only required already powerful anti-Chinese groups, especially labor unions, to press Congress one last time for federal legislation.¹³

The pseudo-scientific work carried out by contemporaneous race theorists reinforced these economic and political concerns by spreading beliefs about the incapability of Chinese people to assimilate to American ways of life. By portraying the Chinese as culturally and biologically different, race theorists went as far as claiming that they posed a threat to American morals and democratic institutions.¹⁴ The *Address to the People of the United States Upon the Evil of Chinese Immigration* that the California State Senate gave on August 13, 1877 shows how race theorists' claims reached State politics. To support Chinese exclusion, the Senate's speaker cited Bayard Taylor's 1855 work "India, China, and Japan." In the words of the American travel author and race theorist, words that in the California State Senate resonated powerfully, the Chinese people were declared:

morally, the most debased people on the face of the earth. Forms of vice, which in other countries are barely named, are in China so common that they excite no comment among the natives. They constitute the surface level, and below them are deeps on deeps of depravity so shocking and horrible that their character cannot even be hinted. [...] *Their touch is pollution*, and harsh as this opinion may

¹³ Salyer, *Laws Harsh as Tigers*, 12–4. See also Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Paul Lombardo, "Eugenics Laws Restricting Immigration," *The Chesterton Review* 43 (January 1, 2017): 174–77.

seem, *justice to our own race demands that they should not be allowed to settle on our soil.*¹⁵

The most “morally debased” aspect of the Chinese culture was the slave trading of women into prostitution.¹⁶ Moreover, Chinese family values ostensibly conflicted with American ones. The California State Senate’s speaker continued: “The Chinese are bad for us because they come here without their families. Families are the center of all that is elevating in mankind, yet here we have a very large male population. And the Chinese females that are here make this element more dangerous still.”¹⁷ Rather than an intrinsic lack of family values, the high cost of travel, men’s prospects to return to China after saving enough money, and traditional female responsibilities of looking after children and extended families at home are all more plausible explanations for why Chinese women mostly remained in China. Moreover, the Page Act, which came into effect five years before this address, effectively prohibited the entry of unmarried Chinese women to purportedly “end the danger” that “immoral Chinese women” represented for the reproductive health of the United States.¹⁸ Media outlets and popular culture of the time quickly propagated these ideas: Arnold Genthe’s photographic documentation of opium dens and

¹⁵ Special Committee on Chinese Immigration, *The Social, Moral and Political Effect of Chinese Immigration. Policy and Means of Exclusion. Memorial of the Senate of California to the Congress of the United States, and an Address to the People of the United States* (Sacramento: State of California Printing Office, 1877). Emphasis in original.

¹⁶ According to Ronald Takaki, the 1870 manuscript census shows that 61% of 3,536 Chinese women in California were classified as prostitutes. By the 1880 Census, the percentage decreased to 24%. Many of these women married Chinese Christians and formed some of the earliest Chinese American families. Nevertheless, with the Page Act of 1875, American anti-Chinese legislators used the prostitution issue to start restricting the immigration of Chinese women. Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1998), 121–5.

¹⁷ Special Committee on Chinese Immigration, *The Social, Moral and Political Effect of Chinese Immigration.*

¹⁸ George Anthony Peffer, “Forbidden Families: Emigration Experiences of Chinese Women under the Page Law, 1875-1882,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 3 no. 1 (1986): 28–46, 28. The 1875 Page Act barred defined “undesirable” immigrants as any person from East Asia coming to be a forced laborer, any East Asian woman who would engage in prostitution, and all people considered convicts in their country of origin.

brothels in San Francisco's Chinatown, and dramatic works such as Bret Harte and Mark Twain's *Ah Sin* (1876) and Henry Grimm's *The Chinese Must Go* (1879) were meant to substantiate claims of threatening Chinese difference in the public imaginary.¹⁹

By broadly targeting Chinese immigrants suspected of "immoral behavior" or "likely to become public charges," the Chinese Exclusion Act was founded on the Page Act of 1875, particularly the association between immoral behavior, prostitution, and immigration. Without a doubt, race and gender were the primary identity categories shaping the Page and Chinese Exclusion Acts. But as the politics of exemption indicate, class and economic status also played a role in discriminating against Chinese laborers *versus* admissible diplomats, tourists, students, teachers, and merchants.²⁰ Diplomats and tourists were groups constituted by upper-class temporary visitors. Students were also likely to be wealthy upper-class subjects and, most importantly, they were expected to return to China after their studies. Teaching and trading were understood to be vital occupations for the successful assimilation of the Chinese community in the United States. By contrast, laborers were neither temporary nor extremely "useful" at this time, and the fact that the great majority were illiterate and impoverished did not make their presence any more advantageous from the nation's perspective.

Despite the confusion that these descriptors might create for the contemporary reader, they were conceived to support immigration officers in their practices of discrimination and exclusion. They also irremediably sanctioned the identification of unwelcome Chineseness with low economic status and the female gender: in other words, superimposed legal categories

¹⁹ James S. Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1993), 23–47.

²⁰ Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 86.

defined who was a welcome Chinese and who was not. Cultural products such as *Madame Butterfly* demonstrate the pervasiveness of such distinctions and how easily they transferred to East Asian subjects beyond China. Written first as a novella by American lawyer John Luther Long in 1898, the same year that the United States officially began both the colonization of the Philippines and the illegal annexation of Hawai'i, the story of a Japanese woman who is not allowed to follow the American father of her child to the United States is the manifestation of exclusion-era legal and racial thinking. Cio-Cio-san can only wait for Lieutenant Pinkerton to return to Japan three years later, by which time he has married an American and wants to take his mixed-raced child, who is a lawful American citizen, to live with his new wife in the US. In the words of performance studies scholar Joshua Chambers-Letson, "as a work of popular entertainment [*Madame Butterfly*] codified and represented these [legal] narratives, giving them the verisimilitude of flesh-and-blood presence onstage while confirming and embedding them within the national culture."²¹ Due to its sustained international popularity as a play (David Belasco, 1900) and opera (Giacomo Puccini, 1904), *Madame Butterfly* still propagates exclusion-era juridical prejudice targeting Asian women within and beyond American national borders.

While all appeals to declare the Chinese Exclusion Act unconstitutional failed, from the very beginning, Chinese nationals in the US filed lawsuits to contest the Act's discriminatory administration. In 1885, a special agent for the Treasury Department estimated that 20% of the total number of Chinese landed since the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act were admitted thanks to successful lawsuits. By 1888, the same agent calculated that 4,091 Chinese people had

²¹ Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *A Race so Different: Performance and Law in Asian America* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 30.

petitioned federal courts for a hearing and 85% were successfully admitted.²² By transferring immigration decisions from border patrol functionaries to federal judges, defendants could invoke the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment against the discriminatory treatment of the Chinese among all immigrants. The courts felt bound to hear these cases because the requests came in the form of petitions for writs of habeas corpus. Once Chinese immigrants got their claims before the court, the evidentiary practices of the US legal system, as opposed to the summary administration of the Exclusion law by immigration bureaucrats, offered them a chance to fashion persuasive legal arguments and obtain favorable results. As Lucy Salyer powerfully argues, though on the margins of American society, late-nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants were able to appeal to the fundamentals of American jurisprudence—habeas corpus, due process, evidentiary rules, judicial review—to fundamentally challenge the administration of immigration law.²³

Due to the increasing number of court cases in the late-1880s, Congress advocated for a restructuring of immigration law enforcement. Initially under the precinct of the Department of Treasury and later the Department of Commerce and Labor, the Bureau of Immigration was instituted in 1891 to take over the workload of immigration inspections. Its administration was assigned to bureaucrats with no training in immigration law, criminal law, or court procedures. In fact, the work of such officials as John H. Wise, Collector of Customs in San Francisco from 1892 to 1898, and James R. Dunn, Bureau of Immigration's Chief Inspector starting in 1899, clearly shows how the interpretation and enforcement of Chinese Exclusion laws was left to

²² Hudson N. Janisch, "The Chinese, the Courts, and the Constitution: A Study of the Legal Issues Raised by Chinese Immigration, 1850–90." Dissertation, Chicago: Microfilmed by Dept. of Photoduplication, University of Chicago Library. 1971.

²³ Salyer, *Laws Harsh as Tigers*, 247.

laymen who renounced the practice of judicial review in favor of stronger executive powers. Wise and Dunn even had direct ties to anti-Chinese immigration movements. Wise had established a successful wool commission business and served on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors when it passed anti-Chinese ordinances in California and the nation. Dunn had strong connections with organized labor, which was one of the most outspoken sectors of the anti-Chinese crusade.²⁴ Even after 1910, when basic mandatory legal training was instituted, the immigration officers' job remained to enforce exclusion and deportation, not to evaluate cases.²⁵ Our contemporary United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is the direct descendant of the Immigration Bureau and, as of today, it is still operated by bureaucrats who interpret immigration laws according to their political orientations and racial bias.²⁶

Starting with the 1892 amendment known as Geary Act, raids became one of the most effective tools to enforce the Chinese Exclusion Act. The practice allowed the executive powers of the Bureau of Immigration to extend beyond border patrol and into the private homes of hundreds of thousands of Chinese and Chinese Americans. Police would immediately arrest all the residents who were either found without a valid certificate of residency or had fallen out of exempt status. Since the Bureau of Immigration required exempt classes to leave their Section 6 certificates with the agency, these groups were vulnerable to arrest like any other unlawful Chinese and would not be released until the paperwork was retrieved from the office's archives.

²⁴ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 55–9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁶ National Archives and Record Administration (NARA), Reference Information Paper 111, 2004, "A Guide to Records of Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders at The National Archives & Records Administration Pacific Region–San Francisco," 2–3.

After a summary deportation hearing, those who could not prove their American nativity or exempt status were repatriated.²⁷

As became clear, restrictive immigration policies alone were not sufficient to spread nativist terror, but the expansion of the Bureau of Immigration's unregulated discretion to administer Chinese Exclusion laws was enough to produce a "psychology of fear" within immigrant communities and forever alienate immigration from other branches of public law.²⁸ This fear became almost a state of being for Chinese immigrants and citizens of Chinese descent when the Bureau of Immigration's 1915 guidelines gave inspectors the right to examine "all Chinese persons in the United States not personally known to them."²⁹ With this move, immigration inspectors gained complete autonomy to lawfully harass any Chinese-looking person whom they had not already examined at a border crossing, or for any other reason. From here, it was only a short step to the passing of the Asian Barred Zone Act in 1917. Judicial methods had already been rejected in favor of summary administrative proceedings and the bureaucratic apparatus that worked to enforce them had been established and tested for decades.

The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act sanctioned the expansion of the modern immigration administration apparatus, set a precedent for subsequent restrictive immigration policies, and regulated definitions of "acceptable" Chineseness by linking racial identity to gender, class, and economic status. This last point was the one on which immigration officers' biased interpretation

²⁷ Salyer, *Laws Harsh as Tigers*, 151–2.

²⁸ Paul C. P. Siu and John K. W. Tchen, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 199. Sociologists Siu and Tchen found that in the late nineteenth century, both Chinese immigrants and Chinese American citizens suffered from a "psychology of fear" caused by the fact that they "did not feel at home under the conditions of exclusion and race prejudice." This fear resulted in the social, political, and economic segregation of Chinese communities and a high rate of return migration.

²⁹ United States Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of Immigration, *Treaty, Laws, and Rules Governing the Admission of the Chinese* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1915), 42.

of the law had the most influence. In fact, during a time in which homebirths were not always certified, forgery was a much easier practice than it is in the digital age, and fires and earthquakes forever destroyed those official documents that did exist, immigration inspectors relied heavily on personal interaction with the petitioners.³⁰ These interactions took the form of long and often absurd interviews. Interview transcripts show how questions were conceived to detect discrepancies in the petitioners' accounts: how many pigs and chickens did your neighbor in China have? Who used to live three houses on the left from you when you were growing up? Three or more testifiers were asked the same questions in separate rooms so to increase the chance of catching a lie.³¹ Petitioners who were proficient in English and could answer basic questions on US history and culture were more likely to be admitted on nativity grounds even when they lacked a birth certificate. Similarly, wealthy Chinese nationals such as diplomats and businessmen were admitted on the basis of their performance of high-class status especially when dressed in Western-style clothes.³²

In the absence of proper documentation, it all came down to the performance of either Americanness for natives or high-status Chineseness for exempt classes. By demonstrating good English conversational skills, knowledge of American history and culture, or elegance in demeanor and appearance, American citizens of Chinese descent and Chinese nationals were both able to perform their rights to permanent or temporary residency. But what happened when

³⁰ Notably, the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 erased proof of residency rights for many Chinese and Chinese Americans of that city.

³¹ The transcripts for such interviews are part of the Record Group 85, Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files (CEACF), at National Archives and Records Administration branches across the country. I have surveyed hundreds of such files to isolate those recording exchanges with performing artists. At the Seattle National Archives, my research on artists' files contributed relevant information to the itemized database that archivists are developing to make RG 85 more accessible.

³² Erika Lee, *At America's Gates*, 101.

the petitioners were performers *by profession*? Immigration inspectors were a particularly inquisitive audience: would their response change once they realized that their interviewees were trained actors?

Chinese actors were not formally included in any exempt class. A letter dated August 28, 1882, just over three months after the Chinese Exclusion Act went into effect, articulates the confusion that Chinese actors created for immigration officers at the border. The Secretary of Treasury wrote to the San Francisco Port Collector:

Chinese legation represents that Chinese play actors from Panama presumably not from China since the act took effect, are refused permission to land at our port. This department thinks that play actors are not laborers within the letter or spirit of the act, and fall under Section Six. It suggests that the facts of the case may bring it within the principle of late decision of Justice filed as reported by the press in the case of a Chinaman who shipped before the act took effect. If you learn that it is as Department think you may permit them to land.³³

The case above likely pertained to Cantonese opera actors who toured extensively from Shanghai to the United States, Canada, and Mexico, passing through Panama.³⁴ According to the Secretary's personal interpretation of the "letter and spirit" of the law, Chinese actors were not laborers. However, he compared Chinese Opera actors to the case of a laborer who was permitted entry because his ship had left China before the Exclusion Act took effect. Circumstances like this one were later resolved by establishing a quota system and the informal practice of accepting bonds as a guarantee of departure after no later than one year. Only one

³³ Secretary of Treasury to San Francisco Port Collector, August 28, 1882. RG 36, Stack B-17-2, row 1-6, "Letters received by the Collector from the Office of the Secretary of Treasury, March 24, 1851–September 17, 1912," NARA San Francisco.

³⁴ Nancy Yunhwa Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theater in North America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

hundred Chinese performers were allowed to be in the United States at any given time.³⁵ Each one of these people were granted temporary residency provided that they bought bonds for \$1,000 to \$1,500 (the equivalent of today's \$25,000) to be returned on their departure.³⁶ The cost was purposely prohibitive so that only the most successful theatre impresarios or companies could afford it. These regulations applied to Cantonese opera actors performing exclusively for Chinese audiences as well as Chinese jugglers, magicians, and acrobats who were popular acts in circuses and vaudeville theatres across the country.³⁷ These people were able to verify their identities as theatre professionals by offering Cantonese opera verses, magic tricks, and bodily contortions during their immigration interviews. "Admissible" Chineseness thus came to coincide with demonstrations of traditional performing arts that the inspectors could recognize as "authentically" Chinese.

By contrast, American-born artists of Chinese heritage who did not practice traditional Chinese arts had a harder time proving their right to permanent residency. For these performers, immigration examinations happened before they could cross national borders. As was required of all people of Chinese descent living in the United States after the Geary Act, their identity had to be pre-investigated prior to traveling abroad. The typical procedure involved applying for a return certificate which, if granted, would function as re-entry permit. Birth certificates were among the materials requested for the application; if the applicant did not have one, they would

³⁵ My sample of temporary entries on bonds shows that "performer" or "artist" were broad categories including singers, musicians, dancers, and actors.

³⁶ See Chapter 2 in Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theater*.

³⁷ CEACF document the movement of dozens of Chinese performers employed by the Barnum and Bailey circus. Cantonese opera singers employed by the Mandarin Theatre of San Francisco and Lun Hop Company are respectively represented at National Archives in San Francisco and Seattle.

be interviewed and asked to supply the contact information of at least three testifiers to corroborate their identity. Clearly, singing and dancing—the Chinese American specialties in American popular theatres—could not be considered proof of native status in the same way as traditional Chinese arts were proof of profession for Chinese nationals on a temporary visa. Nonetheless, both Lee Tung Foo's and Jue Quon Tai's interactions with the Bureau of Immigration suggest that their work in American popular theatres helped them, if not to substantiate their American nativity, then to prove their assimilation into American culture.

Lee Tung Foo and Jue Quon Tai: A Short Note on Sources

In the following sections, I compare Lee Tung Foo's and Quon Tai's vaudeville acts and audience responses to the way they presented their race for immigration officials at American national borders. While Lee Tung Foo sang operatic pieces in ethnic costumes and languages including but not limited to Chinese, Jue Quon Tai made her name as the "Chinese Princess" singing Chinese and American popular tunes in lavish Chinese gowns. Due to a pervasive stereotype holding Chinese people to be terrible singers, Lee's outstanding vocal abilities were often underrated by critics as just average compared to Western voices. By impersonating a variety of races and ethnicities, Lee deemphasized his Chinese identity in order to highlight his vocal talent independent of his race. In contrast, Jue performed exaggerated Chinese characters to capitalize on white audiences' gendered demand for Orientalized spectacle. As a consequence, Jue had a successful career in prestigious vaudeville houses frequented by white, well-off audiences, while Lee could only find work in second-class vaudeville theatres where the largely immigrant audiences appreciated his repertoire of national songs and costumes.

Despite their different performance techniques and goals, these case studies lead to similar historiographical conclusions. First, their work reveals vaudeville to be a racially, socially, and economically segregated industry that did not allow for professional advancement unless racial stereotypes were maintained for the pleasure of white audiences. Second, their experiences at the border confirm that race must be embodied and performed to turn abstract legal definitions into real-world outcomes. Lastly, by comparing their reception in theatres and at the borders, it is clear that stage representations and legal definitions of race influenced one another in articulating perceptions of “Chineseness.” In *A Race So Different*, Chambers-Letson argues that “popular aesthetic performances function as agents of the law, circulating legal narratives through the bloodstream of popular culture.”³⁸ As the example of *Madame Butterfly* has established, popular performance can “function as agent of the law” by giving body to legal categories and creating relatable storylines to explain the law’s proscriptions. My analyses of Lee Tung Foo and Jue Quon Tai demonstrate that the inverse relationship is also true: not only legal notions enter the realm of popular culture and are circulated by it, but popular culture enters the realms of legal interpretation and law enforcement to shape the way in which the law is understood and administered.

The data gathered for this chapter is of four different types: Lee Tung Foo’s and Jue Quon Tai’s immigration files, part of the Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files at National Archives branches in New York City and Seattle; theater reviews and interviews, collected from both national and regional newspapers; Lee’s decade-long correspondence with his voice instructor Margaret Blake Alverson, contained in the Alverson Papers at the California State Library; and

³⁸ Chambers-Letson, *A Race So Different*, 22.

Alverson's own writings about Lee, especially her private diaries and the book she published on Californian music. Due to the several requests for return certificates and interviews that Lee's and Jue's international travels produced, their immigration files are dense with valuable biographical and professional information. Reviews of their vaudeville acts are great sources to reconstruct their repertoires and performance style, yet they also expose the limited and often biased views of white American-born theatre commentators. Lastly, the hundreds of letters that Lee sent to Alverson while touring for ten years offer a unique Chinese American perspective on the vaudeville industry, audience, and artists.

I could not retrace any private writings or interviews by Jue Quon Tai. In fact, the comparatively fewer sources recording her life and work, all written by white men, make an important point in and of themselves: for Chinese American artists, any surviving documentation may exist by sheer coincidence. Jue Quon Tai's vaudeville career lasted roughly as long as Lee's and was more rewarding economically. Nevertheless, she did not correspond with a white upper-class Californian whose papers have been collected by the California State Library as evidence for a life of achievement (fig. 3.1). The fact that Lee had such a prominent teacher was accidental. Lee came from a poor background and, technically, could not afford voice lessons. Alverson annotated her diaries with all the household chores that her pupil performed for her, thus it is possible that Lee only received lessons in exchange for his domestic service. Jue, on the other hand, was the daughter of a wealthy merchant and upstanding member of the Chinese community in Portland, Oregon. She could have afforded an excellent voice teacher, yet her music training, if she was trained at all, did not leave archival traces.



Fig. 3.1: Margaret Blake Alverson, *carte de visite*, Edouart & Cobb and Dore Gallery, 1880. California History Room, Picture Collection, Portraits. California State Library.

The fact that Lee Tung Foo’s life and career can be recovered today through his own words, whereas Jue Quon Tai’s became historical record only as the products of immigration law enforcement, is the consequence of their respective circumstances. Like prison archives, immigration records gather what Michael Foucault famously defined as “brief effects whose force fades almost at once.” In *The Lives of Infamous Men*, Foucault calls his work “an anthology of existences” that does not need interpretation to recuperate “lives of a few lines or a

few pages, nameless misfortunes and adventures gathered into a handful of words.”³⁹ The dominant discourse transformed these lives into objects of the law: if it were not for their encounter with the forces of power, their “nameless misfortunes and adventures” would have vanished without a trace. As the convicts themselves, the historian depends on mechanisms of power. In recognizing this, Foucault indirectly explains why he wants his work to be a recuperation project rather than an interpretative analysis. Recuperation *fre*es the memory of his convicts, while interpretation *locks* them within all sorts of discourses: ethical, sociological, and cultural. I could not have collected my sources or recovered the lives and performances of Jue Quon Tai and, to a lesser extent, Lee Tung Foo were it not for the exclusionary immigration laws turning their “nameless misfortunes and adventures” into historical record. In fact, the lives of hundreds of thousands Chinese and Chinese Americans crossing national borders, being investigated, or deported would remain unknown if the Bureau of Immigration had not produced the amount of paperwork that it did. I acknowledge that my research has benefitted from documents that, in a less racist world, would not have been created at all. My aim is to use these documents to recuperate the memory of Lee Tung Foo and Jue Quon Tai, and to employ performance theory purposefully but responsibly to open up alternative, freeing interpretations.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, “The Lives of Infamous Men,” in *Power, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, James D. Faubion ed. (New York: The New Press, 1967), 156–75, 156.

Lee Tung Foo, the “World’s Only Chinese Baritone”⁴⁰

Lee Tung Foo, or Frank Lee as he was known by his American friends, was born in 1875 in Watsonville, California.⁴¹ He was the first of seven children, all California-born. As the eldest son, he was expected to help his parents support the family while also attending American school in the morning and Chinese school at night. When the family settled to work on a farm in Ripon, Lee was sent one hundred miles south to Kingsburg to apprentice with an uncle. The same uncle chaperoned him to China when he was fourteen. This was a widespread practice for Chinese American families who wanted their children to complete their education in Chinese schools. After less than two years, Lee returned and settled in Oakland. Here he joined a Christian Mission Church and was for the first time part of a church choir. By this point, his father had left farming and opened a grocery business. The passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act might have motivated this change; as agricultural laborers, Lee’s parents would have been deported, whereas as merchants they could petition for a Section 6 exemption.

In *Sixty Years of California Song*, Alverson portrayed Lee as an unappreciated talent. Starting with his own family, he rarely encountered people supportive of his dream to become an opera singer. In Alverson’s words, “it would require many pages to tell of the difficulties in his pathway. His people were enraged at me for leading their son away to be like all the ‘white devils’ of America. I had to hide him for a year. He was the oldest son of the family and was obliged to marry before any of the other members would marry and he appealed to me to help

⁴⁰ “World’s Only Chinese Baritone,” *Keith’s News*, December 24, 1906, 3–4.

⁴¹ I pieced together Lee Tung Foo’s biography from Margaret Blake Alverson’s book *Sixty Years of California Song* and the interviews that Lee released with the Bureau of Immigration. Margaret Blake Alverson, *Sixty Years of California Song* (Oakland: M.B. Alverson Editor, 1913); Lee Tung Foo’s immigration file, RG 85, Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files, 1880–1960, B 313 f 64/64, National Archives and Record Administration, New York City.

him.”⁴² According to Alverson, Chinese cultural customs hindered Lee’s musical education.

Whether this was truly the context Lee grew up in, and whether Lee fully subscribed to Alverson’s “good Samaritan” rhetoric is hard to ascertain. What is undeniable though is that Alverson believed she was Lee’s benefactress. However, Lee might have seen their relationship in more transactional terms. The year Alverson supposedly hid Lee from his family was most likely the time that he worked for her as a domestic servant. Alverson was sixty-one years old and living alone when she started instructing Lee, thus the meals he occasionally cooked and the errands he ran for her might have become more and more essential as their relationship progressed. Alverson annotated her diaries with all this information, including the wages that Lee received.⁴³

Once under Alverson’s tutelage, Lee made steady progress in his vocal training. “He had the most indomitable will and determination to succeed, and he was the most faithful and conscientious and upright pupil I ever taught,” Alverson wrote in her book.⁴⁴ Considering the widespread prejudice against Chinese music and vocal skills, Alverson was amazed by Lee’s commitment and work ethic.⁴⁵ As a journalist for *Keith’s News* reported, “It is a well known [*sic*] fact that the Chinese scale has only a few tones, and the music of China is a clash and discord

⁴² Alverson, *Sixty Years*, 164.

⁴³ Diaries, Box 771-6, Margaret Blake Alverson Collection (MBAC), California State Library, Sacramento, CA.

⁴⁴ Alverson, *Sixty Years*, 164.

⁴⁵ According to Alverson, the only advantage Lee had over her white pupils was his tireless work ethic. This logic should be interpreted in light of the pervasive prejudice for which work ethic and natural talents stand on a racial spectrum, with Asian Americans at one end as the least talented but the most hard-working, and African Americans at the opposite end as the most talented but the least committed to learning. This prejudice is still very much ingrained in education and arts institutions. In a recent lawsuit, Harvard University was accused of consistently rating Asian American applicants lower than the average on personality traits. Besides the biased scoring, the plaintiff exposed suspects regarding the establishment of a “secret quota” to limit the admission of Asian-American students. Anemona Hartocollis and Stephanie Saul, “Affirmative Action Battle Has a New Focus: Asian-Americans,” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2017.

that would be anything but acceptable to American theatregoers.”⁴⁶ This journalist contrasted the Chinese pentatonic scale to the Western heptatonic scale. That music on a pentatonic scale is “a clash and discord” is clearly a misjudgment; in fact, the fewer the notes, the smaller the opportunity for “discord.” Yet the *Keith’s News’s* reporter expressed a common opinion that was shared even by music experts, Alverson among them. In Alverson’s words, “the unmusical and untrue chords or, one might say, discord” of the Chinese scale produces “wholly unmusical” singers.⁴⁷

Lee asked Alverson to be his instructor three times before she accepted. Due to her prejudice toward Chinese singers, she believed that “it was useless to undertake such a task, I expected nothing more to come of it.” In the end, she “unwillingly consented” not because she truly believed Lee could improve, but because she “was told that the boy was broken-hearted with disappointment.” Surprisingly for his teacher, Lee turned out to be Alverson’s “greatest achievement in the art of vocal culture.”⁴⁸ Remarkably, his baritone voice was much lower than the high-pitched Cantonese opera voices that Westerners had started to hear in Chinatowns across North America and England. In fact, one may argue that Westerners’ lack of appreciation for Chinese voices was partly due to their prejudiced feminization of male performers singing Cantonese opera’s high-pitched melodies.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ “World’s Only Chinese Baritone,” *Keith’s News*, December 24, 1906, 3–4.

⁴⁷ Alverson, *Sixty Years*, 162.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁹ See Chapter 1 in Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theater*.

Lee managed to educate himself “to be a singer, and not a bad one” despite not only racial prejudice but also a medical condition that restricted his tongue’s range of motion.⁵⁰ “Ankyloglossia,” or else known as “tied tongue,” may appear at birth and is caused by an unusually short lingual frenulum. Surgeons have practiced the removal of the frenulum for centuries and the procedure is still prescribed today for cases that speech therapists cannot treat. Once Alverson realized that Lee had been “tongue-tied” his entire life, she recommended the surgery. “The next day his tongue was released and on the fifth day he had his high F,” she recalled.⁵¹ Interestingly, although Alverson knew that Lee’s initial difficulty was due to a medical condition, her “Lee Tung Foo” chapter in *Sixty Years of California Song* subscribed to the belief that Chinese people were somehow genetically limited in their vocal abilities. Her pupil was the demonstration that such belief was unfounded, yet she did not use him as an opportunity to challenge the stereotype.

This deeply racist logic was so prevalent that many Chinese American artists ended up exploiting it for their own benefit. By going with the assumption that, according to the average American, their race would prevent them from achieving high artistic standards, they emphasized their Chineseness to frame their singing as exceptional. Consequently, white audiences saw their preconceptions substantiated by the logic of “the exception that confirms the rule” and could enjoy consuming the performance as if it were a freak act. An anonymous reporter for *The Billboard* articulated this interpretative framework upon reviewing one of Lee Tung Foo’s Chinese American colleagues on the vaudeville circuit. He called Fong Can Chow a “Chinese

⁵⁰ Alverson, *Sixty Years*, 166.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

marvel” and “phenomenal freak” due to his “clear sweet cultivated voice that would do credit to many of the occidental singers.”⁵² Theatre reviewers commented on Lee’s vocal skills from exactly the same perspective. “Strangest of all,” wrote a reporter from San Francisco, “this Mongolian prodigy [...] has grasped with marvelous accuracy the laws of harmonics and the fundamental technique of the [voice] work.”⁵³

In 1898, the *San Francisco Chronicle* announced that Frank Lee, “a young Chinese student at the Lincoln High School [...] has seriously commenced study for the operatic stage.” According to the reporter, Lee trusted his capacities to the point that “he told his friends he would be ready to end his life should he fail in his ambition to sing in grand opera.” While recognizing “the obstacles that stand in the way because of his race,” Lee was confident he would “overcome them by his artistic success.”⁵⁴ However, Lee’s hopes were soon crushed. Instead of starting a career in opera, in 1905 he debuted in a second-class vaudeville theatre in Oakland, then a heavy industrial, working-class town.⁵⁵ Economic instability might have played a role in his decision to accept his first vaudeville engagement. As Alverson explained, “he could not work and had no money.” He had become so disconsolate that she had to take “things into [her] own hands.”⁵⁶ Thus, as a favor to Alverson, Mr. Carlton, manager of the Empire Theatre in Oakland, heard Lee sing on October 24, 1904. “He doubted him being Chinese,” Alverson

⁵² *The Billboard*, May 23, 1908, 14.

⁵³ “Remarkable Musical Talent of a Chinese Native Son,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, June 3, 1898. Notice how “Mongolian” and “Chinese” are conflated within the same identity. Jue Quon Tai was similarly billed across different geographical locations and ethnic referents. See discussion of Jue’s supposed “Tartar” heritage on page 179–80.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ As noted by Alverson in her diary, Lee Tung Foo’s vaudeville debut was at the Empire Theatre in Oakland on January 30, 1905.

⁵⁶ Alverson, *Sixty Years*, 165.

recalled, but she “assured him he was. ‘Well certainly he shows his training,’ was the reply. He was immediately engaged.”⁵⁷

Lee Tung Foo’s vaudeville repertoire included American popular tunes such as the hit “Arrah-Wanna;” Irish patriotic songs such as “When Ireland’s Free,” and “My Irish Molly;” Scottish and German drinking songs; traditional Chinese or Chinese-themed songs that he sang in Chinese, English, or both; and liturgic or operatic arias in Latin, English, and French, most notably, the “Pro Peccatis” from Gioacchino Rossini’s *Stabat Mater* and “The Armorer’s Song” from Harry B. Smith and Reginald de Koven’s comic opera *Robin Hood*. He sang opera in elegant tuxedos and American songs either in a Western-style suit or Chinese robe depending on their content (fig. 3.2). For example, he impersonated a Civil War soldier willing to die for his homeland in Julian Edwards and Stanislaus Strange’s “My Own United States” whereas he sang Jean Schwartz and William Jerome’s “Chinatown, My Chinatown” wearing an elaborate Mandarin-style costume and adding a chorus in Chinese for the audience to sing along (fig. 3.3).⁵⁸ He must have played these characters in quick succession almost in the style of a quick-change artist. As a publicity brochure stated, his act was an “olio in one” lasting only twelve minutes.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ This list of songs has been compiled from reviews of Lee Tung Foo’s act, letters to Alverson, and loose papers titled “Songs Lee Tung Foo has studied” (B 761 f 4) in Alverson’s archival collection.

⁵⁹ A copy of this brochure was submitted as affidavit to the Bureau of Immigration. See discussion on page 195. “Lee Tung Foo The Chinese Harry Lauder,” promotional brochure, Lee Tung Foo’s immigration file, CEACF New York City.



Fig. 3.2: “Lee Tung Foo, The Only Original Chinese Baritone Entertainer,” postcard. Margaret Blake Alverson Collection, Correspondence B 710, California State Library.



Fig. 3.3: Lee Tung Foo in traditional Chinese dress, publicity photograph, 1921. California History Room, Picture Collection, Portraits, California State Library.

Less than two years after his vaudeville debut, Lee left for a tour of the United Kingdom. His personal letterhead during this time defined him as the “World’s Only Chinese Vocal Entertainer Extant—Refined Novelty Singing Act,” and described his repertoire with two quotes from press notices, one reading “Hear him ask the Audience to join the Chinese Chorus!” and the other, “There are Chinese Conjurers and Magicians. But this is a Chinaman, who, in full National Costume, sings popular Baritone Songs with telling effect, and Irish Comedy Songs with an Irish Brogue.”⁶⁰ Among the Irish songs on this tour, he sang “My Irish Rose” in English and French, “not to mention a snatch of his native tongue [*sic*]” according to a local reporter.⁶¹ Lee was so impressive in his rendition of “My Irish Rose” that going to the London Alhambra as a spectator one night, the usher recognized him from the previous program and asked, “how is Rosie [*sic*] tonight?” Baffled but pleased, he reported the incident to Alverson as proof of his success abroad.⁶²

Back in the United States, Lee proudly announced he had “a good variety routine of song Chinese, valse, Irish, Scottish and a number in German if required for encore.”⁶³ In April 1914, he listed the songs included in this diverse program: “Sooy Seene Fa,” “I am a Fool who

⁶⁰ Lee to Alverson, London, November 24, 1908. Correspondence B 710, MBAC. All quotes from Lee Tung Foo’s letters to Margaret Blake Alverson are reported *verbatim*. Grammatical and spelling errors have not been marked to avoid unnecessary interruptions to the sentence flow. I would not attribute Lee’s poor written English to lack of education—as the *San Francisco Chronicle* article I quoted earlier claimed, he had been a student at San Francisco’s Lincoln High School. His clumsy writing might have been caused by haste, exhaustion, or lack of paper supplies. He often wrote quickly during breaks between shows or late at night after performing in three or four consecutive shows. Oftentimes it is visible that his abbreviations and missing words tried to save space on the page.

⁶¹ Handwritten transcript of an article appeared in the British newspaper *The Chronicle*. Lee to Alverson, London, January 29, 1909.

⁶² Lee to Alverson, London, November 24, 1908.

⁶³ Lee to Alverson, Milwaukee, February 10, 1914.

Believed in You,” “Turkish Opal,” “Maggie Free,” and “Kuss mich gute Nacht.”⁶⁴ The Scotch character song for which he became famous was a medley of “some of the Harry Lauder song choruses.”⁶⁵ He had it composed for six dollars—the equivalent of one third of a week’s salary for an entertainer of his level of recognition—which led him to note to Alverson, “you see it cost money to make it.”⁶⁶ Lee did not see Harry Lauder perform until the Scottish singer came to Chicago in November 1914.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, he was able to develop a Scottish impersonation which won him praises and the title of “Chinese Harry Lauder.”⁶⁸ In March 1914, a Scottish colleague “came up and asked if I ever have been to Scotland and I said no [...] he said that I am doing a good Scotch and he think I’ll be a big hit in Scotland if I ever go over there.”⁶⁹ His fellow performer did not exactly say that Lee was a good imitation of Lauder, but he did think that his Scottish impersonation was “good” or perhaps enough of a novelty to be “a big hit in Scotland.”⁷⁰ Other colleagues confirmed: “they all said around the stage ‘[Lee]’s an actor beside singer’ ha! ha!”⁷¹ Such comments validated Lee in that they showed appreciation for his abilities to *act* more than to *imitate* a character. In fact, as he told Alverson, the peculiarity of his

⁶⁴ Lee to Alverson, Chicago, Monday After Easter, 1914.

⁶⁵ Lee to Alverson, Chicago, April 24, 1914.

⁶⁶ Lee to Alverson, Chicago, June 2, 1914.

⁶⁷ On November 22, 1914 Lee wrote to Alverson from Chicago: “I heard Harry Lauder twice last week only cost me 50 cents, he did pretty well and he sang a different routine every night. He kept the stage over an hour each time.”

⁶⁸ In September 1918, Lee sent Alverson a postcard from Hartford, Connecticut with a newspaper clipping that called him “Chinese Harry Lauder.” This title must have been circulating for a few years already. Lee reported it on his letterhead and jokingly signed some of his 1914 letters to Alverson as “The Chinese Harry Lauder.” He must have thought the title was extremely funny; he even sketched himself as Harry Lauder in his letter to Alverson on November 15, 1915. That was the day before he saw Lauder perform in Chicago.

⁶⁹ Lee to Alverson, Chicago, March 19, 1914.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

performance was not the imitation part but his use of dialects, costumes, and “the quaint way I deliver the songs.”⁷²

Encouraged by his colleagues’ positive reactions to his acting, Lee progressively added comedy bits to his singing act. He recorded some of his jokes for Alverson: “I don’t sing like Harry but I can sing Louder!” and “there is one thing I can safely say and that is I go better in Scotland than [Lauder] would in China. That’s a cinch, u may not believe it, but there is some Scotch in me, honest, nearly half a pint!”⁷³ He eventually completed the act with a Scottish kilt (fig. 3.4). The costume, as he claimed, was not meant to trick the audience into believing that he was a real Scotsman. Instead, Lee emphasized the discord of racial referents between his Asian facial features and Scottish get-up by fusing the traditional Highland dress—a tartan kilt and sash, knee-socks, a sporran suspended at the waist, and a feather on the bonnet—with Chinese elements such as an elaborately embroidered shirt (in lieu of a plain jacket and bodice) and a tight-fitting round bonnet (in lieu of a Glengarry bonnet). The combination might have had a double purpose. On one hand, Lee might have hoped to stand out among both the racial comedians and the Chinese American singers on the vaudeville circuit.⁷⁴ In fact, while racial comedians and Chinese American singers were common, a Chinese American who could *both* sing and mimic other races was a rare sight. On the other hand, by retaining Chinese elements in his costume and, possibly, by going for comical effect (his kilt is certainly too short and the

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Lee to Alverson, Chicago, November 30, 1914; Janesville, Wisconsin, September 25, 1914. These jokes were most likely outsourced to comedy writers. In a letter from Chicago on April 18, 1914 Lee Tung Foo wrote: “I made arrangements with a writer who is working on a line of funny talk and funny medley for me [...] He played in the same theatre here with me a few weeks ago and he liked my act very much and he liked the way I deliver my songs and talk so he got the idea from my act and he’ll try to fit words in before or after my songs.”

⁷⁴ Lee to Alverson, Chicago, March 19, 1914.

sporrans too long), Lee might have paid homage to Harry Lauder. When performing in the United States, Lauder “americanized” his Scottish outfit and made it look comical by pairing it with riding boots (in place of Scottish brogues) and gauntlets, an oversized medal on his chest, and a mock-up of a Civil War Sergeant’s chevrons (the inverted v-shaped stripes) on his sleeves (fig. 3.5). We might assume that this was the costume Lee saw Lauder wearing when he performed in Chicago, and surely the one that the White photography studio, where both Lee’s and Lauder’s publicity photographs were taken, would have suggested Lee approximate. Thus, by wearing his costume in a ridiculously wrong size, and by mixing Scottish and Chinese dress items as Lauder mixed Scottish and American, Lee might have found his original way to imitate Lauder’s comical, hybrid style of racial impersonation while also preserving part of his Chinese identity.



Fig. 3.4: Lee Tung Foo in Scottish Highland costume, publicity photograph. White Studio, 1929. California History Room, Picture Collection, Portraits, California State Library.



Fig. 3.5: Harry Lauder in Scottish Highland costume, publicity photograph. White Studio, undated. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Diversity, originality, and surprise—or, in the jargon of the time, “novelty”—were the ingredients for a winning vaudeville show. Due to its unexpected juxtaposition of characters, the most “novel” of all vaudeville specialties, and the most recurrent one on a white vaudeville program, was racial impersonation. Visibly non-white impersonators took the definition of novelty to its extremes by creating visual contrasts between their own racial identity and the identities they impersonated. In the particular case of Chinese *singing* impersonators, the novelty effect came from both the ostensible clash of racial identities and the rare spectacle of their vocal skills. Beyond his clever use of costumes, Lee’s ability to sing in many languages, reproduce English accents, and impersonate other races/ethnicities demonstrated language proficiency and acting skills on top of his musical talent. For theatre reviewers, whom we may expect were mostly American-born whites, these skills added to the “novelty” of hearing an Asian man sing beautifully. A journalist for the *Newark Evening News*, for instance, was struck more by Lee’s command of English, German, and Chinese in his singing and “explanatory remarks” than what he judged as “ordinary [...] baritone voice.”⁷⁵ Similarly, Sime Silverman from *Variety* praised the “novelty and comedy value in his effort to catch an Irish brogue,” but about Lee’s vocal execution only wrote that “as a singer for serious consideration, Lee does not rank very high.”⁷⁶

In line with the same principle by which the appeal of Lee’s singing was predicated on his visible Chineseness, the success of his comedy depended on the incongruous relation it held with his Asian features. In other words, his jokes were not funny in and of themselves, but only

⁷⁵ *Newark Evening News*, December 18, 1906. The full quote reads: “This particular Celestial possesses a baritone of very ordinary quality but uses it in English, German, and Chinese songs in a way that, coupled with his explanatory remarks in English, provoked generous applause. His singing of ‘I Love and the World is Mine’, ‘In Tiefen Keller’ and ‘Molly, My Irish Molly’ would not ravish the aesthetic sense, but as showing his command of English and German and his ability to provide diverting entertainment is effective.”

⁷⁶ Sime Silverman, “Show of the Week by Sime,” *Variety*, September 29, 1906.

because they were told by a visibly Asian comedian. As one critic framed it, Lee Tung Foo “who is in his way also a comedian” was “greatly appreciated” because his “famous old Scottish drinking song [...] is on the face of things a marvelous performance for a Chinaman with all the insignia of his country upon him.”⁷⁷

If limited by these accounts, Lee’s ethnic songs, costumes, jokes, and language display would appear to be a deliberate tactic to succeed in an all-white entertainment industry that profited from racialized performance in its most exaggerated forms. However, while Lee’s racialized songs and characters were at least in part influenced by theatrical conventions and marketing strategies, his decade-long correspondence with Alverson reveals a fundamental fact about their origin and purpose: they were devised with the help of Lee’s many immigrant colleagues on the vaudeville circuit and performed for the entertainment of mostly immigrant audiences. This is a crucial point to make in order to differentiate between the reception that Lee got from white theatre critics and his international immigrant audiences. In fact, the different receptions reveal audiences’ different predilections and values: white spectators appreciated Lee’s racial masquerades for the way in which they validated widespread racial stereotypes, while immigrant audiences enjoyed seeing their cultures represented on mainstream American stages.

Lee Tung Foo had many colleagues of different nationalities, indeed so many that “if they all come together will start a war.”⁷⁸ For example, in Grand Forks, North Dakota he shared

⁷⁷ *Lawrence Sun*, January 22, 1907.

⁷⁸ Lee to Alverson, Bridgeport, CT September 26, 1915. Lee’s joke was a dark one. In September 1915, the United States had recently started their protest against German military submarines attempting to cut the supply lines between North America and Britain. This was shortly after Germany sank the passenger ship *Lusitania*, causing 198 civil deaths among whom many upstanding American citizens. President Woodrow Wilson refused to declare war immediately, but during the following weeks the issue was hotly debated within the US government and media.

the program with a Scotch, a German, and a French, and noted: “they all liked me [...] just think of the nationalities in it.”⁷⁹ A year later in Detroit, he met with one Irish and three Scottish friends, which prompted him to write to Alverson, “Scotland and Ireland and China come together once and awhile.”⁸⁰ By reading Lee’s letters, we learn that it was his “Irish friend Pat White” who “gave [him] a copy of his Irish song ‘When Ireland’s Free,’” and that his “Scotch friend of Wilkes-Barre, Pa, [was] looking up an old Scotch comedy song for [him], even he sent to Scotland to enquire about it.”⁸¹ As Lee often noted, he was careful to select his repertoire of racial jokes and national songs according to the most highly represented ethnicities in a given audience. For instance, he would offer “some whiskey gags” for the Irish “in place [of] ‘Kuss mich gute Nacht’ when [there are] very few Germans.”⁸² Conversely, “Kuss mich gute Nacht” was “a regular kicker” in the German Jewish section of Brooklyn: here, Lee noticed, “there are lots of Germans,” and “the lady of the bakery say I am a ‘German’ singer [...] she understood all the words I was singing.”⁸³

Lee’s responsiveness to the immigrants in the audience also hints at a wider phenomenon, namely, the racial segregation between first- and second-class vaudeville houses. The range of performance genres and ticket prices have conventionally been credited with attracting diverse audiences to vaudeville theatres; however, to affirm that vaudeville theatres were egalitarian performance spaces would conceal the fundamental division between so-called “big-time” and

⁷⁹ Lee to Alverson, Grand Forks, ND October 6, 1914.

⁸⁰ Lee to Alverson, Wilkes-Barre, PA October 6, 1915.

⁸¹ Lee to Alverson, Milwaukee, February 14, 1914; New York, October 30, 1915.

⁸² Lee to Alverson, New York City, October 31, 1915.

⁸³ Lee to Alverson, New York City, February 13, 1916.

“small-time” circuits. These were run by different management agencies, hosted in more or less elegant houses, and offered at widely different prices. Vaudeville audiences were thus racially, economically, and socially segregated between costly shows in elegant theatres on big-time circuits, and much cheaper shows in smaller, often dingy theatres on small-time circuits.⁸⁴ This segregation has not been the center of attention in much of vaudeville historiography which, due to source accessibility, has been concerned primarily with big-time enterprises. Lee Tung Foo’s correspondence is a precious source to study the workings of small-time circuits, theatres, and artists in opposition to the big-time businesses that canonical vaudeville historiography has so far documented.

From 1906 to 1918, Lee toured small- and medium-sized American towns and immigrant neighborhoods. In these places, he found immigrant audiences from a variety of backgrounds: some did not speak English at all, and many, according to his definition, were “rough” and disturbingly “noisy.” In Chicago, for instance, he “went well with all kind of foreigners out there,” but in New York City the “foreigners hardly understand English.”⁸⁵ Playing near New York City’s Chinatown, he complained: “the audiences are noisy, I couldn’t hear myself at all.”⁸⁶ In Chester, Pennsylvania, his frustration with the “rough” German population turned into blunt racism when he lamented: “I had to sing hard to pull those Huns along.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Alison M. Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Arthur F. Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁸⁵ Lee to Alverson, Chicago, April 23, 1914.

⁸⁶ Lee to Alverson, Philadelphia, March 10, 1916.

⁸⁷ Lee to Alverson (postcard), Chester, PA March 1916.

Hopping from town to town, Lee did not have time to rest properly. Unlike artists on big-time circuits, he was not reimbursed for travel expenses, was often forced to journey overnight, and performed with no rehearsals just hours after getting off the train. Most of his engagements were for the so-called “four-a-day,” or cheap vaudeville theatres hosting four shows daily from noon to midnight. On account of the tight schedule, not only was his voice strained, but he would get sick while waiting in cold and overcrowded dressing rooms between the programs. In Detroit, he “didn’t sing well [...], these 4 a day got my throat, one thing it is too early for anyone to do well at around noon and very light audiences to sing to.”⁸⁸ Similarly, he “lost couple of low notes” in Brooklyn “on account of noisy audiences and I haven’t been rest properly.”⁸⁹ In this theatre, he even dressed in the stage manager’s property room, “dressing among tools of all kinds, but better than in to the cellar of cold and damp dressings.”⁹⁰

In these and similar theatres, the upper-middle class, white, American-born members of the population were infrequent patrons, which explains why Lee was not preoccupied with reporting their reactions in his letters to Alverson. Reading Lee’s impersonations as assimilationist or conceived only to please white audiences with the rare performance of an Asian-looking person singing and mimicking other races is a reduction that Lee’s own writing demystifies. The “novelty effect” certainly dominated reviews of Lee’s act, but it also betrayed the whiteness of the reporters, who clearly only measured Lee’s talent against his Asian looks. By contrasting these reports with Lee’s own perceptions of his immigrant audiences’ response, it is apparent that “novelty” was not the effect that he was the most eager to achieve. On the

⁸⁸ Lee to Alverson, Detroit, September 9, 1914.

⁸⁹ Lee to Alverson, Brooklyn, January 27, 1916.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

contrary, he emphasized the virtuosity of his voice and the accuracy with which he rendered national songs and characters as the products of diligent study. Such commitment to education and objective representation challenged assumptions about Chinese people's lack of vocal ability and training, albeit only for the immigrant members of the audience.

In his letters, Lee frequently lamented over the pursuit of novelty being the sole driving element in the performances by his Chinese American competitors in vaudeville. These singers allegedly copied his blend of vocal display and racial impersonation only to profit from the act's novelty value and compensate for their lack of musical education.⁹¹ In Lee's own articulation, in lacking his own "natural way on the stage [...] clear pronunciation [and] dialects" they "entertain[ed] just because they are Chinese."⁹² Lee's criticism in some cases got to the point of resentment against the unsophisticated singers who, in his view, compromised the image of the entire Chinese American community. Lee described breaking top notes, bad phrasing, and emotionless singing as more than harmless mistakes; in fact, poor technique risked authenticating the stereotype of the unmusical Chinese while also supporting an image of Chinese and Chinese American people as uneducated and unrefined. For example, Lee reported that the reason why "'Liu Mon Kim' broke his top notes" was that "he smoked a lot and [...] put on lots of airs too."⁹³ As this remark suggests, Lee evaluated music technique in conjunction with etiquette—in other words, one can only sing gracefully when restraining from graceless

⁹¹ In a letter dated January 22, 1906 Lee wrote: "By the way, did I tell you about a Chinese boy called on me in Boston first few days told me he is the original Chinese ragtime singer, I wonder, he did copy a little idea from me one little trick of talk, if I catch him doing it, I'll wring his legs off and shut him mouth up [...] so he look out, if I catch him or hear of him doing it. He'll hear from me. They are all thieves any way."

⁹² Lee to Alverson, Janesville, WI September 25, 1914.

⁹³ Lee to Alverson, Chicago, July 22, 1914.

behaviors. The inverse logic was also true for Lee: as unrefined behavior made the voice sound bad, so bad sounds made a performer look vulgar. In the case of Jue Quon Tai, her musical inexperience manifesting with bad phrasing and breathing between syllables led Lee to condemn her for behaviors that had nothing to do with musical execution but nonetheless compromised the reputation of Chinese Americans—namely, traveling unchaperoned and marrying a Jew.⁹⁴

The pervasive racism that characterized the world of highbrow performing arts likely prevented Lee from showcasing his skills for opera audiences. Nevertheless, he continued to believe in musical education not simply as a way to make a living or achieve popularity, but as a responsibility towards the Chinese community in the United States. Indeed, while novelty stirred the audience interest in the absence of talent or formal training, technique could be equated with refinement and defy belittling stereotypes. Yet the freedom to pursue technique over novelty could only be found on small-time circuits and came at the expense of musically uneducated publics, lower salaries, and poor working conditions. Conversely, on big-time circuits, more cultivated audiences and higher salaries came at the expense of being objectified as an Oriental “freak.” Lee put it on the level of musical skill: going for an impeccable execution was not worth the effort when faced with audiences expecting to watch a novelty act.

Lee might have understood this logic and purposely chosen not to undermine his technique for the pleasure of white audiences. However, his delight in sometimes “hav[ing] a chance to sing for a better class of people,” and his outrage at seeing his copycat colleagues all getting more prestigious engagements suggest that he may have tried to advance to big-time

⁹⁴ Lee to Alverson, New York City, December 28, 1915; New York City, October 17, 1916. This was Jue Quon Tai’s first husband. She was later married to a film director in New York City. See page 173.

circuits, though he never succeeded.⁹⁵ For instance, both Jue Quon Tai and the Chung Hwa Comedy Four, a quartet of Chinese American singers specializing in popular Tin Pan Alley songs, performed at the Palace and Majestic Theatres, the most exclusive vaudeville houses in New York City and Chicago respectively. Coincidentally, one of the members of the Chung Hwa Comedy Four was Lee's younger brother Henry. Judging from Alverson's diaries, Henry was not as talented or hardworking as Lee. He took a few lessons with Alverson but at the first occasion he quit his training to pursue a career in entertainment. In his letters to Alverson, Lee often reported his frustration at his brother for not taking music more seriously. As Henry's quartet performed at the Chicago Majestic Theatre and Lee was engaged in the "four-a-day" in the same city, he wrote: "I tell you that they are singing worse than ever the tenor is off all the time last week at the Majestic here they were off pitch all the week, and Henry knows it but couldn't help it."⁹⁶

Because of his Chinese features and *despite* his vocal skills, Lee was unable to close the gap between lowbrow and highbrow performing arts and venues. The unexpected juxtaposition between his raced body and his masterful voice—his inescapable novelty, as I define it—confined him to the realm of lower-class popular performance. This ultimately confirms the great divide between "legitimate" and popular performance in the early-twentieth-century United States, all the while demonstrating the difficulty for an artist of Chinese descent to extricate vocal execution from racial identity.

⁹⁵ Lee to Alverson, Spokane, WA May 23, 1905.

⁹⁶ Lee to Alverson, Chicago, August 30, 1914.

As Adam Ainsworth, Oliver Double, and Louise Peacock demonstrated in their 2017 collected edition *Popular Performance*, “the Great Divide continues to separate popular performance from legitimate theatre.”⁹⁷ This divide today cuts sharply across comedic genres, with comic drama on one side and improv/stand-up comedy on the other. It may suffice to consider how live, especially improvised comedy is listed separately from other theatrical events in newspapers and magazines. The popular performance that gets “listed separately” is one that, according to Ainsworth, Double, and Peacock, connects performer and audience directly, emphasizes both novelty and skill, and interlaces performer and role in deep ways.⁹⁸ These three elements appeared prominently in immigrant racial impersonation, a type of performance that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was similarly “kept separate” from legitimate theatre. The workings of performer-audience connection have been a theme in my analysis of Kate Elinore’s grotesque comedy in Chapter 2. Lee Tung Foo is a productive case to illustrate the mechanisms of novelty and skill. The next section will conclude with a discussion of the link between performer and role in Jue Quon Tai’s impersonations.

While by definition novelty has negative associations—it can be a “useless or trivial object” per *The Oxford English Dictionary*—popular performers embrace it eagerly to generate unexpected juxtapositions. Unexpected juxtapositions were *inescapable* for Chinese American singing impersonators due to the visual clash between their own race, the racial identities represented, and the rare spectacle of a Chinese-looking artist displaying singing abilities. A basic difference between Lee Tung Foo and his Chinese American competitors can be observed

⁹⁷ Adam Ainsworth, Oliver Double, and Louise Peacock eds., *Popular Performance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

in the degree to which they complied with their inescapable novelty: while his competitors embraced it, Lee tried to deemphasize it as much as possible. Ainsworth, Double, and Peacock distinguish between popular performers, who always take the opportunity to make novelty conspicuous, and legitimate artists, who would consider novelty to be degrading. Lee was caught in between: he was inescapably novel because of his Chinese identity and work as singing impersonator, yet he tried to “normalize” his race and skills so that his talent could be appreciated beyond the framework of racial rarity.

For Lee, novelty and skill stood at opposite ends of the aesthetic spectrum, with novelty representing the most corrupted and skill the most praiseworthy art. His Chinese features and heritage did not allow for his stage work to be admired exclusively for the high level of skill involved. Thus, the case of Lee Tung Foo contradicts Ainsworth, Double, and Peacock’s theorization of skill and novelty as necessarily connected elements. They write:

Another strategy for winning the audience’s approval [is] to present them with a display of skill. Bim Mason argues that, ‘Quite rightly, a popular audience won’t have much time for a performer until he or she shows them to be capable of doing something out of the ordinary—merely acting is not enough.’ [...] As with novelty, skill has to be correctly framed for maximum impact, because there is no direct correlation between the difficulty of a stunt and the amount of applause it will receive.⁹⁹

According to this definition, skill is like novelty in that it must be framed as “out of the ordinary” to achieve “maximum impact.” Such interpretation, however, does not imply the reverse logic—that for it to have the maximum impact, skill must be “novel” or defy expectations. Yet this reverse logic is the only one applicable to artists whose racial identity is considered part of the performance. For Chinese American vaudeville singers, vocal skills could never be simply “out

⁹⁹ Ibid., 17.

of the ordinary;” the stereotype of the unmusical Chinese was so pervasive that to demonstrate even the most basic singing technique was to be perceived as defying racial expectations. This made Chinese American singers not just *skilled* but also and always a racialized *novelty*.

Whether in big- or small-time vaudeville, the unexpected juxtaposition between Chinese American artists’ raced bodies and masterful voices—their inescapable novelty—ultimately confined them to the realm of popular performance for at least a century, with little to no opportunity to cross over to the dramatic, operatic, or concert stage. Hollywood offered a chance to enter the mainstream, as the case of Anna May Wong (born Wong Liu Tsong) demonstrated. Wong was the first Chinese American Hollywood movie star, as well as the first Chinese American performer to gain international prominence. Yet how do we evaluate the political possibilities of performances by Chinese American actors when they gain recognition only as signifiers of the “foreign”? In the early-twentieth century, two films featuring Anna May Wong initiated what have since become the two poles defining Asian American womanhood as different from white womanhood: the “lotus flower” and the “dragon lady” archetypes. In *Toll of the Sea* (1922), Wong is the servile and suicidal Asian woman. At the opposite end of the spectrum, in *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) Wong plays a slave girl whose excessive sexuality defines both her Asianness and her femininity. Similarly, Chinese American men were only cast in villain roles or, as Wong put it, for “murderous, treacherous, a snake in the grass” type of villain. Wong admitted: “I was tired of the parts I had to play. [...] I got so weary of it all—of the scenarists’ conceptions of the Chinese character.”¹⁰⁰ As Jue Quon Tai’s work will exemplify

¹⁰⁰ Anna May Wong, cited in Celine Perrenas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 58.

in the following section, this kind of representation was incredibly hard to overcome, and especially so for Chinese American women performing in mainstream venues.

Jue Quon Tai, “A Little Princess from China”¹⁰¹

Unlike Lee Tung Foo, Jue Quon Tai embraced her inescapable novelty and profited from the heightened Orientalism of her self-representation. She started her singing career in the winter of 1915 and from the small theatres in the Seattle-Portland area where she grew up, she was quickly projected onto the national big-time vaudeville scene.¹⁰² She toured extensively in the United States and Canada on the Orpheum and Keith’s circuits until 1926. After her second marriage to Jewish American painter and film director Harry Lachman, she established contacts in France to study operatic singing.¹⁰³ According to her immigration file, this was her last trip abroad. Back in the United States, she appeared in a handful of films but, as was the case for Lee Tung Foo, her desired transition to the concert stage never took place.

On the occasion of Jue’s vaudeville debut, *The Evening World* publicized the coming of “A Bit of Oriental Fairyland in the Heart of New York.”¹⁰⁴ A few months later, *The Washington*

¹⁰¹ “Feature Acts in Bill at Keith’s,” *Boston Daily Globe*, February 6, 1923, 6.

¹⁰² I reconstruct Jue Quon Tai’s biography, vaudeville career, and reception using theatre reviews and her immigration files: RG 85, Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files, 1880–1960, B 350 f 105/813, National Archives and Record Administration, New York City; B 1329 f 39730/1-1, National Archives and Record Administration, Seattle.

¹⁰³ In 1922, the French government decorated Harry Lachman with the Cross of the Legion of Honor for his artistic achievements, hence Jue’s contacts in France. “Harry Lachman, A Film Director,” *New York Times*, March 21, 1975, 40. Jue’s first husband, Jerome Selig, was also Jewish and, presumably for this reason, was never introduced to Jue’s family. In a pre-investigation interview in January 1923, Jue gave the wrong date for her first marriage but went back to the office three days later to correct herself. When questioned about the reason for her initial lie, she admitted that her sister, also present during the first interview, knew that she had married much later than she actually did, and that her mother had not been informed. The immigration officer thus presumed that was because her mother wanted her to marry a Chinese man, which Jue shyly confirmed. Jue Quon Tai’s immigration file, CEACF Seattle.

¹⁰⁴ “Princess Jue-Quon Tai, Little Mandarin Maid, Likes American Slang,” *The Evening World*, December 10, 1915.

Herald announced: “It is claimed by the Keith authorities that Princess Jue Quon Tai is a real, genuine, simon-pure lady of the royal blood of the quondam Celestial empire.”¹⁰⁵ According to these reports, Jue was so genuinely Chinese that she was quoted saying: “American people think chop seuy [*sic*] is a Chinese dish. The first time I heard of it was when I came to America last June.”¹⁰⁶ Contrary to her debut publicity, Jue Quon Tai was a California-born Chinese American like Lee Tung Foo.¹⁰⁷ She grew up as Rose Eleanor Jewell in Portland, where her father was concurrently assistant manager and treasurer of a Chinese trading firm, collector for the city’s Electric Light and Gas Company, and a real estate agent. Mr. Jue Sue was registered as a Chinese immigrant of the exempt trading class, and as it is implied by the social status of the friends and colleagues who testified for him with the Immigration Bureau on several occasions, he was a point of reference for the Chinese community in Portland. His wife Ng Boo Toe was a Chinese American born in San Francisco. They were married in pomp in the presence of both Chinese and American friends, a practice only observed by the wealthiest and best-connected Chinese American families.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ “Theatrical Briefs,” *The Washington Herald*, April 30, 1916, 4.

¹⁰⁶ “Princess Travels Alone in America,” *The Washington Times*, December 15, 1915, 12.

¹⁰⁷ Jue’s date and place of birth cannot be identified with certainty. In her first interview with the Bureau of Immigration in 1911, she claimed she was born on November 21, 1895 in Portland but in the several interviews that followed until 1938, she affirmed she was born in Los Angeles and variably on December 21, 1897, 1898, or 1901. Her immigration files do not include a copy of her birth certificate, which is likely why at each interview witnesses were called in to testify on her American nativity. While it is impossible to know for sure why she gave so many different birth dates, my guess is that her father instructed her not to provide details about a time in their family history in which he went bankrupt in Los Angeles. Jue never mentioned this in interviews, but her brother John did. He declared: “We did not come direct to Portland, came to San Francisco and lived there a number of years. [...] My father was in the butcher business in Los Angeles. He could not read and write and kept a bookkeeper. He went broke down there and came to San Francisco to start up again.” Herbert Jewell, or John Jue, Interview, February 15, 1922, Jue Quon Tai’s immigration file, CEACF Seattle.

¹⁰⁸ Before their trip to China, Jue Quon Tai, her sister Jue Young, and their mother applied for return certificates with the Bureau of Immigration in Seattle. Two of Mr. Jue’s business partners and the Chinese Consul Moy Back

In 1910, at the age of fifteen and eighteen respectively, Jue Quon Tai and her sister Jue Young went to China to complete their education. They sailed from Seattle with their mother, who chaperoned them until they got settled living in Canton. Shortly after Ng Boo Toe left to return to the US, Jue quit her studies and started travelling around China by herself. While she was at the theatre in Hong Kong one night, someone broke into her hotel room and stole all her documents, jewels, and clothing. Having no proof of identity to be readmitted in the United States or money to continue her travels, she wired her father for help. To ease Jue's readmission, Mr. Jue warned the Bureau of Immigration in Seattle that his now-undocumented sixteen-year-old daughter would be travelling back from China alone. On the day Jue landed, the Seattle Inspector in Charge confirmed her identity as Jue Sue's daughter. To the question "How do you like China as a place for an American girl to live?" she promptly replied, "I don't like it."¹⁰⁹

Jue expressed the same sentiment in an interview for the *Seattle Times* which the Inspector in Charge clipped and saved with the transcript of her interrogation. The anonymous reporter who met her at the dock asked about her experience in China. "Miss Rose Eleanor Jue, the most independent little niece of Uncle Sam that ever traveled over 5000 miles of ocean without a chaperone to get back to the good old United States" declared that "Webfoot Town is good enough for her." In Jue's words, the Cantonese educational methods were "too slow" for her Western mental capacities trained in "bookkeeping, shorthand and banking at a Portland business college." So she quit the school in Canton and "devoted the rest of her time in China to traveling." "Never again China for me," Jue concluded, adding that she would never again visit a

Hin offered their testimonies to confirm the American nativity of the three women. Jue Sue, immigration interview, April 11, 1910, Jue Quon Tai's immigration file, CEACF Seattle.

¹⁰⁹ Jue Quon Tai, immigration interview, April 11, 1910, Jue Quon Tai's immigration file, CEACF Seattle.

country “where they make a girl wear trousers whether she wants to or not, and let the men and boys strut around in perfectly gorgeous skirts.” This explains why, once on the ship, she “just hated to go up the gang plank in trousers,” the only garment that she was able to buy after she was robbed in Hong Kong.¹¹⁰ The article is accompanied by a full-page photograph of Jue in a pensive pose, one hand supporting her temple and the other holding a fan decorated with the image of a traditionally clothed Chinese woman (fig. 3.6). Like the woman on her fan, Jue is wearing a richly embroidered tunic with a high stiff collar. The trousers underneath the tunic are barely visible from her seated position.



Fig. 3.6: “Niece of Uncle Sam is Glad to Get Back Home,” *Seattle Times*, undated. RG 85: Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files 1880–1960, B 1329 f 39730/1-1. National Archives and Record Administration, Seattle, WA.

¹¹⁰ “Niece of Uncle Sam is Glad to Get Back Home,” *Seattle Times*, undated, Jue Quon Tai’s immigration file, CEACF Seattle.

This article, aptly titled “Niece of Uncle Sam is Glad to Get Back Home” is intriguing for three reasons. First, it invites one to think why it was written in the first place. Was a sixteen-year-old Chinese American girl traveling unchaperoned such a sensation for Seattle readers? It certainly was, but even more so was the assertion, coming from a person of Chinese descent, that the United States was a better place to live than China. Jue’s complaints about the Chinese “slow educational methods” and odd gender conventions in clothing framed China as a backward, uncivilized country. By quoting Jue directly, the article not only placed the United States above China as an economic and cultural power but proved that this superiority was apparent also to the Chinese. Jue Quon Tai and her sensational travels thus allowed the journalist to make a broader point: due to the United States’ unquestionable superiority, “Americanization” was going to be the inevitable outcome for American citizens of Chinese descent. In fact, compared to the 1877 California State Senate’s address on the unassimilability of the Chinese, this article shows a stark change in public opinion regarding the children of Chinese descent who were born and raised in the United States.

Secondly, the fact that a copy of this article survives in Jue’s immigration file prompts questions regarding public media’s influence over immigration administration. Although Jue was missing her passport when she landed, the Inspector in Charge did not request any additional testimonies. Her young age and her father’s cautionary letter to the Bureau certainly helped her case, but of even greater significance, I would argue, was her interview with the local newspaper. In keeping with Chief Justice George Sutherland’s articulation at the beginning of this chapter, the Inspector in Charge may have based his “common understanding” of Jue’s race on her public claims of America’s superiority for the *Seattle Times*. In other words, showing her predilection for American education, fashion, and gender mores may have been less official than submitting

an American birth certificate, yet for immigration inspectors it was enough to make her a “niece” to Uncle Sam—an “in-law” to America who, despite her biological Chinese parents, was sufficiently assimilated to prefer the United States over China.

Lastly, the article’s content and photograph are striking in contrast to later reviews and images of Jue Quon Tai in her vaudeville act. In the space of only four years, Jue went from being the “Niece of Uncle Sam” to “the Only Chinese Nightingale.”¹¹¹ Comparably, both the *Seattle Times* article and the origin stories published for her vaudeville debut highlight Jue’s defiance of Chinese traditional gender roles. As the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* revealed in 1915, she supposedly “fled to America when her rich father tried to make her marry a man she did not love.”¹¹² However, while Jue’s liberal views are the product of her American upbringing in the Seattle piece, later reviews frame her progressivism as a reaction to the parental control and female subordination “typical” of Chinese culture. The change in portrayals is so significant that one questions the veracity of both. Was Jue Quon Tai really Chinese or American? Seeing how even the articles in which she is a “Chinese Princess” represent Chinese culture as vicious, it is safe to believe that Jue’s performance of Chineseness was only a stunt.

As Lee Tung Foo’s reception among white audiences has shown, exoticism was a profitable strategy to underscore the novelty value of a vaudeville act. While this was certainly due to white audiences’ prevalent racial ideologies, it was also the consequence of cultural and economic conceptions of Asianness that the Chinese Exclusion Act exacerbated. On a cultural level, people, objects, and practices recognized as “Oriental” in look or taste were situated in a

¹¹¹ “Jue Quon Tai,” *The Billboard*, December 18, 1915, 4.

¹¹² “US Wonderland, Cries Princess,” *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, December 19, 1915.

distant, almost legendary space embracing the entire Eastern hemisphere. Specifically, during this time of exotic “conspicuous consumption,” East Asian imperial history, arts, and philosophies were consumed by wealthy Americans as signs of their cultural sophistication.¹¹³ Edward Said would call such acts of consumption “Orientalism,” as they created a mythical, highbrow East that, essentially, was nothing but the expression of Westerners’ socio-economic status and cultural dominance over the East.¹¹⁴ This highbrow East stood in direct opposition to all that the Chinese Exclusion Act kept outside of American borders: the uneducated, unrefined, and “immoral” Chinese.

As a “Chinese” woman supposedly traveling alone to the United States, Jue needed to dismiss any suspicion that she could be a sex worker. Thus, posing as a “Chinese Princess” was not just a strategy to increase her novelty value but also the marketing solution to a problem that the Page and Chinese Exclusion Acts had created. In Jue’s fabulous origin stories, the only explicit ethnic or geographical referents—she was interchangeably “of old Tartar stock” or coming from “Peking”—were not meant to provide clear background information but only place the artist within a mythical imperial China that highbrow (or highbrow-posing) spectators would feel compelled to appreciate.¹¹⁵ In particular, because emperor Genghis Kahn incorporated the Tartar confederation into the Mongol Empire in the far thirteenth century, Americans still

¹¹³ I utilize the expression “conspicuous consumption” as in the theorizations by economist Thorstein Veblen to define the acquisition of luxury goods as a behavioral characteristics of the class of *nouveau riche* emerging during the Second Industrial Revolution between 1860 and 1920. Such acts of consumption displayed economic power as a way to gain access to social and cultural power. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1899).

¹¹⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

¹¹⁵ “Seven Vaudeville Acts at Pantages,” *The Irish standard*, February 03, 1917, Image 8; “The Theater,” *Detroit Free Press*, January 7, 1921, 6; “Chinese Princess Here,” *New York Times*, December 9, 1915, 10. “Peking” is the “Wade-Giles” transliteration while Beijing is the “Pinyin” transliteration of the Chinese capital. The Pinyin system was created under the auspices of the People’s Republic of China in the 1950s.

conflated China with Mongolia and associated the Tartar ethnic group of Northern and Central Asia with the most powerful Chinese empire. Thus, to claim that Jue was “of old Tartar stock” equated to saying that she came from the kind of far-reaching history that “Orientalizing” Westerners loved to consume.

On an economic level, the concurrent discrimination of Chinese immigrants and the appeal of highbrow East Asian art, history, and ideas incentivized American theater producers to employ East Asians on temporary visas over local Chinese American performers. While this was partly justified by the marketability of racial authenticity in the entertainment business, on a deeper level, it was a strategy to avoid reminding spectators of the “unamalgamable” presence of Chinese immigrants in the United States. Robert G. Lee offers the productive distinction between foreigners and aliens: while foreigners “are seen as innocuous and even desirable,” by declaring “no intention to leave” aliens are feared, discriminated, and ultimately removed.¹¹⁶ Performers on visiting visas were not only “authentic” but, because their presence was legally defined as temporary, they were also desirable. On the contrary, Chinese American artists and especially those “playing Chinese” confirmed for white audiences that the assimilation of the Chinese was close to impossible.

The high demand of so-called Chinese acts in vaudeville and circus during the Exclusion Era produced two outcomes. On one hand, it generated networks of legal professionals and theatre impresarios who worked out ways to circumvent the quotas for Chinese visitors. For instance, immigration lawyers such as Roger O’Donnell and Frank A. Cook exploited their connections to the Department of Commerce and Labor in order to assist theater managers in

¹¹⁶ Robert G. Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 3.

prolonging Chinese artists' visas on bonds.¹¹⁷ On the other hand, as Chinese American artists found that being “foreign” was a selling point, they often chose to pose as “genuine” East Asians to please their audiences and even to stand in for the “original” artists who were kept waiting at the border for days until a spot in the allotted quota would free up.

Jue Quon Tai followed precisely this strategy. Newspapers across the country announced her debut at the local vaudeville house with the pomp and fascination reserved for foreign royals. To substantiate her alleged Chinese origin, Jue appeared “in her own native costumes,” including the traditional pantaloons that she claimed to hate while living in China (fig. 3.7). As her appearance was more captivating than her mediocre voice, her vaudeville acts emphasized her extraordinary beauty over the vocal performance. A reviewer from the *Boston Daily Globe* asserted: “America is celebrated for its pretty women, but one should not overlook that little princess from China, Jue Quon Tai.”¹¹⁸ This journalist evaluated Jue’s elegance and charm on a scale according to which American feminine beauty typically ranks higher than Chinese beauty. On this scale, Jue placed herself above the average Chinese woman, a fact that defied reporters’ expectations.¹¹⁹ Thus, as Lee Tung Foo’s cultivated voice appeared almost as abnormal for his race, so Jue Quon Tai’s rare beauty further accentuated the novelty value of her performance.

¹¹⁷ Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theater*. Barnum and Baileys’ legal agent Frank A. Cook had been an investigator for the Department of Commerce and Labor for many years. The case of magician Ching Ling Foo is interesting. Ching came to the United States on a temporary visa to perform for the Omaha’s Trans-Mississippi Exposition of 1898 but did not return to China after his engagement was over. He and his troupe performed for the Keith-Albee vaudeville circuit until they were arrested for overstaying their visas. With help from a local lawyer and a representative from Chicago’s Chinese community, Ching was able to perform in vaudeville for a few more months before deportation. Over a decade after this incident, Ching Ling Foo returned to the United States with his troupe. Krystyn Moon argues that their engagement with vaudeville impresario Oscar Hammerstein triggered the creation of the bonding system. Krystyn R. Moon, “On a Temporary Basis: Immigration, Labor Unions, and the American Entertainment Industry, 1880s–1930s,” *Journal of American History* 99, no. 3 (2012): 771–92. 775–6.

¹¹⁸ “Feature Acts in Bill at Keith’s,” *Boston Daily Globe*, February 06, 1923, 6.

¹¹⁹ Nixola Greely-Smith for *The Washington Post* shared this sentiment. In her description, Jue was so “uncommonly” beautiful for her race that her slanted eyes were “oblique lines of light” and her Asian complexion



Fig. 3.7: Jue Quon Tai in traditional Chinese dress, publicity photograph. Davies Studio, undated. Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin.

was poetically characterized as “golden-flushed with carmine, as though the petals of crimson and yellow roses were blended in them.” Nixola Greeley-Smith, “Tiny Princess Bring-a-Brother, Who is a Runaway from China, Hopes to Stay in United States,” *The Washington Post*, December 19, 1915, E3.

On a sample of thirty reports between 1915 and 1925, only five include any information on Jue's singing. The *New York Tribune* summarized the "long stories in the papers" that announced "the presence of the Princess in New York," while about Jue's performance at the prestigious Palace Theatre it only mentioned that she sang in "a soprano voice and the English language."¹²⁰ For the *Washington Evening Star*, Jue was a contralto, not a soprano. Jue's voice might have changed with training, but considering that these reviews were written only a few months apart, it is more likely that neither journalists were paying much attention to her vocal execution.¹²¹ In Atlanta, "Princess Jue Quon Tai include[d] in her repertoire a number of native songs of exceptional sweetness," but the reviewer did not provide any titles or comments on the song selection.¹²² No information on Jue's musical repertoire was ever supplied until the very end of her vaudeville career in 1925. In a review for *The Billboard*, the journalist succinctly wrote: "Jue Quon Tai, accompanied by a male pianist, opened with a special tune entitled 'I Was a Fairy Queen When I Came From China.' [...] She follows with three other numbers, 'Somebody to Love,' 'Aloha,' and a special comedy number, rendered in a cabaret style."¹²³ Compared to the abundance of details on her Chinese origin and rare beauty, the scarcity of information regarding her tonality and song selection is striking. This imbalance suggests that the novelty of her Orientalized looks, rather than her lacking execution or uninteresting repertoire, was what the reviewers and, presumably, the audience at large, recognized as worthy of their consideration (fig. 3.8).

¹²⁰ "A Real Chinese Princess Will Sing at the Palace," *New York Tribune*, December 19, 1915.

¹²¹ "In the Spotlight," *Washington Evening Star*, April 04, 1915, 3.

¹²² "Amusements," *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 17, 1917, 16.

¹²³ R. C., "Jue Quon Tai and Company," *The Billboard*, April 11, 1925, 23.



Fig. 3.8: Jue Quon Tai in traditional Chinese dress, photographic portrait. Bain News Service, 1915 ca. Prints and Photographs Division, Bain News Service Photograph Collection, Library of Congress. George Grantham Bain was a New York City photographer known as the “father of foreign photographic news. Before he started the Bain News Service in 1898, he travelled the world working for the United Press, an international news agency whose photo, audio, and film services provided news material to thousands of nineteenth and twentieth-century newspapers, radio, and television stations. The choice of setting for this photograph might have been influenced by the cosmopolitanism of the photographer and by, extension, of his subject. The portrait on the wall, a half-length of a mid-nineteenth-century upper-class woman, as well as the sofa, floor tiles, and wallpaper indicate a Western rather than Chinese interior. These elements contrast with Jue’s Chinese robe and slippers and suggest the international caliber of the photograph’s subject.

Like her “native costumes,” the sets for Jue’s acts were designed to appeal to spectators’ Oriental taste and lend authenticity to her character. *The New York Tribune* described one such design thus: “The princess was displayed in a lavishly appointed Chinese tea garden, containing tables, chairs, and cups for a dozen guests.”¹²⁴ Although Jue Quon Tai was the only performer on the stage, the tea garden comprised furniture and tableware for a dozen more people. Judging from her surroundings, the audience might have expected a traditional Chinese tea ritual. However, “not a single customer happened along.” The critic concluded: “Even the princess, though she sat at the table, failed to order a thing. She sang instead.”¹²⁵ As the surprised tone of this reviewer suggests, Jue’s set design was so abundant only to emphasize the novelty of her act. In fact, the “lavishly appointed” tea set-up was not meant for a tea demonstration or a group performance, but for a solo singing act that captivated the audience for being so unexpected.

According to one *Billboard* reporter, Jue’s sets were so intricate that they drew the spectator’s attention away from her voice. At the New York Hippodrome, they described the set as “built in the Oriental style, with figures of dragons and the like on drops and other scenery, Japanese lanterns dangling from the flies, a jinrikisha in the first scene and other Far East atmosphere.” Jue’s average voice did not hold comparison with such an elaborate Oriental hodgepodge. As the critic noted, “Jue Quon Tai is not a capable performer to play up the surroundings in which she is placed.” Her execution at the Hippodrome must have been especially poor, considering that “at this house [...] the vocal cords are unduly taxed if a response is to come from the furthest recesses of its auditorium.” Yet, the Oriental charm of

¹²⁴ “Regular Royalty Sings at Palace,” *New York Tribune*, December 21, 1915, 9.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

the act as a whole must have been enough to compensate for Jue's lack of vocal power. The journalist therefore concluded: "She is a good-looking young girl, with enough personality to get across in a 'passable' manner, which she did when reviewed."¹²⁶

To recapitulate in the words of one *New York Clipper* critic, Jue's vocal skills were "not what one might desire;" yet "she is a distinct novelty" with "an abundance of personality besides being very pretty."¹²⁷ Like "novelty," the term "personality" is used in popular performance jargon to single out acts and performers that the audience does not forget easily. For a woman, that often implies displaying a rare kind of beauty, as the case of Jue Quon Tai has exemplified. But beyond beauty, Ainsworth, Double, and Peacock define unforgettable stage personalities as those that are crafted through the masterful interlacing of performer and role.¹²⁸ This often involves the performer playing themselves or acknowledging their identity beyond the stage character. In racial impersonation, by acknowledging their private identity beyond the racialized stage persona, the performer produces a clash of racial signifiers that is both baffling and fascinating. Especially when the performer impersonates their own racial identity, what keeps the audience engaged is the way in which they are able to mark or confound the line between themselves and their character. The more challenging it is to distinguish between player and role, truth and fiction, the more captivating the performance is for the spectator.

The case of Chinese American racial impersonators confirms this fact and suggests that the interplay between performer and role is built on three factors: the racial identity of the performers, the goal of their stage characters, and the racial prejudice of the audience. For Lee

¹²⁶ "New Turns and Returns: Miss Jue Quon Tai," *The Billboard*, March 10, 1923, 16.

¹²⁷ *New York Clipper*, June 3, 1916.

¹²⁸ Ainsworth, Double, and Peacock, *Popular Performance*, 8.

Tung Foo, the desire to be appreciated for his singing ability despite the audience's racist preconceptions, produced, according to his voice teacher, "a graceful and acceptable presence and personality on and off the stage."¹²⁹ Because the goal of his performance was to normalize his inescapable novelty, his personality was, according to the *Lawrence Sun*, "pleasant but unobtrusive;" in other words, there was no substantial discrepancy between his private self and stage character.¹³⁰ Even when donning a variety of national costumes and despite being billed as the "Only Chinese Baritone," no real discerning capacities were required for the audience to recognize Lee as Chinese American.¹³¹

The case of Jue Quon Tai was very different. First, given that the goal of her stage character was to augment the novelty value of her act, she went for an exaggerated, as opposed to normalizing, version of herself. Furthermore, considering the demand for Orientalized spectacle, she selected a mythical Chinese persona over a verisimilar Chinese American one as the most profitable character to stage. In Ainsworth, Double, and Peacock's articulation, "there is a process of selection and exaggeration in the creation of a stage self. The personality must be 'developed:' the performer's physical properties—her face and hair must be 'exploited.'"¹³² In this sense, Jue selected, developed, and exploited the Chinese side of her hyphenated identity to the point of exaggeration, in order to distance her off-stage Chinese American self from her Orientalized stage persona as much as possible.

¹²⁹ Alverson, *Sixty Years*, 166.

¹³⁰ *Lawrence Sun*, January 22, 1907.

¹³¹ "World's Only Chinese Baritone," *Keith's News*, December 24, 1906, 3–4.

¹³² Ainsworth, Double, and Peacock, *Popular Performance*, 23.

Jue successfully amplified the novelty value of her act, however her Chinese American off-stage self was not completely erased in the process. As Ainsworth, Double, and Peacock remind us, even when the stage personality “bear[s] little or no resemblance to the performer who inhabits it, the boundaries of truth and fiction can remain blurred.”¹³³ This blurring of boundaries becomes manifest in the language that Jue’s reviewers employed to assess her “real” identity. For instance, the same *Billboard* reviewer who believed Jue to have “enough personality to get across in a ‘passable’ manner” also wrote that, “while it may not be review etiquette to deal in personalities, Jue Quon Tai is really more Occidental than Oriental, and could probably pass as ‘Sally Smith’ or ‘Mary Jones’ without a great deal of trouble.”¹³⁴ This critic does not question Jue’s “original” Chineseness, yet the exaggerated “style of delivery, manner and gestures” that she utilized to emphasize it ended up uncovering “a cramped effort to act and look as Chinese as possible.”¹³⁵ According to one *New York Times* reporter, Jue was “Chinese American, Chinese in appearance and voice (maybe), and American in her manner on the stage.” Remarkably, for this writer the combination was not disconcerting, but “interesting and pleasant.”¹³⁶ This points to an understanding of Chinese Americanness as an attractive mixture of discordant signifiers in looks and behaviors as opposed to a well-integrated identity. For another *Billboard* reporter, Jue was clearly Chinese American, which was a cause of confusion in and of itself: “This is an act that had the writer guessing, not as to whether it was good, bad or average,

¹³³ Ibid., 22–3.

¹³⁴ “New Turns and Returns: Miss Jue Quon Tai,” *The Billboard*, March 10, 1923, 16.

¹³⁵ Ibid. With a similar intent, other theater reporters exploited references to sexualized symbols of American popular culture (according to one reporter, Jue was comparable in “spirit and insouciance” to the provocative Belle Baker) when, *in lieu* of the expected image of Chinese demure womanhood, they were confronted by a somewhat provocative singing act. “Dancers and Band are Featured on Bill at Maryland,” *The Sun*, April 07, 1925.

¹³⁶ “‘Silks and Satins’ Pleasing at Times,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1920, 23.

but as whether Jue Quon Tai actually hails from the Orient. Her attempts to assimilate traits of this ever-interesting race are so ostensibly affected.”¹³⁷ In this review, what Ainsworth, Double, and Peacock describe as an original “process of selection and exaggeration” is viewed as a poor-quality emulation. Tellingly, the journalist’s harsher point of criticism is expressed through contrasting ethnic/national identity categories to reiterate the idea that Chineseness and Americanness could not possibly be found in the same body. They concluded: “Jue Quon Tai impresses one as being an American girl doing a Chinese character badly instead of a Chinese girl doing an American character well.”¹³⁸

The struggle to decide whether Jue was Chinese or American was triggered by the blurring of boundaries between player and role that Ainsworth, Double, and Peacock theorize as being practically inevitable. Yet the reviewers’ confusion would not be so acute were it not reinforced by their own ignorance of the hyphenated experience in America. The realization that Jue Quon Tai was neither Chinese nor American but *both things* at once suggested an idea that was still unfamiliar for the time, namely, that contrasting identities can and do often co-exist in one body. Consequently, because Jue’s stage personality was so challenging to pinpoint, it also potentially exposed the viewer’s ingrained racial assumptions and lack of language to describe hyphenated identities. Seen from this perspective, Jue’s stage personality can be further theorized in light of what Lisa Lowe famously termed “alternative cultural forms:”

¹³⁷ R. C., “Jue Quon Tai and Company,” *The Billboard*, Apr 11, 1925, 23.

¹³⁸ Ibid. In this and other mid-1920s performances, Jue Quon Tai was accompanied by her sister, who remained consistently unbilled. In *Chinese in Hollywood*, Jenny Cho claims that Jue’s sister So Tai Jue (also known as Alice Jewel) appeared with an all-Asian American cast in the musical comedy *Ching-A-Ling* at the Shubert Playhouse in Wilmington, Delaware. She was also part of the “Chinese Showboat” vaudeville act, which toured several cities. Jenny Cho and the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, *Chinese in Hollywood* (Mount Pleasant: Arcadia Publishing, 2013), 21.

Alternative cultural forms and practices do not offer heavens of resolutions but are often eloquent descriptions of the ways in which the law, labor exploitation, racialization, and gendering work to prohibit alternatives. Some cultural forms succeed in making it possible to live and inhabit alternatives in the encounter with these prohibitions; some permit us to imagine what we have still yet to live.¹³⁹

In this quote, Lowe provides a bridge to relate performance to law. In particular, Jue Quon Tai's "distinct novelty" and "abundance of personality" can be interpreted as "alternative cultural forms" for being "eloquent descriptions of the ways in which the law"—Chinese Exclusion laws in this case—made it hard for Chinese Americans to embrace their hyphenated identities. For the law it is always an *either/or*: native or foreign, American or Chinese. Jue's "distinct novelty" and Orientalized stage persona did not offer final corrections to such dichotomy embedded in immigration law. Yet, by purposefully inviting the audience's race assessment, Jue's masterful blurring between performer and character, Chineseness and Americanness, potentially allowed white spectators to recognize their limited racial views and imagine "what we have still yet to live," namely, the possibility of hyphenated subjecthoods as alternatives to identities that are either foreign or white.¹⁴⁰

Lee Tung Foo's and Jue Quon Tai's different performance methods tried to either normalize skills or exaggerate looks. In Lee's words, the normalization of his vocal abilities was aimed at "break[ing] down barriers between Chinese Americans and European Americans," meaning that despite the two cultures being clearly distinct, his refined singing skills emphasized

¹³⁹ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), x.

¹⁴⁰ Jue Quon Tai's act certainly reiterated racial stereotypes. However, as one journalist for *Harper's Bazaar* wrote, "her ambition is not to play 'Butterfly,' but to show America what a real live Chinese girl is like." Here Jue's performance is associated with the *Madame Butterfly* stereotype, yet, it is implied, her Orientalized character went beyond conventional depictions of Asian women as demure commodities. Jue's perception of her own act can only be inferred from short quotes such as this one. While these cannot fully prove her intentions, they do make us wonder: did she have any more politically leaning goals for her performance? What was her commitment toward maintaining the stereotype unaltered? "The Summer Stage," *Harper's Bazaar*, September 1920, 93.

the points of contact between them.¹⁴¹ In Jue's case, the interplay between her character's exaggerated Chinese looks and her own Chinese American self pointed at the existence of a hyphenated identity that was neither Chinese nor American but both at once. Despite the difference in stagecraft, both performances revealed the fundamental unfamiliarity of white spectators with the hyphenated experience in the United States. Whether this realization also invited audiences to re-evaluate their ingrained racial preconceptions is up for debate. Could performance actively articulate racial categories and propose alternative racial understandings? Both Lee Tung Foo and Jue Quon Tai had a chance to test this possibility beyond the theatre stage in their interactions with the Bureau of Immigration.

Performing Hyphenated Identities for the Bureau of Immigration

As Edward Alfred Steiner defined it in a lecture for the New York City League of Political Education in 1916, "hyphenated" was a "malodourous title." Despite boasting "Greek lineage, mean[ing] in the classic language 'under one, into one, or together,'" Steiner observed that "the short, very innocent and proper dash has by brooding over it become an elongated, damnable damn. So that which had the same significance as the ring at a wedding ceremony has suddenly become the symbol of divorce, and is being given the same place in the sphere of patriotism that adultery has in married life."¹⁴² I am quoting Steiner's celebrated speech as a testament to the confusion that surrounded definitions and perceptions of American hyphenated identities. Writing as a German in the United States and while World War I raged in Europe,

¹⁴¹ Lee to Alverson, New York City, February 3, 1917.

¹⁴² Edward Alfred Steiner, *The Confession of a Hyphenated American* (New York, Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1916), 6–7.

Steiner used the wedding ring metaphor to describe hyphenated immigrants as faithfully and patriotically married to America. However, loyalty was often hard to substantiate, especially during times of war. The “brooding” that this process of validation required thus turned the hyphen from a sign of connection into a “damnable” separating line.

Lee Tung Foo’s identity validation for the Bureau of Immigration epitomized this complex process. His personal experiences growing up in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century did not invite an awareness of the hyphen as *uniting* his Chinese and American selves into one cohesive whole. His childhood in a working-class Chinese family, his musical training with Alverson, who distanced him from his Chinese upbringing, and white theatre reviewers’ biased reading of his act were all experiences that produced a disjunction between Lee’s Chinese heritage and his American education. It was with this background that Lee approached the immigration inspectors when returning from his European tour in 1909. Similar to the way in which he catered to immigrant audiences while also being aware of white reviewers’ preconceptions, Lee presented himself to the Bureau of Immigration by performing both his assimilation into American culture and what I term high-class Chineseness. Alternating between these two performance strategies was the closest that he could get to the complex concept of a hyphenated Chinese American identity.

As with all people of Chinese descent living in the United States after the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, Lee’s residency rights had to be pre-investigated before he could travel abroad. A few months before leaving for his tour of the UK, Lee submitted a return certificate application to the San Francisco Bureau of Immigration. All went smoothly at this stage, but unfortunately he lost his passport while traveling. On April 29, 1909 with return certificate in hand but no passport to confirm his American citizenship, the Inspector of Customs at the port of New York

interrogated him for hours under suspicion of fraud. Predictably, many questions focused on the issue of the lost passport. The inspector reacted brusquely to Lee's revelation that the document had actually been stolen by his manager. The story must have sounded like a conjecture to gain illegal entry or, if it were true, Lee's manager may have stolen his passport to sell it to some undocumented Asian in the US. In either case, the situation seriously alarmed the Bureau.¹⁴³

Despite the seemingly grim circumstances, ultimately, Lee was granted entry on the basis of his "excellent appearance," and "very good English" (fig. 3.9).¹⁴⁴ Demonstrating assimilation to American culture through fashion and language was the closest a Chinese-looking person born in the United States but missing his passport could come to proving his American citizenship. In fact, Lee's good command of English and Western-style outfit ultimately substituted for his legal identity documentation. This outcome is even more remarkable considering that to substantiate this performance of Americanness for the Bureau, Lee presented an English/Chinese bilingual promotional brochure describing him as "A Real Dialect Songster of the Celestial Race," and portraying him in the Scottish national costume that he used for his Scottish impersonations on the vaudeville stage (fig. 3.10).¹⁴⁵ As an affidavit, such a brochure furnished proof of profession, but it hardly provided clarifying information on Lee's racial identity and even less so verified his American birthright. So why did Lee think it would help is readmission?

¹⁴³ Chinese Inspector A. D'Alessandro, interview transcripts, Lee Tung Foo's immigration file, CEACF New York City. Lee Tung Foo's at points dismissive sassiness must have complicated things. To the very specific questions from the officer, he was recorded reacting with "if I remember all those things, it would be a tale, I didn't think I was going to be asked all those questions."

¹⁴⁴ Chinese Inspector A. D'Alessandro to New York City Inspector in Charge H. R. Sisson, April 29, 1909, Lee Tung Foo's immigration file, CEACF New York City.

¹⁴⁵ The Chinese caption translates into: "He speaks English, German, Scottish, and French. From this picture one can see that his excellent performance is special. He has some special skills that haven't been seen before." Promotional brochure, Lee Tung Foo's immigration file, CEACF New York City.



Fig. 3.9: Identification photograph filed with Lee Tung Foo's return certificate. RG 85: Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files 1880–1960, B 313 f 68/64. National Archives and Record Administration, New York City, NY.

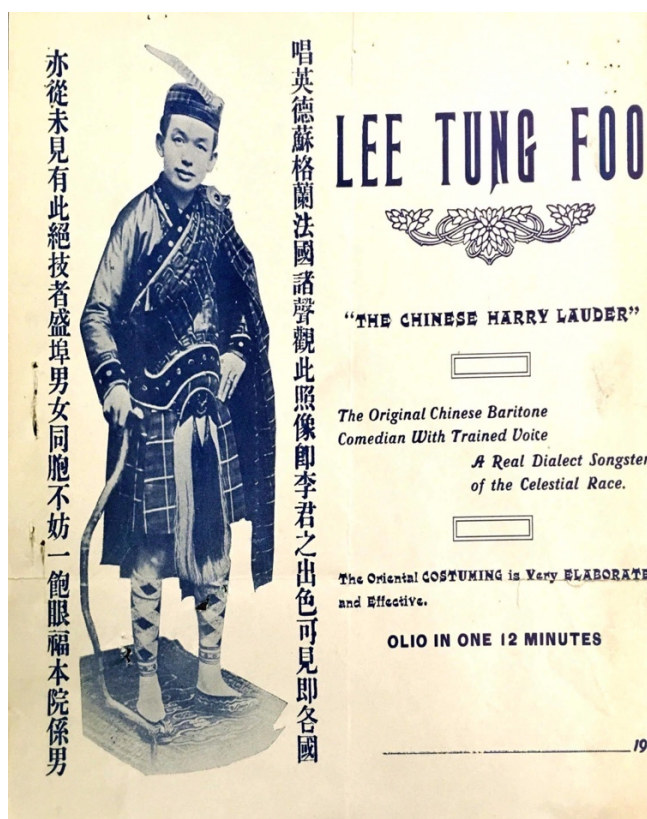


Fig. 3.10: "Lee Tung Foo The Chinese Harry Lauder," promotional brochure. RG 85: Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files 1880-1960, B 313 f 68/64. National Archives and Record Administration, New York City, NY.

Commensurate with his performance of Americanness, Lee used this brochure to evoke an image of high-class Chineseness. As I explained at the beginning of the chapter, Chinese diplomats, merchants, teachers, and students could petition for exempt status, which proved class and economic status to be as central to the exclusion of Chinese laborers as national provenance and race.¹⁴⁶ Lee's interaction with the Bureau of Immigration should be interpreted according to his own personal experiences living as a Chinese American in the United States but also in light of these loose socio-economic descriptions of admissible Chineseness. Besides calling him a "Dialect Songster of the Celestial Race," the brochure indicated that Lee was a "Baritone" and a "Trained Voice." With these specifications, the leaflet proved Lee's education and refinement while implicitly negating his foreign Chinese origin. In fact, according to the stereotype of the unmusical Chinese, no Chinese national could be a trained Western opera singer or have a baritone voice.

To sum up, two features of Lee Tung Foo's presentation influenced the Immigration Inspectors' decision to readmit him into the United States. On one hand, he performed his belongingness in American culture by demonstrating good communication skills and an "excellent appearance" according to Western standards of fashion and manner. On the other hand, he also performed a brand of Chineseness that I term high-class: by submitting a promotional brochure describing him as a "Baritone" and "Trained Voice," Lee emphasized his refined musical education as a sign of high-class status, while also indicating that his Chinese identity could not possibly be legitimate. While Lee's distinct performances of Americanness

¹⁴⁶ Lee, *At America's Gates*, 86. High-school level literacy tests were administered when the proper paperwork documenting Chinese involvement in business was lacking. At immigration interviews, physical characteristics such as coarse hands or dark complexion were interpreted as outcomes of manual and/or outdoor labor. By these arbitrary standards, small business owners who were not formally educated in economics and whose jobs *also* consisted in manual labor (tailors and grocers, most prominently) were often denied entry or deported.

and high-class Chineseness did not provide a unified representation of his hyphenated identity as a first-generation Chinese American, they successfully assisted the immigration officers with interpreting and enforcing the Chinese Exclusion Act in his favor.

This incident warrants one final observation. If, as I claim, Lee's work as a singing comedian influenced his "performance" for and reception by the Bureau of Immigration, is the inverse logic also applicable? In other words, did Lee's interaction with the Bureau effect the way he perceived his stage work? Watching the immigration administrators define his American birthright in terms of elegant aspect, conversational ability, and refined musical education Lee could not only recognize the power of class over racial definitions but also the influence of performance over ontology. As a result, he may have been convinced that by portraying his stage Chineseness as high-class he might overcome his inescapable novelty.

Already in 1906, Lee struck the critic for *Keith's News* as being "a very well educated and a very interesting and intelligent conversationalist."¹⁴⁷ Such a remark was not at all dissimilar from the immigration officers' description of Lee in 1909. In fact, it aligned education and conversational ability with musical talent and, consequently, socioeconomic status. The article went on to confirm Lee's socioeconomic status by claiming that his father was "one of the wealthiest merchants of San Francisco."¹⁴⁸ Lee did not go as far as calling himself royalty as Jue Quon Tai did, but neither was he the son of a wealthy merchant. Lee never revealed his working-class origin, as such an admission would have limited his international travels and even jeopardized his family's residency rights.¹⁴⁹ This connects back to Lee's heart-felt desire to

¹⁴⁷ "World's Only Chinese Baritone," *Keith's News*, December 24, 1906.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ "Prince" Lai Mon Kim, "Princess" Jue Quon Tai, and "Lady" Sien Mein, all singers whom Lee met on the vaudeville circuit, were American-born Chinatown residents like Lee. Lee scorned his competitors' royal

become an opera singer: though not a conventional career for a person of Chinese heritage, it was another way to demonstrate refinement and high-class status. The same *San Francisco Chronicle* article in which Lee was reported “to be ready to end his life should he fail in his ambition to sing in grand opera” visualized this performance of high-class Chineseness with two side images, one a photograph of a young and proud Lee wearing an elegant Chinese robe, and the other a cartoon of “Frank Lee,” Lee Tung Foo’s American name, in a Renaissance period costume (fig. 3.12 and 3.12). No other piece of evidence exists to corroborate Lee’s role in a period opera, but realistic representation was not the goal here.¹⁵⁰ The sketch complemented Lee’s photograph in Chinese garb to help readers visualize something unconceivable: a Chinese American man of high-class status who, as the article claimed, was “preparing for [a] career in Grand Opera.”¹⁵¹ Were it not for the exclusion of working-class Chinese, Lee may not have felt compelled to exploit his opera training to assert his socioeconomic status and present himself as a high-class Chinese both on stage and in the Bureau of Immigration.

appellatives. He wrote to Alverson: “Prince? Princess? and Lady, it takes the Emperor to hold the throne of success, no matter what enemies trying to dethrone him.” He signed the letter “The Emperor of all Chinese Singing Acts” to claim his superiority while stressing that “royalty” is state of being, not a pedigree. Lee to Alverson, Boston, January 7, 1916.

¹⁵⁰ In vaudeville, Lee sung “Armorer’s Song,” “Tinker’s Song,” and “Brown October Ale” from Reginald De Koven and Harry B. Smith’s *Robin Hood*. Alverson, “Songs Lee Tung Foo has studied,” MBLC.

¹⁵¹ “Remarkable Musical Talent of a Chinese Native Son,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, June 3, 1898.



Fig. 3.11: Lee Tung Foo in Chinese robe, illustration. “Remarkable Musical Talent of a Chinese Native Son,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, June 3, 1898.



Fig. 3.12: Lee Tung Foo in period costume, illustration. “Remarkable Musical Talent of a Chinese Native Son,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, June 3, 1898.

On August 10, 1916, only eight months after her debut as a “Chinese Princess,” Jue Quon Tai was booked to perform on a North American tour extending to Canada. Her immigration file includes the correspondence between the local Inspector in Charge in New York City and the two Commissioners General in Washington D.C. and Montreal. The New York Inspector wrote:

I have the honor to advise that Miss Jue Quon Tai, a vaudeville artist, now under contract with one of the local theatrical agencies and at the present time appearing in this City, called upon me today and stated that she is booked to appear in Toronto during the week of August 14th, and in Cleveland, Ohio, during the following week, and, in order to avoid any delay at the time of re-entry, has requested that the matter be taken up with the Bureau, with the view of having the proper instructions issued in connection therewith.¹⁵²

Like Lee’s, Jue’s certificate of identity had also been stolen. That happened in China five years prior and as the several immigration interviews that followed suggest, she did not get a new one until 1922 (fig. 3.13). Having already experienced an interrogation coming back from China, she must have known that inspectors did not have an established protocol to evaluate the admission of undocumented American citizens of Chinese heritage. Thus, instead of wasting time with the laborious return certificate application, Jue introduced herself in person to the Inspector in New York and invited him to seek advice with the Commissioner General in Washington before her departure. During this conversation, she mentioned that an investigation of her residency status had already taken place before her trip to China, implying that if her American nativity were to be questioned again, all the paperwork would be easy to retrieve from the Seattle office.¹⁵³

¹⁵² New York City Inspector in Charge H. R. Sisson to Washington D.C. Commissioner General, August 10, 1916, Jue Quon Tai’s immigration file, CEACF New York City.

¹⁵³ Jue Quon Tai’s immigration file, CEACF New York City.

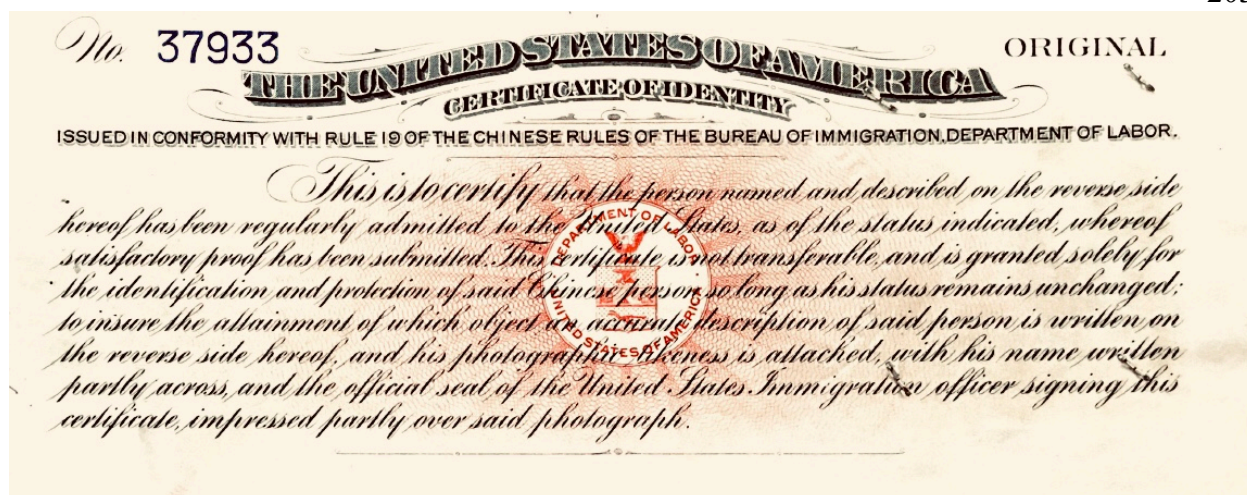


Fig. 3.13: Jue Quon Tai's Certificate of Identity, issued at the port of Seattle, WA on March 24, 1922. RG 85: Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files 1880–1960, B 350 f105/813. National Archives and Record Administration, New York City, NY.

On relating these facts to the Washington Commissioner, the New York Inspector also added his personal impression of Jue as being “thoroughly Americanized.”¹⁵⁴ As was the case for Lee Tung Foo a decade earlier, Jue’s “thoroughly Americanized” appearance was enough to support her claim to American citizenship. Yet, unlike with Lee, the Inspector did not need to

¹⁵⁴ New York City Inspector in Charge to Washington D.C. Commissioner General, August 10, 1916.

base his judgment on Jue's appearance or language skills since, as he wrote, she was already a "comparatively well known vaudeville artist."¹⁵⁵ The Commissioner General in Washington was reassured by this fact and reported to his colleague in Montreal: "The personal history of Miss Jue Quon Tai, while not a matter of record, is familiar to a great many officers in the Immigration Service, including the Bureau."¹⁵⁶ Although Jue's vaudeville career had only just begun, her reputation preceded her. The big-time vaudeville circuit on which she performed was well-publicized among white American-born spectators and far-reaching across all of North America. For this reason—and not because her immigration status had ever created "a matter of record" for the Bureau—Jue was "familiar to a great many officers." She was well-known as a public figure in the theatre profession and as a "foreign princess." Deceitful billing aside, the Bureau had no reason to believe that she was actually born in China. As the Washington Commissioner General wrote: "she is generally believed to have been born in Los Angeles, California, as she claims, notwithstanding she is being 'starred' as a 'foreign princess.'"¹⁵⁷ With this specification, the Commissioner General demonstrated familiarity with Jue's media representations and work in theatre. Billing notwithstanding, he confirmed Jue's American citizenship; in fact, her "thoroughly Americanized" appearance supported the "general belief" regarding her American birthright more firmly than her stage persona could prove her allegedly royal Chinese origins.

On August 10, 1916, when the New York Inspector wrote to the Commissioner General in Washington, Jue's performance in Toronto was only four days away. The letter was received

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Washington D.C. Commissioner General to Montreal Commissioner General, August 11, 1916.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

on August 11, a Friday, so the case had to be resolved and passed on to Montreal on that same day before the office's weekend intermission. This short timeline, together with Jue's popularity on the vaudeville big-time circuit, help to justify the Bureau's hasty pronouncement on Jue's "thoroughly Americanized" appearance. Still, in what looks like a final twist of judgment, the New York Inspector suggested that the case could also be treated as "parallel with those of Chinese vaudeville artists admitted to this country temporarily under bond, who are frequently permitted to visit Canada and return."¹⁵⁸ While the Inspector's submission was legitimized on precedent, it contradicted the "general belief" regarding Jue's American citizenship. The reason he might have offered such an alternative was the little time available to investigate Jue's nativity. If at reentry her "thoroughly Americanized" appearance would not satisfy border patrol officers, by assuming that she was Chinese—and thus her circumstance akin to that of Chinese performers granted temporary admission on bonds—her case could be resolved faster. Jue Quon Tai's mother had a similar experience when she was interviewed for her daughters' return certificates prior to their trip to China in 1910–11. Despite being born in San Francisco, she was advised by her Chinese-born husband to claim legal residence in the United States as the wife of a Chinese merchant. Since the woman did not have a birth certificate, the Bureau would have needed to conduct a complex investigation to verify her American nativity.¹⁵⁹ In contrast, her husband's registration as exempt trading category was recorded with the Bureau and required only minutes to retrieve.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ New York City Inspector in Charge to Washington D.C. Commissioner General, August 10, 1916.

¹⁵⁹ Based on my research of Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files, birth certificates were rarely submitted as proof of identity. This might have been due to the difficulty of registering home births among foreign populations who lived in segregated city areas like the Chinese in San Francisco or New York City. In San Francisco specifically, the 1906 earthquake destroyed a huge number of the birth certificates that did exist, making identity verifications even harder.

¹⁶⁰ Ng Boo Toe's interview, April 11, 1910, Jue Quon Tai's immigration file, CEACF Seattle.

Compared to the immigration officials' quick resolution of Jue's case, theatre reviewers' race assessments at her vaudeville performances were more methodical. One superficial explanation would be that Jue's ability to confound the boundaries between her native self and foreign stage character was more effective in the theatrical setting where it was aided by costumes, props, and scenery. However, semiotically speaking, this interpretation only accounts for the way that the message is formulated according to the sender's communication needs. A discrepancy in reception between different receivers, in this case between the theatre reviewers and the immigration administrators, cannot be fully justified unless the receivers' role in shaping the message is recognized. It was in the interest of the immigration officials to resolve the case as objectively and as quickly as possible, while it was the journalists' job to intrigue their readers and even invite them to partake in their race assessment efforts. As a consequence, while the Bureau's administrators looked for precedents and judged according to the most apparent elements, theatre reporters were incentivized to treat each performance as unique and hesitate on the hidden details to draw their readers in. What becomes apparent thanks to this comparison is that, regardless of the race assessment's purpose, in both the theatre and the immigration office racial identities were worth discussing only when they appeared to contradict commonly held stereotypes. In other words, for theatre critics, artists, as well as immigration law administrators, racial identities were often only a matter of profitability or convenience.

Jue Quon Tai's and Lee Tung Foo's interactions with the Bureau of Immigration suggest that immigration agents were aware of the contemporaneous theater scene and that they might strategically choose to be persuaded by stage representations depending on whether these slowed down or offered shortcuts to their own administrative race assessments. Officers chose to follow stage prejudices regarding Chinese people's supposed lack of vocal ability to uphold Lee Tung

Foo's American birthright. In the case of Jue Quon Tai, they simultaneously disregarded and relied on her billing to leave both the American citizenship and Chinese on bond visit options open. In the first few decades of the twentieth century, hyphenated identities were both burdensome to substantiate and elusive to communicate. Lee Tung Foo and Jue Quon Tai were surely aware of this challenge. Being unable to grasp the full meaning of their hyphenated identities, they also went for shortcuts, Lee trying to normalize while Jue exaggerating her Chinese heritage. Arguably, no attempt at uniting the two sides of the hyphen will be made until the mid-1960s, when playwrights such as Frank Chin, David Henry Hwang, and Elizabeth Wong began to give the Chinese American experience center stage.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body on Stage* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2002).

Chapter 4: Jewish American Racial Impersonators

The American Jews: Immigration, Racialization, Dissimilation

The history of Jewish performance in the United States starts with the history of the Jewish modern diaspora. In 1880, three quarters of world's Jews lived in Eastern Europe and only 3% lived in the United States. This percentage steadily increased over the following decades. Between 1880 and 1890, 240,485 Jewish men, women, and children reached American shores and settled in cities such as New York, Boston, and Chicago. Between 1890 and 1919, the total number of Jewish entries increased to 1,551,315, a striking 10.43% of the total immigration to the United States. Between 1906 and 1907, the peak year for Jewish immigration, 153,748 Eastern European Jews entered the country. By 1924, when the Johnson Reed Act restricted immigration to severe quotas based on national origin, 3.6 million Jews—3.4 % of the US population and 22.86% of the worldwide Jewish population—had relocated to the United States. Of these 3.6 million, 73% of them came from the Russian Empire.¹

Why did so many Jews emigrate in such a short period of time? And why to the United States? The historiography points to both political-economic and ideological reasons. The most often recurring narrative starts with the assassination of Tsar Alexander II on March 13, 1881. Of the nine conspirators in the terrorist revolutionary organization Narodnaya Volya (The People's Will), only one was of documented Jewish origins. Hesya Helfam was born into a Jewish family but left home at the age of sixteen to escape an arranged marriage. She was responsible for

¹ “Statistics of Jews (Prepared by the Bureau of Jewish Social Research),” United States Census Bureau, “History.” <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/jewishpop-ajc.pdf>

renting a space in Saint Petersburg for the conspirators to meet, while living there herself disguised as an inconspicuous married woman. The press exaggerated her role in the assassination enough for the rising Tsar Alexander III and his notoriously anti-Semitic counsellor Kostantin Pobedonostev to blame it on Jewish “anarchists.”² Members of Narodnaya Volya were executed publicly and the so-called May Laws were quickly enforced. These laws were explicitly drafted to protect Russian peasants from Jewish economic control and limit the advancement of Jews both economically and intellectually. They forbade Jews from living in areas with less than 10,000 inhabitants, prohibited Jewish ownership of land and real estate, established a quota for Jews who wished to receive secondary education, and restricted Jewish membership in the Russian bar to 9% of the total number of lawyers admitted, whereas before the May Laws were enacted 22% of Russian lawyers were Jewish.³

As large-scale repeated riots known as pogroms began to target Jewish communities, the Jewish groups most affected by the May Laws—former small landholders and business owners, aspiring intellectuals, and lawyers—started to look for acceptance elsewhere.⁴ In 1882, less than a year after Tsar Alexander II’s assassination, 15,000 Jews disembarked in the United States. Economic prosperity was real in the United States, or at least the talk was that America was the “Golden Medina,” a country where streets were paved with gold and opportunity was limitless. As Jewish American author and immigration activist Mary Antin put it, “America was on

² Lawrence J. Epstein, *At the Edge of a Dream: The Story of Jewish Immigrants on New York’s Lower East Side 1880–1920* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 1–27.

³ Samuel Joseph, *Jewish Immigration to the United States from 1881 to 1910* (New York: Columbia University, 1914), 56–69. “MAY LAWS – JewishEncyclopedia.Com.” <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10508-may-laws>.

⁴ The word pogrom comes from the Russian “pogromit” or “to demolish.”

everybody's mouth [...] all talked of it, but scarcely anyone knew one true fact about this magic land."⁵ Streets certainly needed to be paved in the new country, but with hard concrete and the migrants' cheap labor. Bridges and railroads needed to be built, as well as new homes for the swelling population and offices for nascent corporations. The industrial manufacturing of goods—a late introduction to post-Civil-War agrarian society but one that registered a 700% increase between 1865 and 1900—needed hands to operate the machines.⁶ The expansion of the ready-to-wear industry in Northern United States, for instance, coincided with the institutionalization of a post-Reconstruction sharecropping structure in Southern states and the arrival of great numbers of immigrants from Europe. As former slaves and their descendants were caught in an abusive system to produce the cheapest possible cotton, so too newcomers from Europe—oftentimes expert tailors, as was the case with many Jewish immigrants—were enticed into an exploitative industrial system by salaries comparatively higher than those they were used to making in their home countries.⁷ As an unknown new American wrote, “not only the streets weren't paved with gold, they weren't paved at all, and I was expected to pave them!”⁸

Once off the steamer, dreams and hopes were broken. Poor living and working conditions aggravated the struggle to make ends meet, while racial and religious prejudice deeply influenced interactions with locals and other immigrant groups. Ideas about racial difference had

⁵ Mary Antin, *From Plotzk to Boston* (Boston: W. B. Clarke, 1899), 12.

⁶ Joseph H. Davis, “An Annual Index of US Industrial Production, 1790–1915 (Manufacturing and Mining Industries),” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 119, no. 4 (2004): 1177–1215.

⁷ Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 93–96.

⁸ This popular quote appears on a plaque in the Museum of Immigration at Ellis Island, New York City.

been popular since the foundation of the American Republic, but at this particular historical juncture, racialism went from being abstract philosophical concepts to applied science.⁹ Modern social science emerged as racial theories began to be tested through interviews and observations. Backed up by the “scientific method,” sociological and anthropological theories concretely influenced the way people viewed race as the legitimate basis for discrimination.¹⁰ The nativist scorn for different life habits was directly related to the unified protectionism towards the nation’s economic wellbeing, cultural uniformity, and racial purity. With so many apparently different racial types populating the country and the increasing difficulty of telling “white” peoples apart, supporters of “racial purity” began to express concern about how to preserve what was commonly called “the American national character.” To paraphrase from Charles W. Gould, Americans were becoming an endangered people, as being American could be “learned.”¹¹

The theories of elite Anglo-Saxon intellectuals reinforced these fears and concretized them into restrictive immigration policy. The Immigration Restriction League, formed by Harvard students and members of prominent New England families, campaigned for the introduction of a literacy test, lobbied New England representatives and senators, and widely influenced immigration policy when it was placed under Federal authority in 1891.¹² As a result, the Immigration Act of 1891 added to the list of categories excluded from entry, with religious refugees still admitted but political minorities left out. The same policy also compelled steamship

⁹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 3–4.

¹⁰ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 150–2.

¹¹ Charles W. Gould, *America: A Family Matter* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1920).

¹² Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 102–3.

companies to take the unadmitted back at their own expense, favored raids which increased deportations of the undocumented already present in country, and made American employers' posting of jobs in Europe illegal.¹³

Henry Cabot Lodge, a Harvard-educated historian, became Senator for Massachusetts in 1899. He was a vocal proponent of immigration restriction and literacy admittance tests at a time when immigration was still widely supported for economic and developmental reasons. In "The Great Peril of Unrestricted Immigration," he cautioned against mixing "higher" and "lower" races and famously wrote: "You can take a Hindoo and give him the highest education the world can afford...but you cannot make him an Englishman."¹⁴ In the wake of prominent publications in Eugenics by Sir Francis Galton and Charles B. Davenport, Lodge's ideas became scientific truisms.¹⁵ From 1907 to 1911, Lodge served on the Dillingham Commission, which studied immigration patterns to assist Congress with immigration decisions. The outcome of this collaboration among senators, representatives, and unelected experts in economics and sociology was the Immigration Act of 1917, which imposed a literacy test and barred immigration from the Asia-Pacific zone.¹⁶

¹³ "An act in amendment to the various acts relative to immigration and the importation of aliens under contract or agreement to perform labor," 51st Congress, Session II, Chapter 551, March 3, 1891.
<http://library.uwb.edu/Static/USimmigration/26%20stat%201084.pdf>.

¹⁴ Henry Cabot Lodge, "The Great Peril of Unrestricted Immigration," in *The New Century Speaker for School and College: A Collection of Extracts from the Speeches of Henry Cabot Lodge, Chauncey M. Depew, Charles H. Parkhurst, Henry W. Grady, James G. Blaine, James A. Garfield, Henry Ward Beecher, William H. Seward, Wendell Philips, George William Curtis, and Other: Selected and Adapted for Use in Declamation, and in the Study of American Oratory in the Latter Part of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Henry Allyn Frink (Boston: Ginn & Co, 1898), 177. Ellipsis in original.

¹⁵ Francis Galton defined Eugenics in "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims," *American Journal of Sociology* 10, no. 1 (1904): 1–25. Charles Benedict Davenport's 1911 book *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (New York: H. Holt and Co.) was even used as a college textbook.

¹⁶ Jeremiah Jenks was one of the prominent sociologists part of the Dillingham Commission. He wrote *The Immigration Problem: A Study of Immigration Conditions and Need* and, with anthropologist Daniel Folkmar, the *The Dictionary of Races*. The latter was particularly influential upon the Commission's report to Congress: in it,

Shortly after the Immigration Act of 1917 was passed, Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color: The Threat Against white World-Supremacy* demonstrated that "racial purity" was a concern for several "white nations." Racial purity could only be maintained by implementing three measures: keeping "primary races" separate, instituting strict anti-miscegenation laws, and restricting non-white migration into white nations.¹⁷ The first two measures were already in place in the United States: Jim Crow laws and the ghettoization of immigrant enclaves kept races isolated, while miscegenation was widely prohibited, although with differences among states. The third measure—immigration restriction—was being actively discussed in Congress again. The result would be the Emergency Quota Act in 1921 and the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924, two laws whose quotas for legal entry were purposely calculated on outdated census data so as to limit new immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, a majority of which was Jewish.¹⁸

What Stoddard's book did not fully address was how to discern between the races in the American "melting pot." To keep the "tide of color" in place, color needed to be visible. Nativist writers considered Jews to be particularly dangerous to American racial purity as they could

Jenks and Folkmar stated that their principal task was to discover "whether there may not be certain races that are inferior to other races... to show whether some may be better fitted for American citizenship than others." Jeremiah Jenks and Daniel Folkmar, *A Dictionary of Races of People: Reports of the Immigration Commission* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1911), 4.

¹⁷ Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-supremacy* (New York: Scribner, 1920). Stoddard closed his tract thus: "As the years pass, the supreme importance of heredity and the supreme value of superior stocks will sink into our being, and we will acquire a true race-consciousness (as opposed to national or cultural consciousness) which will bridge political gulfs, remedy social abuses, and exorcise the lurking specter of miscegenation. In those better days, we or the next generation will take in hand the problem of race-depreciation, and segregation of defectives and abolition of handicaps penalizing the better stocks will put an end to our present racial decline" (309). The year following this publication, President Warren Harding used Stoddard's argument to support his pro-segregation views in a speech in Birmingham, Alabama. *The New York Times* quoted Harding stating: "Whoever will take the time to read and ponder Mr. Lothrop Stoddard's book on *The Rising Tide of Color* must realize that our race problem here in the United States is only a phase of a race issue that the whole world confronts." "Harding Supports New Policy in South," *The New York Times*, October 27, 1921.

¹⁸ Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 322–4.

easily pass for white. André Siegfried mobilized the idea of a Jewish inner-outer split to explain this phenomenon. Being able to separate their outer white appearance from their Jewish inner beliefs and allegiances made Jewish immigrants successful in both passing (often even marrying outside their ethnicity) and preserving their culture of origin. Siegfried conceived “culture” in purely racial terms: it was an internal characteristic, but also the outer sign “revealing” the presence of Semite blood.¹⁹

Jewish American thinkers produced a variety of theories in response to nativist authors. They wrote about Jewishness in both non-religious and non-racial terms, embracing the idea of culture as a set of customs and geographical provenance rather than racial identity. In *Theories of Americanization* (1920), Isaac Berkson posited that Jews possess an “identity of race” that is expressed through a “community in history, social traditions, religion, language and literature, a consciousness of these common possessions and a hope and possibility of being re-established as a nationality in Palestine.”²⁰ Also in 1920, Horace Kallen’s *Culture and Democracy in the United States* embraced the concept of an American “democracy of nationalities” for which culture and national identification are as ineradicable facets for the individual as race and bloodline. When applied to Jewishness, such a definition stood directly in opposition to the idea that Jews belonged to an inferior racial group that needed to be “Americanized” out of existence. For Kallen, Americanization was neither a path towards domination, as nativist believers in the Jewish “conspiracy” for world supremacy would have it, nor a process of obliteration, as the

¹⁹ André Siegfried, *America Comes of Age, a French Analysis*, H. H. Hemming and Doris Hemming trans. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927), 22–27.

²⁰ Isaac Baer Berkson, *Theories of Americanization: A Critical Study, with Special Reference to the Jewish Group* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1920), 53.

supporters of the melting-pot ideal advocated.²¹ Rather, Americanization was a two-phase process whose final outcome is the distinction of ethnicity in both cultural and national terms. Kallen explained: “Once the proletarian level of independence is reached, the process of assimilation slows down and tends to come to a stop. [...] Then a process of *dissimilation* begins. The arts, life, and ideals of the nationality become central and paramount; ethnic and national differences change in status from disadvantages to distinctions.”²² According to Kallen, “assimilation” is the necessary first phase of a process geared toward reaching a baseline level of independence in a new country. After this phase is completed, the assimilated “immigrant group is still a national group, modified, sometimes improved, by environmental influences.” At this point, it will seek “its way out on its own social level” and affirm its cultural specificity.²³ This will be a “change in status from disadvantages to distinctions,” a process that re-constitutes a Jewish ethnic, national, and spiritual unit.

Reconstituting the Jewish unit has one particular inconvenience: once Jews became visible in the American melting pot, they were also more likely to be targets of anti-Semitism. Recognizing Jews in the melting pot, as André Siegfried argued, was crucial to prevent them from passing for white. This fear was supported by another fear, which Zygmunt Bauman dubbed “proteophobia,” or the anxiety over racial ambiguity. In Bauman’s words, Jews are “ambivalence incarnate. In the mobile world, the Jews were the most mobile of all; in the world of boundary-breaking, they broke the most boundaries; in the world of melting solids, they made

²¹ Horace Meyer Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States: Studies in the Group Psychology of the American Peoples* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), 124.

²² Horace Meyer Kallen, “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot,” *The Nation* 100, no. 2590 (18–25 February 1915). Emphasis in original.

²³ *Ibid.*

everything, including themselves, into a formless plasma in which any form could be born only to dissolve again.”²⁴ As a “formless plasma,” Jews subverted the cognitive categories by which the world is organized and Otherness kept separate. From this perspective, Siegfried’s notion of a Jewish “inner-outer split” can be interpreted as a reaction against the author’s own “proteophobia”—that is, as a way to establish a new cognitive category that explains Jewish success in the melting pot. Supposedly, it was the ability to keep internal allegiances separate from their outer propensity for assimilation to make Jews, in Bauman’s terminology, “insidiously protean,” or uncannily skillful at masking their internal racial otherness with external mimicry. Consequently, as the stereotype goes, Jews are naturally skilled at acting or, in more explicitly anti-Semitic terms, “deceiving” others about their race. We can see this concept pushed to extremes in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*, where being an actor is equated to being Jewish due to Jews’ known adaptability and performativity.²⁵

When asked in 1925 to provide her opinion on the alleged Jewish propensity for mimicry, Jewish comic Fanny Brice confirmed the phenomenon as self-evident. She said:

I believe it’s because I’m Jewish that I have been a steady climber on the stage [...] the versatility with which I have been credited, is peculiar to Jews. There is no need of my giving historical justification for my statement, as scholars have long determined that a variety of experiences, and a constantly changing environment have produced an adaptability in the Jew, rarely possessed by other people.²⁶

²⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1995), 214–5. Ellipses in original.

²⁵ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science; with a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, 1882, Water Kauffman trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 316–7.

²⁶ Fanny Brice, “As I See Myself and Others,” *Jewish Tribune*, June 12, 1925.

In recent years, Andrea Most has historicized this idea of Jewish “peculiar versatility.” Life as diasporic outsiders taught Jews adaptability as a survival strategy. Siegfried’s split between the inner and the outer Jew is, for Most, comparable to W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of African American double consciousness, or the awareness of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of the white majority. But while Du Bois emphasized how double consciousness cripples the internal development of African Americans, Most focuses on the Jewish sense of control over their modes of behavior. Being able to switch modes deliberately and elegantly from “Jewish” to “non-visibly Jewish” improved adaptability to the American metropolis, where, according to Most, distinguishing between reality and scam was a matter of survival.²⁷

For Fanny Brice, performativity in the everyday could develop into acting skills for the artistically inclined. In this context, the nativist theory of the Jew as “insidious protean” paradoxically acquires a positive value to validate Jewish theatrical aptitudes. Fanny Brice believed “the versatility” with which she was “credited is peculiar to Jews.” Whether Brice’s point could be made for other immigrant groups as well would be a matter of investigation. Undeniably though, Jews exploited their versatility and became a majoritarian presence in American popular entertainment. Jews saw theatre and film as spaces to express their theatricality and do good business. Many started as vaudeville performers and became theatre managers; others initiated the nickelodeon industry and eventually transitioned to creating successful Hollywood studios; others worked long careers as writers, composers, and directors on Broadway.²⁸

²⁷ Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 14. W. E. B. Du. Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

²⁸ Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 401–5 and 555–73. See also: Stephen Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999); Kenneth A. Kanter, *The Jews on Tin Pan Alley: The Jewish Contribution to American Popular Music, 1830–1940* (New York;

There are particular cultural and economic reasons for why Jews more than any other immigrant group in the US established such a strong presence in popular entertainment. Among the cultural reasons is a view of theatre as platform to oppose American Protestant sensibility and practice a Jewish version of liberalism. Among the economic reasons are job opportunities created by the retirement from entertainment of fast-assimilating Irish Americans and a Jewish type of entrepreneurship consolidated over the years in international Yiddish theatre. Let us explore each of these factors individually.

As Jewish intellectual Jonas Barish claimed in *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, anti-theatricalism and anti-Semitism have often gone hand-in-hand. Thus, to oppose anti-theatricalism is to challenge not only Protestant fundamental values but also anti-Semitic views such as the stereotype of the “insidiously protean Jew.”²⁹ As early as 1828, Jewish critics and playwrights such as Mordecai Manuel Noah and Isaac Harby wrote to oppose anti-theatricalism and resolve the paradox for which theatre could both educate and derange its spectators. In “Defense of Drama,” for instance, Harby found theatrical entertainment “of no inconsiderable consequence” to its participants, despite its position of “moral lever” in society. When turning to the possible effect of drama on the young, he reasoned: “If the dissipations of a city cannot be restrained and broken up in every channel, is it not well to direct the torrent which we cannot

Cincinnati: Ktav PubHouse, 1982); Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Lary May, *Screening out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). Sam and Lee Shubert went from being variety actors to theatre managers to originating the Theatre Syndicate. Marcus Loew and Adolph Zukor started with managing nickelodeons and finished with merging the Metro Picture and Goldwyn Picture Corporations into what we know today as the MGM media company. Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, George S. Kaufman, Edna Ferber, and Joseph Stein directed and composed music, lyrics, and prose for successful Broadway musicals such as *Annie Get your Gun*, *Funny Face*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Show Boat*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*.

²⁹ Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 468–70. Reformed Jews did not object to theatre while some late-nineteenth-century Protestants, especially Methodists and Baptists, still did.

oppose?”³⁰ In Harby’s metaphor, theatre’s power to influence minds can, if ethically channeled, work in favor of noble values. Hence being directly involved in creating theatrical entertainments offered Jews the chance to express their own system of values in opposition or as an alternative to Protestant values.

A fundamental component of the Jewish value system in America is what Andrea Most terms “theatrical liberalism.” According to Most, first- and second-generation Jewish American performers negotiated a position for themselves within American Protestant liberalism by reimagining key features of traditional Jewish culture as theatrical. The three most “theatrical” aspects of Jewish culture are: the prioritizing of external action over internal intention; the celebration of self-fashioning as a “ticket to freedom;” and an idea of community building based on a system of obligations rather than private rights. These cultural qualities not only made Jews particularly inclined to join the production of American theatrical entertainments, but they also explain how Jews survived and thrived in an entertainment economy that was based on liberal Protestant views.³¹

Firstly, in the Judaic worldview what matters is the deed: truth resides in action, not the intention. By prioritizing external action over internal intention, Jews on and off the stage demonstrated that acting is the opposite of deceiving: it is a way to express one’s authentic self with facts. Possibly, this principle was at the foundation of Jewish American contributions to Konstantin Stanislavsky’s Acting Method. While the American “start system” induced an interpretation of Stanislavsky’s teachings self-indulgently in terms of centrality of the actor and

³⁰ Isaac Harby, “Defense of Drama,” in *A Selection from the Miscellaneous Writings of the Late Isaac Harby* (Charleston: J.S. Burges, 1829), 258.

³¹ Most, *Theatrical Liberalism*, 39–87.

his inner emotions, Jewish American teachers of Method acting such as Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Paul Mann sought ways of aligning actor and role by focusing on the actor's interpretative viewpoint and external enactment.³² Secondly, the freedom to "enact oneself" might appear to be a uniquely American form of liberty, yet the celebration of self-fashioning was also an ideal that Jewish immigrants brought to America from the context of the German Enlightenment. Known as *Bildung*, this was a new ideal for the rising middle class, a secular and aesthetic mode of self-creation endorsed broadly but purposefully through education, exposure to art, and cultural diversity. German Jews first, and progressively the rest of the Jewish diaspora bought into this ideal and re-created themselves as cultured members of the European middle class. Lastly, Most notes how unlike the American legal system, which is built on the defense of private rights, Judaic law is based on the concept of duty toward one's community. For instance, Bar/Bat Mitzvah does not celebrate the freedoms coming with the age of majority, but the entrance into a system of obligations that ties the Jewish community together. Likewise, theatre communities thrive when all their members are equally responsible towards one another. In American theatre communities, Jewish artists found a system of responsibilities similar to Judaic law. Here they also felt free to practice acting as the external expression of their internal intentions and re-create themselves as cultured members of society, thus espousing the *Bildung* ideal. Hence Most's concept of "theatrical liberalism" in a nutshell: on one hand, it embraces theatricality as external enactment, self-creation, and belonging to a community toward which one must be obligated while, on the other hand, it contends with a Protestant liberal framework in which personal feelings and private rights are valued highly.

³² As David Krasner powerfully argues, "an important part of the history of the Method is rooted in Yiddish theatre." David Krasner ed., *Method Acting Reconsidered: Theory, Practice, Future* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 22, 30.

Jewish “theatrical liberalism” and opposition to Protestant anti-theatrical sentiment challenge the established theory according to which popular entertainment was the Jewish means to leave ethnic and religious roots behind and be granted admittance into “whiteness.” Arguing that Jewish-created entertainment was a fantasy for an America tolerant of difference implies a view of the entertainment industry as secular space untouched by any religion or cultural practices. This condition is hard to substantiate, especially in early-twentieth-century small-town America where, as Kathryn Oberdeck powerfully argues in *The Evangelist and the Impresario*, cultural hierarchies were transformed at the intersection of Protestantism and performance.³³ Likewise, Judaism has always existed beyond the reaches of organized religious practice. As Sophie Tucker’s and Eddie Cantor’s memoirs confirm, Judaism continued to influence the lives of secular Jews, albeit in ways that were not as obviously “Jewish” as the observance of holidays and dietary restrictions. Rather than creating an alternative secular space, it is more realistic to conceive popular entertainment as a space for American Jews to devise and enact a worldview that could work within the existing Protestant liberal culture and their own Jewish traditions. This entertainment space—secular but influenced by religious values, liberal but built on a system of obligations—was one that Jewish artists entered eagerly.

Besides the cultural reasons detailed above, two major economic factors concerning immigrant entertainments in America should be taken into account to fully justify Jewish majoritarian presence in popular entertainment. The first is a market opportunity created by Irish Americans and eventually taken up by Jewish artists; the second is Jewish historical expertise in managing entertainment as demonstrated in the context of international Yiddish theatres. In *The*

³³ Kathryn J. Oberdeck, *The Evangelist and the Impresario: Religion, Entertainment, and Cultural Politics in America, 1884–1914* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

Shuberts of Broadway, Brooks McNamara argues that following the influx of Eastern European Jews, Jews supplanted the Irish as the “new underclass” willing to “humiliate itself” on American popular theatre stages.³⁴ Inversely, according to Robert Cherry, the decline in the number of Irish Americans involved in commercial theatre was due to their own “adherence to Catholic teachings that viewed bodily pleasure and sexuality as inherently sinful.”³⁵ Jewish immigrants were much more accepting of pleasurable activities and overt female sexuality;³⁶ thus, as song and dance numbers interspersed with sexual references became canonical in variety theatre (*Variety*’s leading critic Sime Silverman famously called such numbers “just elaborate stripteases”), Jewish artists met a demand that fewer Irish Catholics were open to satisfy.³⁷ Rather than being mutually exclusive, McNamara’s and Cherry’s claims might have operated simultaneously: as second-generation Irish Americans were “dissassimilating” (in Horace Kellen’s terminology) by reconnecting to Catholic tenets and distancing themselves from what they considered low entertainments, Jews displaced the Irish as the “new underclass” in immigration and performance hierarchies.

³⁴ Brooks McNamara, *The Shuberts of Broadway* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). 3.

³⁵ Robert Cherry, “Jewish Displacement of Irish Americans in Vaudeville: The Role of Religious and Cultural Values,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 25, no. 3 (December 25, 2013): 344–57, 345. Second-generation Irish Americans grew up in the devotional movement built by Cardinal Cullen in Ireland. Cullen’s movement emphasized the rejection of bodily pleasures to overcome sin: this perspective was brought to America by priests trained under his guidance. According to Maureen Dezell, by 1900, three-quarters of US church hierarchy was Irish. Their “mission” was “increasingly one of ‘immigrant uplift,’ the tenets of which were as simple as those Cullen’s Church had prescribed for the peasantry of Ireland: “Go to Mass, receive the sacraments, send your children to Catholic schools, do as the nuns and priests say, give money, avoid drunkenness and impurity.” Maureen Dezell, *Irish America: Coming into Clover* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 63.

³⁶ Paul Michael Yedwab, *Sex in the Texts* (UAHC Press, 2001). Talmud law includes indications on sexual intercourse and pleasure, as for example on the duty to perform marital obligations without clothes or the possibility of having intercourse “naturally or unnaturally, provided that [the man] does not expend semen to no purpose.”

³⁷ Harley Erdman, *Staging the Jew: The Performance of an American Ethnicity, 1860–1920* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 98–9.

Concurrently, Yiddish theatrical companies were banned in the Russian Empire and began to travel across Europe, North and South America.³⁸ In the United States, shows were produced in New York and, increasingly, in East Coast cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore where some of the Jewish American diaspora begun to relocate in the first decade of the twentieth century.³⁹ Already in 1905, comic actors from the Yiddish theatre were as popular as their mainstream colleagues in American vaudeville. As social workers in New York City's settlement-house movement noticed, saloons and dance halls were being converted at an alarming rate, as "every important street on the Lower East Side has its glaring electric sign which announces 'Jewish Vaudeville House.'" ⁴⁰ What concerned social workers the most was the inaccessibility of the language and, in some cases, aesthetic forms, as they believed these to be codes that encouraged immigrant audiences to question their assimilation to the American middle class.⁴¹ In the words of one settlement worker, "the songs are suggestive of everything but what is proper, the choruses are full of double meanings, and the jokes have broad and unmistakable hints of things indecent."⁴² Yet, contrary to social workers' expectations, there was

³⁸ Marvin L. Seiger, "A History of the Yiddish Theatre in New York City to 1892" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1960), 164–5. Yiddish theatre was officially banned in the Russian empire in 1883.

³⁹ Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 11, 22. Caplan situates the birth of professional Yiddish theatre in the 1870s with Avrom Goldfaden. The company was founded in modern-day Romania; between 1881 and 1905, they opened productions in Lemberg, Paris, Bucharest, and New York. Former members of the renowned Vilna troupe founded several Yiddish theatre companies around the world. In the United States only, Caplan counts nine: the Bronx Art Theater, Chicago Dramatische Gezelshaft, Ensemble Art Theater, Jewish Art Theater, New Yiddish Art Theater, Nit Gedayget, Second Avenue Theater, Unzer Teater, and the Yiddish Theater Unit of the Federal Theater Project.

⁴⁰ Paul Klapper, "The Yiddish Music Hall," *University Settlement Studies* 2, no. 4 (1905): 20–1.

⁴¹ Rick DesRochers, *The New Humor in the Progressive Era: Americanization and the Vaudeville Comedian* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 56.

⁴² Klapper, "The Yiddish Music Hall," 22; see also Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audience: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 132–5.

no sharp divide between Yiddish and mainstream middle-class entertainments. In fact, the comic Yiddish theater played a crucial role as testing ground both artistically and entrepreneurially for several Jewish American mainstream vaudevillians including, not coincidentally, Sophie Tucker and Eddie Cantor.⁴³

It is commonplace for scholars of culture to identify artistic productions as standing either inside or outside the mainstream. The former has been defined “dominant” or “majoritarian,” while the latter “subversive” or “minoritarian.”⁴⁴ This distinction is not a simple one to make when it comes to Jewish American contributions to popular entertainment. Being both “foreign” in the US and culturally prominent in popular theatres, Jewish American entertainers are in Henry Bial’s terminology a “dominant minority.” Yet their art is not always “minoritarian” in its subversive or revolutionary potential. Bial writes:

The binary, dominant versus oppressed paradigm of ethnic and cultural studies lacks a vocabulary that can address the phenomenon of a *dominant minority*. [...] Contemporary performance theory holds that performance’s political potential lies largely in its power to disrupt the existing social order [...] But the Jewish minority, which we might call a dominant minority, is not looking to overturn the entire applectart. Its political activism as played out in theater is limited largely to addressing issues of racial and ethnic discrimination.⁴⁵

⁴³ Sabine Haenni, *The Immigrant Scene: Ethnic Amusements in New York, 1880–1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 6. Haenni argues that ethnicity and commercial culture are not necessarily opposed to one another. Precisely because they were commercial public spheres, not just an ethnic subcultural phenomenon, ethnic theaters functioned as testing grounds to experiment with new forms of public and individual identity presentation that were later adopted by the mainstream. On Tucker’s exposure to Yiddish theatre, see Armond Fields, *Sophie Tucker: First Lady of Show Business* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2003), 10–2. On Cantor’s first performance in the Yiddish musical hall, see Eddie Cantor, *My Life Is in Your Hands* (New York, London: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 75.

⁴⁴ Arguably, the text that first and most influentially challenged this model was Stuart Hall’s “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular” (1981). Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays*, vol. 1 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 347–61.

⁴⁵ Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 8. Emphasis in original.

In the performance analyses that follow, I grapple with Jewish paradoxical positionality as an ethnic and religious minority in America and “dominant minority” in popular entertainment. Second-generation Jewish American performers could count on a network of impresarios, theatre owners, agents, and publicists of Jewish origins who, a generation prior, had created ethnic as well as mainstream performance spaces in major American cities. Caught in the middle of their “disassimilation” process, these artists exploited their privileged positions in show business to “address issues of racial and ethnic discrimination” through performance. To them fell the responsibility of altering the established “stage Jew” stereotype that both Gentiles and fresh-off-the-boat Jews had popularized between the 1880s and the 1900s. They were not “looking to overturn the entire applecart,” yet they gave visibility to modern embodiments of Jewish Americanness. They did so despite race theorists fueling discussions on immigration restriction; in fact, they turned some contemporaneous xenophobic concepts on their head. They mocked those who suffered from “proteophobia” by creating racially hybrid characters. They took proud ownership of their own “peculiar versatility” and shaped their “formless plasma” into some of the most humorous racial characters of their time. Among them, many took up blackface performance. So-called Jewish blackface became a staple of white vaudeville during the first two decades of the twentieth century. As vaudeville veteran Joe Laurie recalled, many blackface comedians simply wore black makeup “and talked ‘white.’ No dialect, didn’t even try, in fact some of them told Hebe [Jewish] stories in blackface.”⁴⁶ This chapter shows how Jewish blackface was performed and how it “address[ed] issues of racial and ethnic discrimination” despite blackface’s racist history.

⁴⁶ Joe Laurie Jr., *Vaudeville from the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Holt, 1953), 139.

Sophie Tucker and Eddie Cantor: A Short Note on Methodology

Investigating Jewish blackface has its unique challenges. As Laurie's comment above implies, many performers were profiting from it. However, few tried to articulate their motivations, especially once blackface left the theatre stage in the 1930s.⁴⁷ Thus, while archival evidence of Jewish blackface is extensive, the reliability of its sources is arguable. Sophie Tucker and Eddie Cantor are only two among the many Jewish artists who performed in blackface during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Others include Fanny Brice, Al Jolson, George Burns, and Nora Bayes, but there were many more. I selected Tucker and Cantor for this study due to the comparability of their career trajectories and childhood experiences of poverty and marginality in Orthodox Jewish communities. Moreover, they both wrote best-selling autobiographies that, while not always trustworthy (they were, after all, meant to impress their fans), contain some illuminating reflections on blackface performance's different enactments, receptions, and effects.

Sophie Tucker, born in 1886 "on the road" somewhere between today's Ukraine and the port of Hamburg, grew up in a Jewish Orthodox family in Hartford, Connecticut.⁴⁸ Her father left their Russian shtetl first, with her pregnant mother and older brother following a few months later (fig. 4.1). In Hartford, the family's Kosher restaurant became a favored meeting point for the Jewish community and Tucker's only place to practice singing while she entertained

⁴⁷ Michael Rogin, *Blackface, white Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 252. In the interwar period, blackface performance transitioned from theatre stages into film. Civil Rights activists successfully campaigned against the use of blackface in arts and the media but, Rogin argues, "as the civil rights stirrings in the wake of World War II discredited literal blackface, so the continuation of metaphorical blackface contributed to the fragmentation of the 1960s movement." Different forms of blackface performance still survive today, see discussion on page 233.

⁴⁸ Sophie Tucker's biography is reconstructed from: Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Red Hot Mama: The Life of Sophie Tucker* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018); Armond Fields, *Sophie Tucker*; and Tucker's own memoirs *Some of These Days; the Autobiography of Sophie Tucker* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1946).

undemanding customers. Tucker reached New York City in 1906 as a nineteen-year-old self-taught singer who had never lived in a big city before. She had been married and divorced already, and to pursue a career in entertainment she had left a three-year-old son behind in the care of her mother. She found her first residence in Manhattan's Tenderloin district, a prominently Black neighborhood also known as a "red-light" district.⁴⁹ Other single white or white-looking women would have tried to avoid the area not to be mistaken for sex workers, but as Tucker made clear in her autobiography, she knew how to defend herself from solicitation and actually appreciated the racial integration.⁵⁰ In fact, having Tin Pan Alley at a walking distance was a big convenience. As she reminisced, she used to visit this mixed-race music establishment at least once a week, and here she started collaborations with songwriters such as Irving Berlin, who was Jewish, and Shelton Brooks, who was African American.

Meanwhile, Eddie Cantor was born in New York City in 1892.⁵¹ He was orphaned at two years of age and raised by his maternal grandmother, a sixty-three-year-old cigar maker who had recently joined her sick daughter in America after selling off her business in Russia. May Laws did not allow Jews to own manufacturing firms, thus her "retirement" was not by choice. Alone

⁴⁹ Rosamond Johnson, James Reese Europe, and George Walker also lived in the Tenderloin at the time. James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 1930 (New York: DaCapo Press, 1991), 118–9.

⁵⁰ Tucker, *Some of These Days*, 24–5. In her memoirs, Tucker recalls the night she went to seek employment at the German Village, a beer hall near her apartment in the Tenderloin. On her way to the place, two men solicited her sexual services. At the third request, she "shoved [the man] with such force he fell into the gutter." When a fourth man harassed her at the German Village, she reacted so violently that the police had to intervene. Tucker must have experienced sexual harassment daily while working at the German Village, but she clearly knew how to defend herself.

⁵¹ Eddie Cantor's biography is reconstructed from: David Weinstein, *The Eddie Cantor Story: a Jewish Life in Performance and Politics* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2018); Herbert G. Goldman, *Banjo Eyes: Eddie Cantor and the Birth of Modern Stardom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); James Fisher, *Eddie Cantor: A Bio-Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1997); and Cantor's own memories: *My Life is in Your Hands* (New York; London: Harper & Brothers, 1928); *Take My Life* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957); and typescripts of Cantor's draft autobiography in Eddie Cantor Papers (ECP), B 33, Charles E. Young Research Library's Special Collections, University of California Los Angeles.

in New York after her daughter's death, and with a grandchild to care for, she put her business acumen to work and became a respected headhunter. She connected established Jewish families in the city with fresh-off-the-boat Polish girls looking for work as domestic servants. Economic hardship was real for grandmother and child, so much so that for a time they were forced to move in with the Polish girls in a tenement basement. Despite the bleak circumstances, or perhaps because of them, Cantor made comedy his business. "We had to laugh to keep from crying, there was such poverty, such misery and disease," he recalled in his memoir.⁵² He started by creating impressions of his Polish flat mates and other Lower East Side children. As a teenager at Surprise Lake Camp, a tuition-free summer camp for poor Jewish boys, he became "camp clown in the hope that [he]'d be held over for more than two weeks" (fig. 4.2).⁵³ Later, he took a job as a singing comedian at a nightclub in Coney Island to escape the drudgery of factory work.

⁵² Typescripts of Cantor's draft autobiography, 4, ECP.

⁵³ Ibid., 11. Surprise Lake Camp was young Cantor's respite from the pollution and poverty of the Lower East Side. The Camp is still operating today and is the oldest Jewish camp in the United States.
<https://surpriselake.org/about/history/>



Fig. 4.1: The Abuza Family. M. A. Shea Studio, 1890 ca. From left to right: Jennie holding Anna, Sonia (Sophie Tucker) at five years of age, Charles, and Philip. Sophie Tucker Collection, Museum of the City of New York.



Fig. 4.2: Eddie Cantor (sitting, bottom right) at Surprise Lake Camp. Photographer/date unknown. Eddie Cantor Papers, B 47, Charles E. Young Research Library's Special Collections, University of California Los Angeles.

Neither Tucker nor Cantor received formal acting or musical training, yet they became two of the most popular singing comedians in the country. Cantor's first amateur performance came about on a bet, while for Tucker it was an opportunity to quit her waitressing job. Neither had a sponsor or official introduction to the entertainment industry, yet both rose from amateur nights to burlesque, and from big-time vaudeville to Broadway, partly thanks to an established network of Jewish entertainment workers in New York City (fig. 4.3). Lastly, while they both

grew up in segregated Jewish Orthodox communities, first their touring shows, and later radio, film, and television brought them close to American publics from coast to coast. They were active on stage and screen until they passed away, Cantor in 1962 and Tucker in 1966.

Many have looked for the secret of Tucker's and Cantor's long successful careers, the shared opinion being that both artists knew when and how to adjust their styles to evolving societies and media. They also recognized when the time was right to close a routine with a classic from their well-known repertoires and in this way satisfy their old loyal followers. But beyond the ability to adapt to their times and audiences, both artists knew how to exploit blackface formal elements to first advance and eventually, powerfully assert their modern Jewish American identities. Within white vaudeville's dominant culture, they produced wholly new conceptions of Jewish American femininity as brashness and over sexuality and Jewish American masculinity as elegance and witty intellectuality. Their original blackface characters assisted them in two ways. By signifying the jazz nightclub culture of the time, Tucker's blackface injected modern glamour and sexual explicitness into outdated ideas of demure Jewishness. Comparably, by referencing but clearly contrasting with backward, dimwit minstrel types, Cantor's blackface opposed the stereotypical image of old-world uneducated Jewish immigrants as they had been depicted by nativist racial theories.



Fig. 4.3: From left to right: William Morris, Eddie Cantor, Sophie Tucker, and George Jessel. Harold Steen Studios, undated. Eddie Cantor Papers, B 46, Charles E. Young Research Library's Special Collections, University of California Los Angeles. Morris and Jessel were also Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Jessel introduced Cantor to producer Gus Edwards, who employed both in the act *Kid Kabaret* in 1912. Morris was Tucker's life-long manager and friend. On the back of the photograph a typed note reads: "William Morris, president of the Jewish Theatrical Guild of America, listening in on a rehearsal of George Jessel and Sophie Tucker for a 'surprise skit' which they intend to enact at the testimonial dinner given by the Jewish Theatrical Guild in honor of their second vice-president, George Jessel, on October 27th at the Hotel Commodore."

My analysis of Tucker and Cantor's Jewish blackface is built on a vast literature that emphasizes the recursion of blackface beyond the confines of nineteenth-century minstrelsy. W.T. Lahmon Jr. and Eric Lott in cultural studies, David Savran and Jeffrey Melnick in theatre and musicology, and Susan Manning and Danielle Robinson in dance studies illuminate the many ways in which blackface can be performed without any makeup or costumes through prose

and poetry, visual arts, music composition, voice, and dance.⁵⁴ Manning calls this phenomenon “metaphorical minstrelsy,” while in Lahmon’s terminology blackface re-emerges at different points in time as “lore cycles,” or revivals that, due to the new contexts eliciting them, generate radical and often revolutionary cultural products. My analyses also align with more recent works by Robin Bernstein and Tavia Nyong’o in which blackface is shown to operate well into the twenty-first century for the achievement of specific cultural and political agendas. Bernstein and Nyong’o expose repetitions of blackface minstrelsy’s repertoires in gesture, intonation, material culture, and children’s literature not so much to condemn the form from a moral standpoint, but to disrupt the framework opposing uncritical recuperation and blanket censure that has traditionally defined minstrelsy historiography.⁵⁵

I owe my own conceptualization of blackface performance as either explicit or symbolic to this body of work. Both Tucker and Cantor started out by explicitly referencing blackface minstrelsy’s stock characters. Once they abandoned grease paint, wigs, and minstrelsy’s traditional costumes—Tucker after only two years, Cantor a decade after his professional debut—both continued to inject their progressively “Jewish” acts with references to Black culture and previous blackface personae. I call these practices symbolic blackface. Tucker sung “coon” songs, ragtime, jazz, and blues—all music styles marked Black due to their lyrics, spirit,

⁵⁴ W. T. Lahmon Jr., “Ebery Time I Wheel About I Jump Jim Crow: Cycles of Minstrel Transgression from Cool white to Vanilla Ice,” in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Black face Minstrelsy*, Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara eds. (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*; Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Danielle Robinson, *Modern Moves: Dancing Race during the Ragtime and Jazz Eras* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵⁵ Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Tavia Nyong’o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

and raced origin stories. Additionally, because of her simulated Southern accent and deep tones, Tucker's recorded voice was often mistaken for that of a Black blues singer. Cantor, on his part, continued to revive his blackface character in cameo roles on film and television until the end of his career (fig. 4.4). Moreover, the comedic way in which he rotated his big bulging eyes continued to reference his blackface persona even when he did not wear any makeup. Reviewers responded to Cantor *au naturel* by calling these acts "whiteface," a descriptor that exploited Blackness as an ever-present means of comparison with Cantor's Jewish identity.⁵⁶

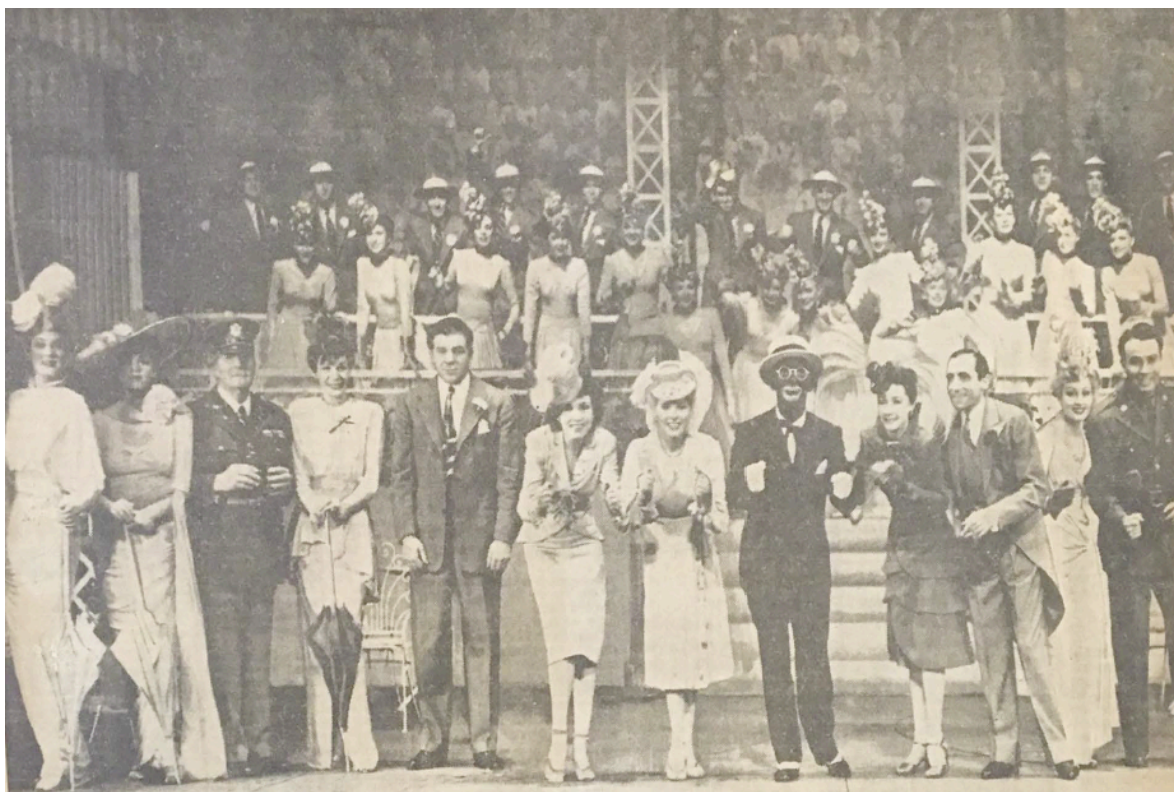


Fig. 4.4: "A Scene from the New Eddie Cantor Musical Comedy, 'Banjo Eyes,'" December 24, 1941, Hollywood Theatre, New York. Clipping in Eddie Cantor Papers, B 58, Charles E. Young Research Library's Special Collections, University of California Los Angeles.

⁵⁶ In these so-called "whiteface" acts, no whitening makeup was ever involved, and Cantor never tried to appropriate white-identified gestures, vocabulary, or social entitlements as performers of the African diaspora had done since the earliest days of the New World. Such a use of whiteface has been theorized by Marvin McCallister in *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Blackface historiography cannot promote either uncritical recuperation or moral condemnation because blackface is, *really*, neither black nor white, but both. Due to its American beginnings in minstrelsy, the racism intrinsic in the form cannot be discounted. Yet, blackface has been deployed in a myriad of contexts and manifestations for purposes beyond the denigration of Black people and even to raise consciousness in the fight against racism. Some examples from the last fifty years include plays by Douglas Turner Ward (*Day of Absence*, 1971), The Wooster Group (*Route 1 and 9*, 1981, and their original direction of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, 1995), Young Jean Lee (*The Shipment*, 2009), and Branden Jacob-Jenkins (*Neighbors*, 2010, and *An Octoroon*, 2014). As Tracy C. Davis and Catherine M. Cole claim in their 2013 *TDR: The Drama Review* issue "Routes of Blackface," the study of blackface performance "demands research methods and theoretical tools as multiple, heterodox, and polymorphous as the form itself."⁵⁷ In what follows, I investigate Tucker's and Cantor's self-created life narratives, audience receptions, and personal relationships in the entertainment industry. I analyze their acts' visual, sonic, and dramaturgical components employing theories that span from dance, to sound, to gender and sexuality studies. Explicitly or symbolically, Tucker and Cantor utilized the vocabulary of blackface to define their hyphenated identities as modern American Jews. My purpose is to neither condemn nor excuse, but survey Tucker and Cantor's methods, potential motivations, and outcomes to demonstrate how blackface could operate beyond the oppositional confines of Blackness or whiteness to articulate a modern understanding of Jewish Americanness.

⁵⁷ Catherine M. Cole and Tracy C. Davis, "Routes of Blackface," *TDR: The Drama Review* 57, no. 2 (2013): 7–12. 8.

Sophie Tucker, “The Jewish Girl with a Colored Voice”⁵⁸

For her vaudeville debut, Sophie Tucker performed in blackface. Looking back on that amateur night in 1906, she described the event as a turning point for her life and career. As she waited for her turn to perform, she overheard the producer ordering an assistant: “This one’s so big and ugly the crowd out front will razz her. Better get some cork and black her up. She’ll kill them.”⁵⁹ Blackface was not a specialty for attractive young women, as Tucker became aware on approaching the world of vaudeville for the first time. But rather than giving up the chance to get on stage, she put up with the insult and exploited the situation. Ultimately, As Lori Harrison-Kahan has stressed, blackface was just a “painful initiation rite” for Tucker; in other words, a reminder that her plump body was not fit to play sexy or elegant feminine roles.⁶⁰ But as unpleasant as it may have been according to this interpretation, blackface performance was a gateway to white mainstream entertainment, and Tucker pragmatically took advantage of it disregarding any possible moral qualms.

Occasional amateur nights eventually opened the way to performing in vaudeville. Tucker’s first engagement on the small-time vaudeville circuit was with Joe Woods, a “creator” and manager of young talent. Woods got artists started in acts of his own conception. His booking fee also included the rental of costumes and props, so while performers had no say in what they wore on stage, they were still responsible for keeping costumes clean and in good shape. The dress Woods gave Tucker was of white satin: “It’ll look good with blackface,”

⁵⁸ The appellation was frequently used to title reviews of Sophie Tucker’s stage works in theatre and entertainment publications such as the *New York Clipper*, *Variety*, and *The Billboard*.

⁵⁹ Tucker, *Some of These Days*, 33.

⁶⁰ Lori Harrison-Kahan, *The White Negress: Literature, Minstrelsy, and the Black–Jewish Imaginary* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 17.

Tucker remembered him saying. Tucker pleaded him to try her out without the makeup, but he would not listen. “That’s how I became a blackface singer,” Tucker concluded—a “Manipulator of Coon Melodies,” as Woods billed her on her first New York date in December 1907.⁶¹

Tucker soon realized that blackface not only concealed her feminine traits, but it also put her salary at risk. Using burnt cork for makeup, she would often stain Wood’s white satin dress and pay for cleaning out of pocket. The blacking process started with applying an under layer of grease—cocoa butter, Vaseline, or Crisco oil were common—which gave a shiny effect to the cork powder but also caused smearing. “The difficulty of keeping the dress clean was too great,” Tucker recollected. For this reason, once on tour and away from Woods’ controlling ways, she “changed to a high-yellow make-up and rented a black velvet dress which gave a contrast” (fig. 4.5).⁶² This transition is significant: while burnt cork only produced the unnatural black used by blackface minstrels, shades of grease paint could be easily mixed to intensify or tone down the color at the performer’s need.⁶³ As a result, Tucker’s appearance lost any reference to minstrelsy: the big red lips and cartoonish look were gone and, in their place, was an elegantly dressed and thoroughly made-up young woman.

⁶¹ Tucker, *Some of These Days*, 35.

⁶² Tucker, *Some of These Days*, 35.

⁶³ S. J. Adair Fitz-Gerald, *How to “Make Up:” A Practical Guide for Amateurs and Beginners* (New York: Samuel French Publisher), 1901; Jack Haverly, *Negro Minstrels: A Complete Guide to Negro Minstrelsy* (Chicago: F.J. Drake & Company), 1902; James Young, *Making Up: A Practical and Exhaustive Treatise on This Art for Professionals and Amateurs* (New York: M. Witmark & Sons Publishers, 1905). Before makeup artist Max Factor (Maksymilian Faktorowicz, a Polish immigrant of Jewish heritage) revolutionized the business with his Flexible Greasepaint in 1914, grease paint was only advertised in stage makeup manuals. Meant to assist amateurs and inexperienced professionals, these manuals instructed on makeup application for different effects: old age, sickness, youth etc. They also taught how to use makeup to reproduce contemporaneous racist images. In the chapter often titled “Nationalities,” they instructed on shade selection and mixing (sticks came in ten different gradations) to achieve the skin tone “typical” of a certain ethnicity. This chapter treated nationalities, races, and ethnicities indiscriminately. Not surprisingly, instructions for the “Nigger Minstrels” (Fitzgerald) or “Minstrel Negro” (Young) were given separately. Grease paint was only gradually adopted by blackface performers as it could not accomplish the pitch-black effect that was key to impersonate Blackness in its most exaggerated and derogatory form.



Fig. 4.5: Sophie Tucker in blackface, publicity photograph. Photographer/date unknown. Theatre Biography Collection, B 409, Bio File Code T8354.3, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, the University of Texas at Austin. Published in various newspapers, this image suggests that Tucker was wearing her “high yellow” makeup already in 1907, only one year after her vaudeville debut in blackface.

At the act's closing, Tucker would peel off one of her long white gloves and wave at the audience. The surprise effect worked so well that it could be compared to the reveal of a magic trick: "When I would pull off one of my gloves and show that I was white there'd be a sort of surprised gasp, then a howl of laughter." The audience was particularly bewildered by the contrast between the color of Tucker's skin and the quality of her voice. Not only were her low tones rare in a young white woman, but her Southern accent, she claimed, "had got to be as thick and smooth as molasses."⁶⁴ The accent further disoriented Tucker's patrons: "I just learned this Southern accent doing a blackface act for two years," she explained apologetically.⁶⁵ It is unlikely that Black audience members from Southern states attended Tucker's performances on the white vaudeville circuit, hence the challenge to attest to the universal credibility of Tucker's imitation. But whether Tucker's act was convincing enough or perhaps considered appropriate is not the point here. What is significant is to recognize how Tucker's faked "authenticity" in voice and accent, combined with a repertoire of coon songs and "high-yellow" makeup changed her act's register from explicit to symbolic blackface.

By the end of 1909, Tucker's growing popularity gave her the freedom to give up the makeup entirely, yet music and dance styles continued to contribute signs of Blackness to her performances. She replaced coon songs with ragtime, and progressively ragtime with jazz and blues songs. Over the following decade, her vaudeville acts became increasingly marked by their racial diversity in casting and content. They included an all-Jewish jazz band, African American shimmy dancers, references to her Jewish immigrant background in banter and exchanges with

⁶⁴ Tucker, *Some of These Days*, 40.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

the audience, and jazz and blues song by either Jewish or African American composers that she sang in her Southern dialect imitation, Yiddish, or a mix of both.⁶⁶

Coon songs, ragtime, jazz, and blues all have histories of contested racial meanings and authorship. Despite frequent appropriations and revisions by Jewish performers, these four musical genres were “marked Black” or understood to have originated in African American communities. Coon songs were first introduced in late-nineteenth-century minstrel shows. Intended as comedy, the songs ranged from playful to dismissive to blatantly racist. However cruel, they also romanticized the nostalgia for a preindustrial plantation South.⁶⁷ According to Pamela Lavitt Brown, Jewish female singers in the 1890s built a “minstrel continuum” by transposing coon songs from minstrelsy to vaudeville. Here “coon shouting” only superficially referenced Blackness; in fact, it came to refer to performances by Jewish female singers who employed a variety of vocal styles, eccentric costumes, character impersonation, Black vernacular, and cakewalk steps.⁶⁸ Sonically, rather than pushing from the diaphragm, the singer transposed the tone upwards by a fifth, from C to G, so as to use the upper ranges of her voice. This produced the “shouting” effect and the sexually appealing vocal stretch that was commonly meant by the phrase “gettin’ hot” used to describe both the aural and bold physical dimension of

⁶⁶ *The New York Clipper*, September 20, 1922; *Variety*, September 21, 1922. Sophie Tucker Scrapbooks (STS), NYPLPA. Upon returning from a tour of England in 1922, Tucker greeted her fans on the American vaudeville circuit with a program featuring a Jewish piano player, a chorus of eleven African American dancers, and a wide musical repertoire including: a blues number, “Do I, Bluebird Blues,” in part sung in the style of a Jewish Cantor; a ragtime tune performed in Black English Vernacular about “Lovin’ Sam Sheik of Alabam,” “a heart breakin’ man’ for whom ‘there ain’t a high-brown gal in town who wouldn’t throw her daddy down” (lyrics by Jack Yellen, music by Milton Ager (New York: Ager, Yellen & Bornstein Inc., 1922); and a provocative jazz song, “Bad Little Boys aren’t Goody-Good to the Goody-Good Little Girls,” which she performed in English first and encored in Yiddish.

⁶⁷ Annemarie Bean, “Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy,” in *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, 245–56.

⁶⁸ Pamela Lavitt Brown, “First of the Red Hot Mamas: ‘Coon Shouting’ and the Jewish Ziegfeld Girl,” *American Jewish History* 87, no. 4 (December 1, 1999): 253–90.

coon shouting performance.⁶⁹ Like many coon shouters, Sophie Tucker had a voice famous for its ability to project across large theatres. In fact, critics praised Tucker for her “iron lungs” and claimed that her voice could be heard loud and clear even with her back turned to the audience.⁷⁰

As the popularity of coon songs coincided with the expansion of the sheet-music business, so the demand for ragtime compositions in the 1900s was reinforced by the increment in number of published “piano rags” and pianofortes sold in the United States.⁷¹ Ragtime rose to prominence as a piano music and was later transformed into ragtime songs in the wake of Irving Berlin’s “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” (1911).⁷² Debates about whether ragtime was a new genre or just a style kept composers occupied for at least two decades. According to Irving Berlin, ragtime came to refer virtually to any “Negro dialect song with medium to lively tempo, or a syncopated rhythm.”⁷³ James Reese Europe, the African American band leader and composer, claimed that “there never was any such music” as ragtime; rather the word was a “fun name given to Negro rhythm” by white musicians.⁷⁴ Whatever constituted ragtime, it was clear to both Jewish and African American contemporary observers that it was music in some way “marked Black.” It was also clear that somehow it originated a more “refined” version known as jazz. When exactly ragtime turned into jazz is impossible to date. As one expert for the music journal

⁶⁹ John J. Niles, “Shout, Coon, Shout!” *Musical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (October 1930): 516–30. 516–8, 527.

⁷⁰ Mordaunt Hall, “The Screen,” *New York Times*, June 5, 1929, 26.

⁷¹ James H. Dorman, “Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction American Blacks: The ‘Coon Song’ Phenomenon of the Gilded Age,” *American Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 450–67, 453. In 1890, at least 600 coon songs were published in sheet music form and many sold millions of copies.

⁷² Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 27.

⁷³ Edward Berlin, “Ragtime Songs,” in *Ragtime: Its History, Composers, and Music*, John Edward Hasse ed. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985), 73.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900–1950* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982), 70.

Etude wrote in 1924, “at the end of the great war, American ragtime simply went wild and that was Jazz.”⁷⁵

Stories about the origin of jazz changed periodically according to the culture producing them. In the early-twentieth century, the most widespread account told of its African American inception and ensuing assimilation into Euro-American traditions largely disseminated by Jews.⁷⁶ This narrative supported the biased opinion according to which African Americans were incapable of preserving their own folk materials or developing them into musical forms.⁷⁷ In fact, it contributed to the belief by which African American music needed the Jewish “refining touch” to reach dignified form. As Jeffrey Melnick appropriately argues in *A Right to Sing the Blues*, musical evolutions and their corresponding narratives are hard to reconstruct because they were often caused by several overlapping “extramusical concerns,” “musical developments, in short, could never remain untouched by market concerns, racial ideologies, and urban demographics, to name but three shaping influences.”⁷⁸ In the case of jazz, racism and cultural appropriation played fundamental roles.

⁷⁵ *Etude*, January 1924, 518.

⁷⁶ Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown*, 23–5.

⁷⁷ Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 167. See also Howard L. Sacks and Judith Sacks, *Way up North in Dixie: A Black Family's Claim to the Confederate Anthem* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993). This idea picked up with white attempts to collect and analyze African American spirituals in the nineteenth century. The reality was much more nuanced. Howard L. Sacks and Judith Sacks expose the relationship between Black folk music and its white appropriations in the context of blackface minstrelsy. They write: “Some scholars accept the minstrels’ claims of authenticity, viewing the early minstrels essentially as folklorists or anthropologists whose site of fieldwork was the Southern plantation and whose population under study was slaves. Other writers observe that since most of the early minstrels were Northerners, they would have had little opportunity to interact with plantation folk [...] As different as these interpretations sound, they all carry a troubling blind spot, namely, a focus on blacks in the South and nowhere else as models for blackface artists” (8).

⁷⁸ Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 28.

Blues was perhaps the genre over which African Americans retained authorship the longest.⁷⁹ Its vocal expressions are especially challenging to execute for voices higher than contraltos, which justifies the predominance of male voices and so-called contraltos “profondo” (female bass voices) in the business. Sophie Tucker possessed the range to both sing low blues notes and to “shout” high coon melodies. The movement and tonal quality of Tucker’s voice stood out for three typical features associated with Black blues singing: the restriction and sudden expansion of the range, the switch from singing to speaking and back again, and a characteristic bass wavering note.⁸⁰ Moreover, she fit the character of many blues songs. Black blues singers used to sing about life failures, freedom from marriage and relationships, and “red hot mamas” as women who are “‘red hot’ in [their] sexual appetite but maternal in authority, allure, and dangerously enveloping possessiveness.”⁸¹ Tucker’s use of sexual references in her songs, stories of her three failed marriages, and jokes about her stout figure and domineering attitude can be traced back to the blues tradition of empowered Black women.⁸² As she sang in “Red Hot Mama:” “I could make a music master drop his fiddle / Make a bald-headed man part

⁷⁹ Ulrich Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties: A Story in Black and White* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011). Adelt identifies the 1960s as the decade in which the music was reconfigured from Black to white in its production and reception while simultaneously retaining a notion of authenticity that remained connected with constructions of Blackness.

⁸⁰ Peter Antelyes, “Red Hot Mamas: Bessie Smith, Sophie Tucker, and the Ethnic Maternal Voice in American Popular Song,” in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones eds. (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 212–29.

⁸¹ Antelyes, “Red Hot Mamas,” 213.

⁸² Regarding Tucker’s physique: critics often linked Tucker’s deep voice to her weight, suggesting a connection between her lack of femininity and references to Blackness. One reviewer, for instance, linked Tucker’s “short stumpy figure” and “big booming voice” to emphasize what he thought was an unnaturally low and loud voice for a white woman. Pierre Van Paassen, “Lights of London,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 16, 1926, 4.

his hair in the middle / ‘Cuz I’m a red hot mama / Red hot mama / But I’ll have to turn my temper down.”⁸³

While sexual references in songs, an overassertive personality, and a deep contralto voice may have defined Tucker as a blues singer, these qualities do not explain why listeners would mistake Tucker’s recorded voice for that of a Black woman. The fact that her fans referred to Tucker as the “Jewish Bessie Smith,” while African American vocalists such as Ada Ward and Sarah Martin advertised themselves as “The Colored Sophie Tucker” speaks to the ordinary nature of such misidentifications.⁸⁴ In Pierre Schaeffer’s terminology, this was a classic “acousmatic” issue, or the problem of identifying a sound without being able to see its source.⁸⁵ Acousmatic questions originate from the assumption that if we listen carefully, we should eventually be able to identify the sound’s source. Yet, as Nina Sun Eidsheim argues in *The Race of Sound*, we ask the question “not because a possible ontology of vocal uniqueness will deliver us to the doorstep of an answer, but because of voice’s inability to be unique and yield precise answers.”⁸⁶

Voice is not unique due to various anatomical and contextual factors. Specifically, 1) voice is a collection of materially produced phenomena among which the organs involved in the production of sound and the acoustical conditions in which the sound is emitted; 2) voice can

⁸³ Gilbert Well, Bud Cooper, and Fred Rose, “Red Hot Mama,” Sophie Tucker (vocalist), Ted Shapiro (piano), recorded by Okeh, matrix 8552.

⁸⁴ Daphne Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 187, 234.

⁸⁵ Pierre Schaeffer, *Treatise on Musical Objects: An Essay across Disciplines*, Christine North and John Dack trans. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 64.

⁸⁶ Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 3.

change during a vocalizer's lifetime, as musculature, vocal tissue, and ligaments renew and age; and 3) voice is not innate but cultural, meaning that vocal choices are based on the vocalizer position within society.⁸⁷ Eidsheim explains this last point thus:

Vocal communities share an invisible and often unconscious and inexplicable synchronicity of vocal movements and vocal performance, gravitationally attracted by the dynamics of the culture in which the vocalizer participates. [...] Neither speakers nor singers use the entire range of their voices' infinite timbral potentialities. In other words, the decisive factor in honing each voice's potentiality and developing expertise in a timbral area is not individual preference but collective pressure and encouragement.⁸⁸

According to Eidsheim, the culturally inflected characteristic of a voice is timbre, or the “attribute of auditory sensation in terms of which a listener can judge that two sounds similarly presented and having the same loudness and pitch are dissimilar.”⁸⁹ Timbre is also the feature that, in Faedra Chatard Carpenter's words, allows “Americans [to] still talk about what *sounds black or sounds white* in simplified racial terms” despite the recognition that race is a social construct.⁹⁰ As it relates to the “acousmatic question” of Tucker's recorded voice, timbre is what made her “sound black” and thus facilitated her career as a blues singer in a business that was dominated by Black artists. But as Eidsheim concludes, the mistake is in the listener, not the singer. Consciously or not, the singer may develop “expertise in a timbral area” due to collective

⁸⁷ Ibid., 10–1; Farah Jasmine Griffin, “When Malindy Sings: Meditation on Black Women's Vocality,” in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 102–25.

⁸⁸ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 11.

⁸⁹ American National Standards Institute, *Acoustical Terminology*, ANSI S1.1 – 1960 (New York: ANSI, 1960), 45.

⁹⁰ Faedra Chatard Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2014), 195. Emphasis in original.

preference or pressure, yet only by shifting attention from the singer to the listener can we lay bare the racial preconceptions that guide our listening acts.⁹¹

Sophie Tucker's vaudeville acts referenced Blackness musically, aurally, but also kinesthetically. Tucker was often assisted by a cast of African American dancers who demonstrated the shimmy, a dance popular in night clubs that, due to its pronounced pelvis rotations and established association with Black dance traditions was oversexualized and marked as Black. As Jayna Brown writes in *Babylon Girls*, "for white people, versions of Black dance practices served a particular function as they reshaped their sense of individual self to the changing larger social and geopolitical bodies."⁹² African American dances—from the turkey trot, the bunny hug, and the shimmy in the 1910s to the Charleston and black bottom of the 1920s—were appropriated and performed as symbols of the transgression of old gender, sexual, and social mores. To carry out their "transgressing" function, these dances were miscoded to signify a primitive freedom from social constraints and, most importantly, were performed in elegant night clubs and variety theatres where white patrons could feel safe coming in contact with Black cultural forms. In Sophie Tucker's musical acts, Black bodies performing a provocative Black dance like the shimmy made explicit the Black referents implicit in Tucker's music and voice. Moreover, Black dancers emphasized the sexually charged and norm-defying content of songs such as "I Just Couldn't Make Ma Feelings Behave," "I'm Living Alone and I

⁹¹ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 4. On racialized listening practices see also Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

⁹² Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2008), 158–9.

Like it,” or “I Ain’t Takin’ Orders from Noone” and implicitly suggested that such behaviors were associated with Blackness.⁹³

Symbolic blackface also introduced Tucker to the economic profitability of racial impersonation in vaudeville. A typical vaudeville bill was made of eleven to fourteen short acts comprising genres as varied as acrobatics, comedic skits and songs, dancing teams, and short burlesques of contemporaneous Broadway shows. Performance genres, characters, and racial/ethnic identities were attentively calibrated in the process of assembling successful vaudeville programs. The acts’ order on the bill was studied to avoid repetition and enhance the striking alternation of tempos, moods, and specialties.⁹⁴ For example, to avoid “racial redundancy” on a white House’s vaudeville program, African American and white artists in blackface often competed over the single spot reserved for the so-called plantation or coon act.⁹⁵ By leaving explicit blackface performance, Tucker augmented her chances to be booked for any of the other spots available on the bill. In fact, by taking up symbolic blackface, her performance ceased to be a coon act and was instead classified as “impersonation.” Among the different subgenres of impersonation—character songs, imitations of popular figures of the time, and stereotypical depictions of genders, races, and ethnicities—racial impersonation was the most

⁹³ Sheet music from Sophie Tucker Collection, Series I: sheet music, lyrics, and orchestrations, Museum of the City of New York (MCNY).

⁹⁴ Edward Renton, *The Vaudeville Theatre, Building, Operation, Management* (New York: Gotham Press Inc., 1918).

⁹⁵ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 92–127. This rule could not be applied to the TOBA circuit, which was managed and staged exclusively by African Americans. Even on the TOBA, however, and famously in early African American musical comedies, racial impersonation was a regular presence.

recurrent act on a white House's vaudeville program.⁹⁶ Technically, after discarding the blackface, Sophie Tucker's work was in character impersonation. Her lyrics were often in the first person, which made clear for her auditors the connection between her private self and the fictional characters she played. But once she started to inject her Black music, songs, and dances with references to her Jewish identity, character and racial impersonations coalesced and enhanced the unconventional appeal of her acts for both audience members and booking agents.

Tucker's racially hybrid performances could be classified as Jewish blackface starting in 1913, when she first introduced herself to the audience as a "white Jewish girl" and started "interpolating Jewish words in some of [her] songs, just to give the audience a kick."⁹⁷ As Black referents in music, language, and dance multiplied in her acts, Tucker's Jewish identity also became more and more explicit. Eventually, her "introductions" acquired an almost confessional tone and turned into opportunities to expose memories about her Jewish childhood: how she learned to sing at her parents' kosher restaurant in Hartford; how she was a self-taught singer who loved entertaining all sorts of Jewish clientele at the restaurant; and how her old-world family did not approve of her going into a performing career.⁹⁸ As a result, Tucker's private narratives functioned as vehicles to connect with the immigrant and Jewish audiences on an experiential level. Indeed, only by laying bare her "real self" and comparable experiences to the many immigrants in the auditorium was Tucker able to become an audience favorite. As she framed it in her autobiography, there was one thing that never changed over the course of her

⁹⁶ Susan A. Glenn, "Give an Imitation of Me': Vaudeville Mimics and the Play of the Self," *American Quarterly* 50, no.1 (March 1, 1998): 47–76. My survey of vaudeville programs at the Billy Rose Theatre Division of the New York Public Library has shown an average of four impersonators per bill.

⁹⁷ Tucker, *Some of These Days*, 40–1.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

career: “That was the customers’ response to an entertainer who met them at their own level; who was one of them.”⁹⁹

To sum it up in the words of Tucker’s long-time friend and Chicago theatre critic Amy Leslie, Tucker was a “sunny, brave, honest, industrious slave to the public.”¹⁰⁰ Her Yiddish interjections in the middle of her blackface act (or later, jazz and blues songs), and her stories about being the daughter of immigrant Jewish parents were predicated on acute observations of the vaudeville business and, more specifically, its dependence on audiences’ predilection and the spectators’ need to feel closely connected to their favorite artists. In fact, we may even be able to pinpoint the context in which Tucker grasped the potentialities of such stage tactics and began to develop them into her original brand of Jewish blackface. It was the 1912–1913 theatre season, when for thirty-five consecutive weeks she played a “ragtime-singing” maid next to Alexander Carr in the part of the Jewish patriarch in the Chicago production of *Louisiana Lou*, a musical comedy about a wealthy Jewish family in New Orleans (fig. 4.6).¹⁰¹ To further complicate racial descriptors in the production, Tucker wore whitening makeup but sang ragtime songs such as

⁹⁹ Ibid., 135. Tucker’s song selections, wardrobe choices, and racialized presentations were predicated upon the “one bit of advice” that her agent William Morris gave her “again and again”: “always play to your audience.” Consider this episode in Tucker’s memoirs, where she described her experience of winning over an audience at the Colonial vaudeville theatre in Manhattan. The manager had warned her, it was a “tough house” with “a claque.” From previous observations, Tucker figured that if she could find the leader of the claque and win him, she would have the entire house on her side. Shortly before the Monday opening, she went out to the auditorium and identified her man among the rowdy, working-class immigrants sitting in the cheap gallery seats. She thus approached Mike, a “foreign-looking fellow,” introduced herself as an immigrant like him and, with all her frankness, asked him to help her make a good impression. Mike appreciated the humility and decided to collaborate. Tucker went on stage that night and played her whole act to Mike and his friends. Eventually, she could see “the lower part of the house enjoy[ing] my songs. I watched their faces, could see them applaud.” That applause could not have started without Mike’s incitement, which she had won by communicating to his claque that she was one of them. *Some of These Days*, 40–1.

¹⁰⁰ Amy Leslie, *Chicago Daily News*, December 18, 1922.

¹⁰¹ Addison Burkhardt and Frederick Donaghey, *Louisiana Lou*, 1912. Manuscript Division, US Copyrighted Dramas, Microfilm Reel 69, Library of Congress. Piercy Hammond, “Predicting Popularity for *Louisiana Lou*,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 9, 1912.

“Now Am de Time” in her imitation of a Black Southern dialect. Carr was the veteran Jewish impersonator who would play Barney Bernard’s sidekick in the 1923 film version of the acclaimed Jewish comedy by Montague Glass and Charles Klein *Potash and Perlmutter*. Learning from Carr’s Jewish humor, and noticing the audience’s appreciation of her own Black-inflected ragtime, Tucker might have been convinced that the combination was attractive.¹⁰² Not coincidentally, it was during her first vaudeville engagement right after *Louisiana Lou* in the Summer of 1913—and suitably in Chicago, where regulars would have recognized her as *Louisiana Lou*’s “ragtime maid”—that Tucker first presented herself as a Jewish girl. These first experiments with Jewish blackface did not go unnoticed; in fact, they provided Amy Leslie with an argument to raise the “Yiddish fiery” of “ragtime Sophie” above Mary Garden’s Opera singing. As Leslie documented for the *Chicago Daily News*, “Mary never could dream of shouting a bearcat rag with the Yiddish fiery of Tucker nor, fight the frog in her divine throat with the humorous abandon of the ragtime Sophie.”¹⁰³

¹⁰² An undated clipping titled “*Louisiana Lou* at LaSalle” in Sophie Tucker’s September 1911–August 1912 scrapbook defines Tucker “the best singer of ragtime tunes on the stage.”

¹⁰³ Amy Leslie, *Chicago Daily News*, May 12, 1912.



Fig. 4.6: Alexander Carr and Sophie Tucker in *Louisiana Lou*. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, April 3, 1912. Clipping in Sophie Tucker's 1911–2 Scrapbook, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Tucker's explicit references to her Jewish immigrant experience proved a successful tactic to connect with the recent immigrant members of the audience and secure regular engagements. Yiddish lyrics and stories about her Jewish childhood gradually proliferated but did not replace jazzy tunes or African American shimmy dancers. In fact, similar to Jue Quon Tai's blurring of boundaries between her Chinese character and Chinese American identity, by alternating Jewish and Black referents Tucker kept her audience engaged. At Tucker's performances, spectators were not concerned with determining her real racial identity, though that was often the case for her records' listeners. Yet, racial hybridity was a strategy to emphasize novelty and make a performance stand out among the many racial impersonators on the vaudeville circuit. But can this pursuit of novelty alone justify Tucker's retention of Black signifiers? As Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe and African American migration from the rural South brought both groups to metropolitan centers in Northern United States, contact began to take place particularly in the realm of popular culture.¹⁰⁴ In early-twentieth-century entertainment, Jewish and Black performers were among the first who formed long-lasting artistic collaborations.¹⁰⁵ In this environment, I suggest that Tucker's Jewish blackface was not simply a device to amplify novelty on stage, but rather the result of her interracial partnerships.

Like many other white artists who were appreciated as stylish innovators for appropriating Black cultural forms, Tucker referenced Blackness in her acts to redefine her Jewish American femininity as modern and glamorous. However, compared to exploitative racialized performances by contemporaneous white American-born female artists such as Irene

¹⁰⁴ Harrison-Kahan, *The White Negress*, 12.

¹⁰⁵ Savran, *Highbrow/lowdown*.

Castle, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Denis, Tucker recognized her African American colleagues as the creators of the Black expressive forms that she used in her acts.¹⁰⁶In Jayna Brown's articulation, "Tucker's case furnishes one of the strongest arguments for the historical precedent of cross-racial/interclass alliance, involving cooperation between a second-generation Eastern European woman vaudevillian and African American performers."¹⁰⁷ Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake are among the many Black performers who substantiate Brown's claim. In *Reminiscing with Sissle and Blake*, they recalled with gratitude the times when they worked on Tucker's bill as the Dixie Duo, and how they ended up selling their first collaborative piece, "It's All Your Fault," to Tucker.¹⁰⁸ Likewise, blues singer Alberta Hunter provided Tucker with original songs. The two met at the Dreamland Café, an integrated nightclub in Chicago where Hunter was the solo voice for the King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. Recalling that Tucker "sent her maid, Belle, for me to come to her dressing room and teach her songs," Hunter refused Tucker's presumptuous request, but still allowed her piano player to "come over and listen and get everything down."¹⁰⁹ This was only possible because, as Blues historian Daphne Harrison claims, the two women went to see each other perform and drew from each other. Harrison writes: "Tucker sought the rhythms, emotional expressiveness, and Black dialect inflections, and Hunter learned stage presence and the use of sexy innuendoes from Tucker."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 157.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 213–14.

¹⁰⁸ Robert Kimball and William Bolkom, *Reminiscing with Sissle and Blake* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 15–17.

¹⁰⁹ Cited in Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 209.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

The case of dancer Ida Forsyne (fig. 4.7) is less about mutual and straightforward exchange, but it still supports a view of Tucker as an equitable employer of Black labor. From 1922 to 1924 Forsyne toured with Tucker as her personal maid and shimmy dancer for her act. She had recently returned from a period in Russia studying Eastern European folk dance, but after experiencing difficulty finding a job back in the United States, she accepted the maid-dancer arrangement with Tucker. Her job included dancing at the end of Tucker's routine to whip up audience applause, and sometimes doing "the maid part on and off stage," most likely as an old Mammy character for the ballad "M-O-T-H-E-R, the Word that Means the World To Me."¹¹¹ While Forsyne's African American colleagues "thought [she] was wrong not to be taking the bow because [she] was the one getting the applause at the finish," she was never unhappy with her job. On the contrary, she fondly remembered how Tucker defied theatre managers for her, sticking up for her right not to appear in blackface during their act.¹¹² In fact, despite Forsyne having made a name for herself as a "Topsy" role in blackface prior to leaving for Russia, Tucker went beyond that limiting stage stereotype and recognized Forsyne for her professional talent and dancing skills.

¹¹¹ Ida Forsyne, Interview by Marshall Stearns, July 29, 1964. Marshall Winslow Stearns Collection, B 5 f 19, Institute of Jazz Studies, Dana Library, Rutgers University.

¹¹² Ibid.



Fig. 4.7: Ida Forsyne as “Topsy” with Abbie Mitchell’s Tennessee Students. *Indianapolis Freeman*, January 28, 1906. The caption reads: “*The London Daily Telegraph* says that Abbie Mitchell and her Tennessee Students will soon be the talk of the town especially the dancing Miss Topsy (Ida Forsyne later of Hogan’s Company) the little lady ‘who was not born but just grew.’ During their appearance in Paris and London they have been taking audiences by storm.”

Sophie Tucker's broad understanding of vaudeville business practices got her into blackface performance. She recognized the monetary value that blackface represented, thus she kept referencing Blackness symbolically in her acts even once she abandoned blackface makeup. Her music, lyrics, timbre, use of diction, and dance all pointed towards a modern and stylish interpretation of Blackness. As a consequence, her Jewish "injections" were grounded not only in vaudeville's reliance on racial plurality and audience's demands but were used to absorb some of the allure and transgressiveness of Blackness. In Jayna Brown's terminology, Tucker was among those white "New Women" who embraced Blackness to redefine her identity as glamorously modern. However, her appropriations functioned differently from those of white American-born artists for two reasons: first, Tucker's whiteness was explicitly marked as Jewish and, second, her engagement with Black music and dance was the acknowledged product of interracial relationships that she built with African American colleagues and collaborators.

In sum, Tucker's Jewish blackface was a studied tactic to secure employment in white vaudeville, yet it also gave her the opportunity to connect with African American artists and define her Jewish Americanness in terms of modernity, style, and defiance of old social and gender mores. For these reasons, I advance a reading of Tucker's Jewish blackface in light of D. Soyini Madison's definition of "performance of possibility:" a space in which the performer enters the domain of the Other to gain in personal transformation, while the Other being performed gains in the affirmation of their own personhood, history, and culture.¹¹³ As Madison points out, for the Other to be "deeply known," the performer must engage in their cultural landscape; only in this way does performance become the medium by which to "enter domains

¹¹³ D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2012), 176.

of intersubjectivity that problematize how we categorize who is ‘us’ and who is ‘them.’”¹¹⁴

Sophie Tucker gained in personal transformation by infusing her Jewishness with symbols of modern, urban Blackness. At the same time, she directly engaged with African American musical culture and its producers to learn from their craft. As a result, her newly created image of Jewish American womanhood as brashness, physical vigor, and overt sexuality challenged stereotypes of old-world demure Jewish femininity while simultaneously affirming the significance of Black cultural forms and allure of empowered Black femininity.

Eddie Cantor, “America’s Blackest-faced Comedian”¹¹⁵

Precisely like Sophie Tucker, Eddie Cantor first competed for an opportunity in vaudeville at an amateur night: it was 1906, the same year Tucker wore blackface for the first time.¹¹⁶ Perhaps because he was not as accomplished a singer as Tucker, Cantor capitalized more on the comedy than the musical quality of his vaudeville acts. Cantor too eventually interspersed his “unusual blackface” with a “solemn Jewish manner” and, in so doing, connected with colleagues and spectators of diverse racial backgrounds.¹¹⁷ Yet, while Tucker was able to mix and blend racial markers by often outsourcing Black referents to her African American cast of dancers and instrumentalists, Cantor was never involved in casting decisions. In the *Ziegfeld Follies*, he had the chance to perform alongside a Black artist, the famed Bert Williams, but that

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Caption in clipping, undated. Robert Baral Papers, B 7 f 49, NYPL. The caption describes a caricature of Cantor in his spectacles and “intellectual” blackface look.

¹¹⁶ Cantor made his first significant vaudeville appearance in 1907 at the Clinton Music Hall in New York. Fisher, *Eddie Cantor*, 53.

¹¹⁷ Quotes from *Variety*, November 21, 1914, 20; Robert C. Benchley, “Review,” *Life*, May 4, 1922.

was not his choice. Therefore, with fewer means to express Blackness aurally or outsource its embodiment to other members of the cast, Cantor exploited explicit blackface forms more heavily than symbols of Blackness in voice or casting.¹¹⁸

Like Tucker's, Cantor's career began in blackface almost out of necessity. While according her sexist producer Tucker lacked in feminine attributes, as a young amateur performer, Cantor lacked the financial means to pay for a comedy writer. Consequently, he often told other comedians' jokes disguised as different racialized characters. In the 1909–10 season, he toured the Peoples Vaudeville Circuit for sixteen weeks.¹¹⁹ After telling the same jokes dressed as German, Irish, and Eastern European characters for the first three fourths of the engagement, he felt “really stumped” for ideas.¹²⁰ He tried mimicking old age, but he was not even fifteen at the time so his character must have looked too farfetched to be funny. As he later recalled, “I sat down with a piece of charcoal to put a few lines on my face. The lines only made me look haggard. I tried to wipe off the marks, they spread. Blackface! I quickly rubbed cork over my cheeks, neck, ears.”¹²¹ With an implicit sense of guilt, he added: “Hiding behind a black mask, I got the booking for another four weeks on the same circuit. That was easy.”¹²²

¹¹⁸ Edward R. Sammis, “Through the Years with Eddie Cantor (Radio Stars),” May 1933. Clipping in scrapbook, Chamberlain and Lyman Brown Papers, B 181 f 8, NYPLPA. Both Tucker and Cantor were self-taught singers who started out as singing waiters. But while singing was Tucker's passion, Cantor only learned because he had to. At Carey Walsh's Saloon in Coney Island, “you were up there and you had to sing,” he recollected for Sammis. “According to that formula,” Sammis concluded, “he must have had many a good singing lesson at Carey Walsh's. The belligerent costumers, when three sheets to the winds, were in the habit of demanding a rendition of their favorite ditty. And getting it—or they threw things.”

¹¹⁹ The Peoples Vaudeville Circuit was a small chain managed by Nicholas and Joseph Schenck, Adolph Zukor, and Marcus Loew, all recent Jewish immigrants and future moguls of the film industry.

¹²⁰ Cantor, *My Life*, 112–4. Goldman, *Banjo Eyes*, 28–9.

¹²¹ Cantor, *My Life*, 114.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 115.

As this anecdote implies, Cantor's first experiments with blackface were a response to market demands. Yet, he continued to perform regularly in blackface and inject his Black characters with references to his own Jewish identity until 1918 and intermittently until the 1940s. At first, he "dressed in a battered high hat, a loose-fitting second-hand Prince Albert, and huge pancake shoes" to reproduce the conventional Jim Crown minstrel character.¹²³ Progressively, "the sooty spirit of the cotton fields was brought up to the twentieth century." By the time he joined the famed *Ziegfeld Follies* in 1917, "there was just a trace of the cotton fluff in [his character's] ears, but the night-club rhythm danced in his eyes," a comment that exploited blackface to reference the transition from the minstrel show to the nightclub, from the rural South to the urban North and, implicitly, from past to future.¹²⁴ Jewishness and Blackness both contributed to this transition. The appeal of the jazz nightclub and its association with provocative African American dances, integrated audiences, and contacts between Black and Jewish jazz musicians fed into a discourse about modernity as urbanity, nightlife, and racial mixes.¹²⁵ As it was epitomized by Al Jolson playing the son of a Jewish cantor who chooses "modern" blackface entertainment over "old-word" religious observance in the film *The Jazz Singer*, Jewish blackface powerfully symbolized this transition.

When Cantor ended his contract with the Peoples circuit, Bedini and Arthur, a "black-and-white" juggling act, were touring on the Orpheum circuit. The Orpheum was a more

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ On the intersection of modernity, nightlife, and racial associations, see David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown*; Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984); Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2000); Fiona I. B. Ngô, *Imperial Blues: Geographies of Race and Sex in Jazz Age New York* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

prestigious and better-paying chain, which was enough to convince Cantor to join Bedini and Arthur despite the “downgrade” to supporting artist. Cantor’s silent role was simply to fetch plates for the jugglers to spin: for this, he had to wear blackface like Arthur so as not to overshadow Bedini as the straight man in whiteface (fig. 4.8). Wearing an oversized suit, Cantor reproduced what Robert Toll describes as the “caricature of the happy-go-lucky, childlike Southern Negro who loved to entertain whites.”¹²⁶ Halfway through the act though, he would transform into a trickster character, holding on to the plate, exchanging complicit looks with the audience, and even polishing the plate before handing it to the two visibly annoyed jugglers.



Fig. 4.8: Eddie Cantor in blackface handing a letter to Bedini. Bedini and Arthur’s vaudeville act, 1912. Reproduced in *My Life is in Your Hands* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1932).

¹²⁶ Robert C. Toll, *Blacking up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 73.

Cantor had been playing with Bedini and Arthur for seven months when at the Shea's Theatre in Buffalo the opportunity arose for a promotion. The act was placed second to last on the bill, right before the closing number gathering all the artists back on stage. This meant that they only had the downstage space for their performance, as behind the curtain the set and cast would be preparing for the group finale. Juggling required much more surface area than that; thus, Bedini and Arthur were caught unprepared. Cantor, on the other hand, had experience singing and joking in spaces of all sizes. He offered to sing a song and entertain with some of his comedy, which, since he had no jokes ready, would be entirely gestural. The song he selected was Irving Berlin's latest piece, "Ragtime Violin."¹²⁷ He came out onto the stage with a big suitcase, opened it with fanfare, made the audience impatient to see its contents, and finally, took out a small toy fiddle. He scratched a few chords, looked apologetically at the audience for his total incompetence, then tried oiling the strings but with no improvement. He ultimately threw the toy fiddle out, and with a nervous, remorseful expression on his face, began his song. As the ragtime rhythm accelerated, his voice also grew in volume and confidence. He remembered "walk[ing] rapidly up and down the stage, clapping [his] hands and bobbing about like perpetual motion. The result was something new and entirely unintentional in jazz interpretation"¹²⁸

Cantor's 1911 performance at the Shea Theatre was his first fortuitous attempt at associating blackface with Jewishness. This might explain why he perceived it as "something new and entirely unintentional." In the standard "plantation darkey" costume, he sang a distinctive Jewish ragtime instead of the expected coon or nostalgic plantation song. Moreover,

¹²⁷ Irving Berlin, "Ragtime Violin" (New York: Ted Snyder Co., 1911).

¹²⁸ The episode is recounted in Cantor, *My Life*, 125–6.

the embarrassed and apologetic persona he created for the occasion was more akin to a “Hebrew” type—for instance Joe Welch’s “pathetic loser”—than the typical happy-go-lucky minstrel clown. The Jewish reference implicit in his acting style might not have been obvious to all, but by singing “Ragtime Violin” Cantor remedied that. In fact, not only did the violin appear prominently in the lyrics of several so-called “Yiddish dialect songs,” but Irving Berlin’s popularity as the Jewish composer who was revolutionizing Tin Pan Alley had already reached vaudeville audiences.¹²⁹

Yiddish dialect songs constituted a large part of Tin Pan Alley’s production. In the description for the 2016 exhibit “Jewface: ‘Yiddish’ Dialect Songs of Tin Pan Alley,” the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research emphasized the weight that these songs had on vaudeville performances as well as their thriving life in the sheet music industry. I quote from the exhibition’s website:

Essentially a variant of blackface minstrelsy, the music that accompanied these [vaudeville] ‘Jewface’ performances was not only performed on stage, but was also published as colorfully illustrated sheet music so fans could play them at home. [...] While the genre was initially created by gentile performers to make fun of Jewish immigrants, it was eventually taken over by Jews, who apparently felt that they could do a better job mocking themselves. Irving Berlin, Fannie Brice, and Sophie Tucker were just a few who wrote and performed these Yiddish-inflected songs.¹³⁰

As Tin Pan Alley prominently served vaudeville artists and impresarios, its songwriters worked within vaudeville’s aesthetic parameters. These parameters were partly inherited from the concert saloon and blackface minstrelsy’s olio segments; thus, vaudeville focused as much on

¹²⁹ Charles Hamm, *Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot: The Formative Years, 1907–1914* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹³⁰ YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, “Jewface: ‘Yiddish’ Dialect Songs of Tin Pan Alley,” Center for Jewish History in New York City. <https://www.yivo.org/jewface>.

racial variety in character impersonations as in music.¹³¹ Not coincidentally, “ethnic songs” were called “novelty songs” in the vaudeville jargon of the time. As songwriters were responsive to and derived their artistic relevance from the way their songs were performed in vaudeville, so performers reflected back the popularity of songwriters. Irving Berlin wrote some ethnically explicit lyrics to appeal to vaudeville audiences’ taste for ethnic/racial diversity; concurrently, artists like Eddie Cantor chose to perform his songs to absorb some of his trendiness and profit from the novelty value of his texts.

“Ragtime Violin” contained no explicit reference to Jewishness but “Yiddle on your Fiddle, Play some Ragtime,” a song that Berlin wrote just two years before “Ragtime Violin,” clearly did. The song’s protagonist, Sadie, shares the name with another of Berlin’s fictional Jewish girls, Sadie Cohen, who in the song “Sadie Salome Go Home,” also published in 1909, fights her “sweetheart Moses” for her right to “become an actress lady.”¹³² Both “Sadie Salome Go Home” and “Yiddle on your Fiddle” sold well as sheet music and were still performed in vaudeville in 1911, the year Cantor sang “Ragtime Violin” at the Shea Theatre in Buffalo.¹³³ The association between Sadie pleading “Yiddle in the middle of your fiddle, play some ragtime” and Anna Lize inciting Mr. Brown to “fiddle up, fiddle up on your violin” in “Ragtime Violin” must have come easy to both vaudeville patrons and sheet music buyers.

¹³¹ Nicholas Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies: Popular Musicians and Mass Entertainment in American Culture, 1870–1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 105–10.

¹³² Irving Berlin, “Yiddle on your Fiddle, Play some Ragtime” (New York: Ted Snyder Co., 1909); Irving Berlin and Leslie Edgar, “Sadie Salome Go Home” (New York: Ted Snyder Co., 1909). Digital copies of the sheet music are available through the University of Indiana’s INHarmony project at <http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/inharmony/welcome.do>

¹³³ “Yiddle on your Fiddle, Play some Ragtime” was performed by Grace Leonard and Mae Clark; “Sadie Salome Go Home” by Bobby North, Troy Barnes, and Frank Ross.

Considering the accepted junction of Jewish musicianship and African American syncopated rhythms, the blurring of racial and ethnic markers in ragtime texts by Jewish lyricists and music publishers should not surprise. Some Tin Pan Alley examples are “The Yiddisha Rag,” a melody “so spoony” but like “nothing cooney;” “Rosie Rosenblat, Stop the Turkey Trot” from the musical revue *The Sheik of Avenue B*, which *the New York Times* described as a “Jewish show that is not quite a Jewish show;” “Jerusalem Rag” about a “great Yiddish man” and his “great rag like only a Yiddish can” (fig. 4.9); and Eddie Cantor’s own “My Yiddisha Mammy,” about a “mammy” who “don’t come from Alabammy” but “her cabin door is in a brown tenement” in the Lower East Side.¹³⁴ Irving Berlin’s ragtime songs are part of this genealogy. In “Yiddle on your Fiddle,” he made the intersection of Jewishness and Blackness explicit in the lyrics. The sound of Yiddle’s name echoes Yiddish language’s sounds but, strikingly, Sadie reveals Yiddle to be her “choc’late baby.” According to Charles Hamm, “it’s not clear if [Sadie’s] request that [Yiddle] play some ragtime is intended to elicit humor at the thought of a Jewish fiddler playing music associated with African Americans.”¹³⁵ I would claim that the association was so well established that by the 1910s it was not even ironic anymore. In fact, I would go as far as suggesting that Cantor may have chosen to perform a song by Irving Berlin not simply to lend a Jewish marker to his blackface persona, but to substantiate the intersection of Jewishness and Blackness that ragtime music already expressed.

¹³⁴ Jos H. McKeon, Harry M. Piano, and W. Raymond Walker, “The Yiddisha Rag” (New York: Harry Von Tilzer Music Pub. Co., 1909); lyricist and composer unknown, “Rosie Rosenblat, Stop the Turkey Trot,” in Isaiah Sheffer (dialogue), *The Sheik of Avenue B (The Ragtime and Jazz Era Comedy Revue)*, Town Hall Theatre, 1922; Herbert B. Binner (music) and George A. Little (lyrics), “Jerusalem Rag” (Chicago: Betts & Binner Co., 1912); Alex Gerber, Jean Schwartz, and Eddie Cantor, “My Yiddisha Mammy” (New York: M. Witmark, 1922).

¹³⁵ Hamm, *Irving Berlin*, 41.

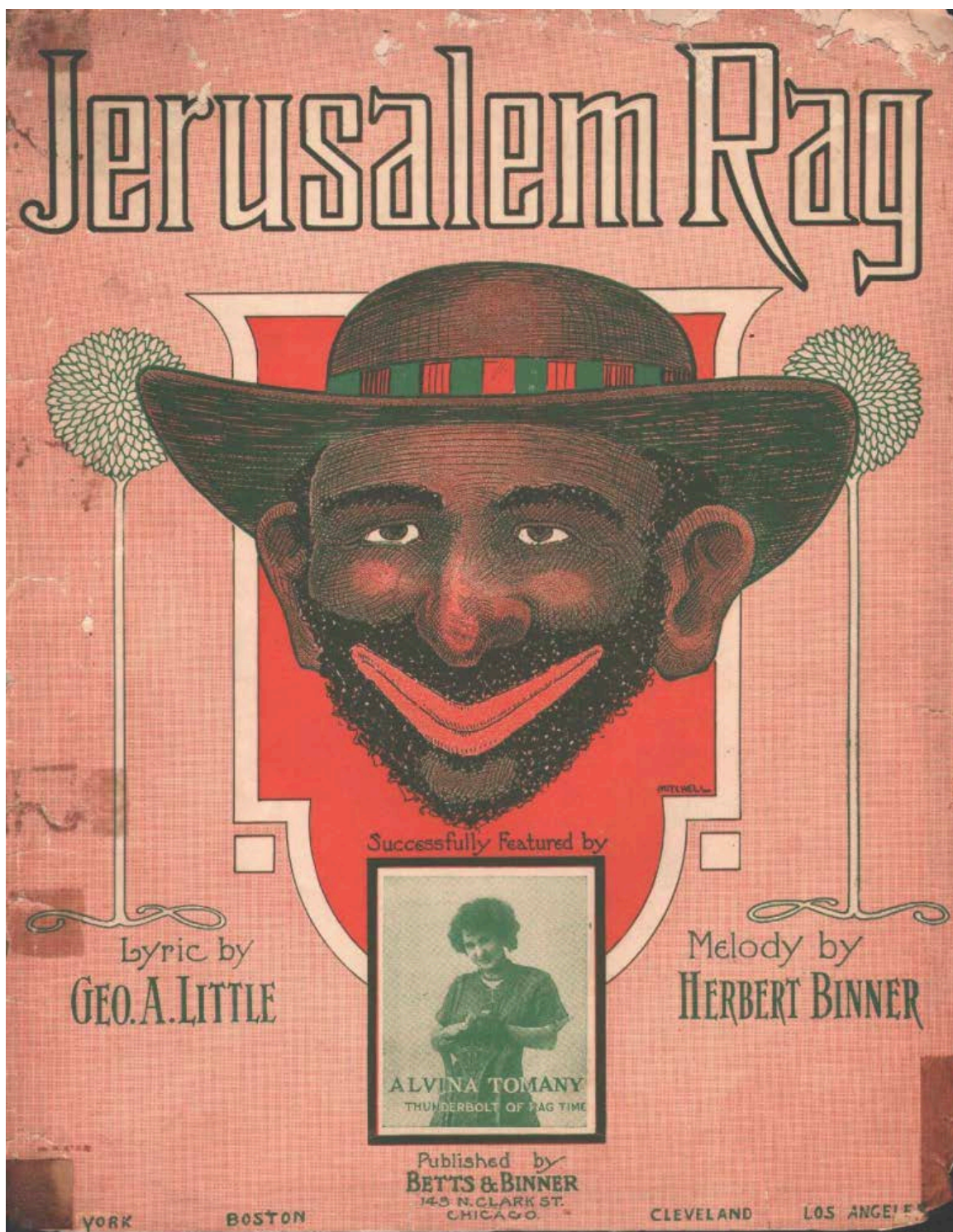


Fig: 4.9: Sheet music cover for “Jerusalem Rag.” Lyrics by George A. Little, music by Herbert Binner (Betts & Binner: 1912). INHarmony Digital Sheet Music Collection, University of Indiana. Notice how this illustration has the distinctive Jewish nose, beard, and ears, but the skin is as dark and the lips as wide and bright as those of blackface minstrels.

At eighteen years of age while touring with Bedini and Arthur Cantor met an old acquaintance, George Jessel, then a twelve-year-old comic who was engaged in productions by Gus Edwards.¹³⁶ Edwards was a sketch writer, composer, and producer of young talents. In Atlantic City he was rehearsing a new children's show, *Kid Kabaret*, a twenty-minute skit of a party among well-to-do city children whose parents are absent.¹³⁷ With only the supervision of their Black butler, they invite in children from the street: "Muttsky," billed as "a little bit Yiddish" (George Jessel), an Italian flower seller (Ruthie Francis), "Chaucey Pickadilly," a Londoner who forgets his British accent to sing ragtime songs (Albert Hinston), an Irish match seller (Fanny McVay), and many more (fig. 4.10). The multiethnic group performed a variety of specialty numbers including a ballet, popular songs on the classical violin, and ragtime songs.¹³⁸

Cantor liked the prospect of playing the Black butler so much that he forced Bedini and Arthur to release him from his engagement.¹³⁹ Being the oldest among the "kids," he exploited the opportunity to take charge of the party and direct the children's games. He "rises far over the rest in ability, they are 'just cute kids,' yet he is the comedian that seems to lend the whole performance its dash and zest," wrote a reporter from Seattle.¹⁴⁰ Cantor was the production's most acclaimed performer. He was praised above all for "a style of his own and a most engaging manner" which, interestingly, reporters started to recognize as a specifically Jewish style of

¹³⁶ Walter Browne and E. De Roy Koch, *Who's Who on the Stage 1908; The Dramatic Reference Book and Biographical Dictionary of the Theatre* (New York: Dodge, 1912). Jessel and Cantor became long-time friends, see figure 4.3.

¹³⁷ Cantor, *My Life*, 126–8; Goldman, *Banjo Eyes*, 37.

¹³⁸ *Kid Kabaret*, program. Reprinted in various newspapers with slight variations, especially in the number of actors involved, ranging from 17 to 21. Clippings in scrapbook, ECP, B 57.

¹³⁹ Cantor, *My Life*, 126–7.

¹⁴⁰ Clipping in scrapbook, undated, from the Orpheum Theatre. ECP, B 57.

blackface.¹⁴¹ From the perspective of a Chicago critic, Cantor was “the Frank Tinney of the cast,” while a journalist from Calgary thought his unique blackface was “the Al Jolson type.”¹⁴² Neither Tinney nor Jolson—the former the “anti-gags” *par excellence*, the latter with his mysterious brashness—were the conventional old-school blackface minstrels. Akin to Cantor’s Jewish-inflected “Ragtime Violin” performance, Tinney was remembered for making “ludicrous efforts to play the ‘Miserere’ on the bagpipes” and creating laughter “by lengthening the preliminaries, by false starts, erasures, corrections.”¹⁴³ Jolson, on his part, was the first recognized Jewish blackface performer who by 1912 had made the leap from vaudeville to Broadway.¹⁴⁴ Thus, by comparing Cantor to Jolson, the Canadian journalist implied Cantor’s Jewish identity along with his “Jewish” style of blackface.

¹⁴¹ Clipping in scrapbook, undated, from Burtis Grand Theatre. Another clipping from the Maryland Theatre in Baltimore stated: “it is doubtful whether the popular author and musician could add anything to Cantor’s accomplished work; [...] the other characters are just typical American boys and girls.” ECP, B 57.

¹⁴² Clippings in scrapbook, respectively: undated, from Chicago Palace Music Hall and Calgary, June 28, 1913. ECP, B 57.

¹⁴³ Frederick Snyder, “American Vaudeville, Theatre in a Package: The Origins of Mass Entertainment” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1970), 81.

¹⁴⁴ During the 1911–2 theatre season, Al Jolson went from singing Stephen Foster’s songs in blackface as the opening act for *La Belle Paree* to playing the headliner role in *La Vera Violetta* (Shubert Brothers productions, Winter Garden, New York).



Fig. 4.10: Eddie Cantor (background, standing) as the blackface butler in *Kid Kabaret*. Photographer/date unknown. Eddie Cantor Papers, B 47, Charles E. Young Research Library's Special Collections, University of California Los Angeles.

Cantor further developed his Jewish blackface once he was completely in control of his role as the “anarchic” comic in the double act *Master and Man*. Opposite Al Lee playing the straight man without makeup, blackfaced Cantor would either interrupt Lee’s singing with silly non-sequiturs or alter the meaning of Lee’s questions by providing some bizarre but incredibly clever answers.¹⁴⁵ Being finally in charge, Cantor also restyled his appearance (fig. 4.11). To

¹⁴⁵ Goldman, *Banjo Eyes*, 43. According to Henry Jenkins, through “the conflicting figures of the clown and the comic antagonist,” anarchist comedies “explore the relationship of the ‘natural,’ uninhibited individual to the rigidifying social order,” thus providing audiences with a temporary escape from the restraints of civilization. With his foolishness, Cantor’s Black servant challenged the “rigidifying social order” embodied by Lee’s white master.

contrast the absurdity of his jokes, he wore a pair of large, white-rimmed glasses which gave him the appearance of an intellectual. To distinguish his look from the baggy outfits typical of blackface minstrelsy's "plantation darkey" characters, he wore the elegant suit of a modern city dweller. At first glance, this resembled a minstrel "dandy" type, as Robert Toll describes it, "wearing straight 'trousaloons,' a long-tailed coat with padded shoulders, a high ruffled collar, white gloves, an eye-piece, and a long watch chain."¹⁴⁶ Yet, unlike this portrayal, Cantor's costume was not meant to appear over the top, but only too tight, so as to increase the impression of slightness. Lastly, to contrast both the Black dialect imitation of "plantation darkeys" and the pretensions of malaprop-speaking city dandies, Cantor spoke with grandiose vocabulary in his native New York accent. Whereas according to Toll minstrels used to explain "new inventions, current events, scientific principles, and city life" using inappropriate vocabulary in grammatically faulty sentences, Cantor talked about silly things using impeccable grammar and sophisticated terms.¹⁴⁷ With his glasses and fancy language, Cantor recalled having "added an intellectual touch to the old-fashioned darkey of the minstrel shows."¹⁴⁸ This suggests that he was aware of his sources in blackface minstrelsy, though he might have been more familiar with the "old-fashioned darkey" than he was with the dandy character.

Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 221–2.

¹⁴⁶ Toll, *Blacking Up*, 68.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁴⁸ Cantor, *My Life*, 114.



Fig. 4.11: Eddie Cantor in blackface, publicity photograph. White Studio, undated. Eddie Cantor Papers, B 47, Charles E. Young Research Library's Special Collections, University of California Los Angeles.

The big news of the moment was the war in Europe, so Cantor made a joke of the situation and further confounded the audience regarding his ethnic/racial identity:

Cantor: You'll have to let me go.
 Lee: Why?
 Cantor: To fight in the war, to fight for my mother country, Russia.
 Lee: Russia?
 Cantor: Yes, darkest Russia...
 Lee: I didn't know you were Russian.
 Cantor: Oh, yes. My relatives are all in the war. My father's General Petrovitch, my uncle's General Ivanovitch. Then there's *eczema*—another itch...¹⁴⁹

Pronounced in a New York accent by a thin man in blackface, Cantor's lines must have been as funny as they were absurd. The absurdity was not so much in hearing a blackfaced Jew joke about his mother country, "darkest Russia;" in fact, this was a familiar line in Jewish blackface. The paradox was to have a skinny "intellectual" man pushing to enlist as a soldier in World War I. For the anonymous critic reporting for the *Indianapolis News*, the intellectual touch and slender appearance were so out of place that he called Cantor's character "ultra feminine:" "Cantor is one of the most refreshing blackfaces seen here in a long while [...] When he has restrained the ultra feminine slap-me-on-the-wrist imitation just a trifle there will be hardly anything in his act that will not deserve the highest praise" (fig. 4.12).¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Reported in Cantor, *My Life*, 145. Ellipsis in original.

¹⁵⁰ Clipping in scrapbook, undated, ECP, B 57.



Fig. 4.12: Eddie Cantor in blackface, publicity photograph. Apeda Studio, undated. Eddie Cantor Papers, B 47, Charles E. Young Research Library's Special Collections, University of California Los Angeles. Cantor is wearing a polka-dot foulard tied with a bow around his neck and a tight-fitting suit with pants so short that they show white striped socks. The shot might be capturing what the reporter for *Indianapolis News* described as Cantor's "slap-me-on-the-wrist imitation."

As Daniel Boyarin asserts, “historically the Jewish male is, from the point of view of dominant European culture, a sort of woman.”¹⁵¹ Boyarin is not claiming characteristics or behaviors that are essentially female but a set of *performances* that are read as nonmale within a given culture. According to this legacy, maleness is defined by physical strength, courage, and confidence. The feminine, by contrast, is constituted by physical weakness and alternative forms of gaining power such as dissimulation and trickery. We can interpret the *Indianapolis News* reporter’s “ultra feminine” reference within this Jewish *versus* dominant European culture framework. Besides, the “ultra feminine” was a recognized feature of the “stage Jew.” As Harley Erdman claims, since the earliest representations of Shylock (*The Merchant of Venice*) and Fagin (*Oliver Twist*) in the United States, stage Jews had “proved themselves incapable of living up to their society’s expectations of how one must perform oneself as a man.”¹⁵² Their effeminacy contrasted with their evil qualities and manifested itself through both language and physical abilities: they often addressed other male characters as “my dear” and succumbed to physical confrontations due to their moral cowardice or inept bodies. In Erdman’s articulation, the lack of physical prowess invoked “the traditional effeminacy of the stage sheeny since it cast the Jew as puny weakling, unable to defend himself.”¹⁵³ Cantor’s “ultra feminine” performance style is what I believe differentiated his blackface character from the conventional urban dandy. In fact, if read with the Shylock and Fagin types in mind, Cantor’s performance exposed a genealogy of stage Jews hidden behind the black mask.

¹⁵¹ Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 306.

¹⁵² Erdman, *Staging the Jew*, 37.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 81.

Playing against images of brimful or even aggressive Black physicality, Cantor created a wimpish, somewhat effete character. This nebbish type aligned with stereotypical, often anti-Semitic theatrical representations, but it also revived a classic stock character from Jewish folk culture, the “nebekh.” In Leo Rosten’s definition, the nebekh is:

an innocuous, ineffectual, weak, helpless hapless unfortunate. A Sad Sack. A ‘loser’ [...] To define the nebekh simply as an unlucky man is to miss the many nuances, from pity to contempt, the word affords. Nebekh is one of the most distinctive Yiddish words; it describes a universal character type. [...] A nebekh is more to be pitied than a *shlemiel*. You feel sorry for a nebek; you can dislike a schlemiel.¹⁵⁴

Before Cantor, other Jewish vaudeville comics impersonated “nebekh” types as correctives to the more blatantly racist representations of “shlemiel” stage Jews like Shylock and Fagin. Joe Welch, Willie Howard, and Frank Bush belong to this generation. As a poorly dressed peddler character, Welch would enter onto the stage to funereal music and begin his routines with “if I would never been born, I’d be a happy man today.” Willie Howard partnered with his older brother Eugene for much of his career: while Gene acted dignified and pompous, Willie slumped in contrast, his skinny body drooped, and his bony face contorted in expressions of misery (fig. 4.13). Bush was among the first to depict the Jew as a “jolly good fellow” rather than the stereotypical deceitful evil; he would often be beaten for his clumsy attempts at cheating, but would take the blows with a pitiable, laughable smile (fig. 4.14).¹⁵⁵ Several facets of Cantor’s blackface nebbish can be traced back these depictions. Both Welch and Cantor stood center stage and stared uncomfortably at the audience shrugging their shoulders before they began cracking

¹⁵⁴ Leo Rosten, *The New Joys of Yiddish: Completely Updated* (New York: Three River Press, 2001), 264–5.

¹⁵⁵ Erdman, *Staging the Jew*, 75–83; Laurie, *Vaudeville*, 288–90; Frank Cullen, *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America* (New York: Routledge, 2006), Vol. 1: 173, 535–8 and Vol. 2: 1180; Joe Welch, Robinson Locke Collection, NYPLPA.

jokes. Both Howard's and Cantor's quick eye movements betrayed their alertness, otherwise concealed by their droopy deportment and wretched facial expressions. Both Bush and Cantor wore spectacles and were known for their funny dance moves, especially their distinctive shuffling with hands clasped behind their backs. Still, contrary to traditional renderings of the nebekh, Cantor's blackface character was too stylish and too smart to be pitied. He might have been "innocuous, ineffectual, weak," but he was never a "loser." His witticism would always win in the end, even against bigger, more masculine adversaries.



Fig. 4.13: Joe Welch, cabinet photograph. White Studio, undated. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library Digital Collections.



Fig 4.14: Frank Bush, *carte de visite*. Tomlinson Studio, undated. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

The *Indianapolis News* critic described Cantor's blackface as "refreshing" while *Variety* called it "unusual."¹⁵⁶ These attributes almost certainly meant to reference the character's physical weakness, effeminacy, and intelligence. Contrary to the stereotypical image of Blackness as physical might, manliness, and lacking intellectual abilities, Cantor's blackface character was evidently delicate yet cunningly humorous and proudly intellectual. These traits were common in stereotypical representations of the "stage Jew" as well as "nebekh" types by Jewish American vaudeville performers. As a consequence, Cantor's joke about enlisting to fight for "mother Russia" only confirmed his Jewish identity, which was already embodied in the "feminine" traits (delicacy, cunningness, intellectuality, minute physicality) of his blackface character. As Scott Balcerzak convincingly argues, Cantor's "pansy-like negro with spectacles" was the adaptation of the Jewish nebbish type to American minstrel-derived performance culture.¹⁵⁷ Here I suggest that Cantor's Jewishness did not vanish in this "adaptation" process. Rather, disguised as a revisited blackface minstrel, Cantor universalized the nebbish character and circulated it widely in American popular culture. For Rick DesRochers, Woody Allen's neurasthenic characters and Larry David's wry humor are the ultimate incarnation of comic nebbish types originated by Jewish vaudevillians such as Groucho Marx and Eddie Cantor. Thus, blackface Cantor can be seen as the link between late-nineteenth-century vaudeville performance and late-twentieth-century Hollywood film and television comedy.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Clipping in scrapbook, undated, ECP, B 57; *Variety*, November 21, 1914, 20.

¹⁵⁷ Scott Balcerzak, *Buffoon Men: Classic Hollywood Comedians and Queered Masculinity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 81–2.

¹⁵⁸ Rick DesRochers, *The Comic Offense from Vaudeville to Contemporary Comedy: Larry David, Tina Fey, Stephen Colbert, and Dave Chappelle* (New York: Bloomsbury USA Academic, 2014).

In 1916, Jewish agent Max Hart convinced Florenz Ziegfeld Jr., also a Jewish immigrant in American entertainment, to hire Cantor for the following year's production of his famed *Ziegfeld Follies*.¹⁵⁹ The *Ziegfeld Follies* was a sumptuous musical revue. Each edition had a theme—pleasures of urban America in 1917, war and patriotism in 1918, prohibition in 1919—that connected songs, dance numbers, and comedy sketches.¹⁶⁰ Ziegfeld was known to be the demanding overseer of every single aspect of the show, from selecting fabrics for the hundreds of costumes to vetting the comedians' jokes.¹⁶¹ Comedians of the caliber of Fanny Brice, W.C. Fields, Will Rogers, and Bert Williams, the only black man who ever performed for Ziegfeld, traded the freedom they had in vaudeville to originate their own material for Ziegfeld's higher salaries.¹⁶² Thus, whatever share of independence they were able to exercise on Ziegfeld's stage is a good indicator of where they chose to concentrate their aesthetic and career priorities. In Cantor's case, the fact that he evolved from a blackface supporting actor into a unique *Jewish* blackface headliner hints at his deliberate effort to multiply the Jewish references in his act and exploit the conventions of blackface to produce an original representation of Jewish Americanness.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Cantor, *My Life*, 152–3.

¹⁶⁰ *The Ziegfeld Follies*, program and scripts, Theater Collection, Broadway Productions, MCNY.

¹⁶¹ On Florenz Ziegfeld Jr., see Cynthia Brideson and Sara Brideson, *Ziegfeld and His Follies: A Biography of Broadway's Greatest Producer* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015). On costuming in revues, see Marlis Schweitzer, *When Broadway Was the Runway: Theater, Fashion, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

¹⁶² *The Ziegfeld Follies of 1917*, program, MCNY. On revues as businesses, see M. J. Verlaine, *Ziegfeld: The Man Who Invented Show Business* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

¹⁶³ On Cantor's own perspectives on revues and Florenz Ziegfeld Jr., see Eddie Cantor, *Ziegfeld, the Great Glorifier* (New York: AHKing, 1934).

In Act 1 Scene 7 of the *Follies* of 1917, Cantor performed his now famous “delicate” blackface character. In “Pappy and Sonny,” Bert Williams as a blackface porter bragged to his workmates about his son Abner who was due home from college: “He’s on the football team [...] He is like his dad!” Cantor played Abner, a boyish and effete young man. He would embarrass his father in front of his friends with his immaturity: “Look, Dad, I carry matches!” Deeply humiliated, Williams would respond: “Son, pick up those grips!” And Cantor, “Dad! Remember, I have a temper!”¹⁶⁴ Cantor recalled “camping” all over the stage as he used to do in vaudeville. After their opening performance, Williams said to Cantor: “Look, son, don’t push too hard. You can afford to underplay this character because the situation almost carries the scene.”¹⁶⁵

Cantor had admired Williams since his amateur days. In the *Follies* of 1917, he learned to downsize his energy from Williams; in fact, compared to Cantor’s grandiose gesticulations, Williams’s measured moves demonstrated a control over the audience that Cantor still lacked. Cantor remembered how Williams “could stand, very quietly, in the center of the stage and, without moving an inch, manipulate emotions as if they were puppets on a string.”¹⁶⁶ Williams used what Tina Post calls a “deadpan” aesthetic to draw attention to his masterful composure: despite his character’s helplessness, by standing quietly he emphasized command over his misfortunes.¹⁶⁷ His signature persona was Mr. Nobody, a downtrodden unfortunate whom Williams described as “the man who, even if it rained soup, would be found with a fork in his

¹⁶⁴ *The Ziegfeld Follies of 1917*, program and scripts, MCNY.

¹⁶⁵ Eddie Cantor, “Bert Williams—‘The Best Teacher I have Ever Had,’” in *White on Black; the Views of Twenty-two White Americans on the Negro*, Era Bell Thompson and Herbert Nipson eds. (Chicago: Johnson Pub., 1963), 92.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 90. Cantor wrote: “It took weeks of stinting and saving before I was able to buy a ticket to his show. As I watched him, I knew, even then, that here was greatness—here was a man with a divine spark.”

¹⁶⁷ Tina Post, “Williams, Walker, and Shine: Blackbody Blackface, or the Importance of Being Surface,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 59, no. 4 (2015): 83–100. 92.

hand and no spoon in sight.”¹⁶⁸ But as Louis Chude-Sokei wrote in *The Last “Darky,”* Williams’s “performance was erasure, not invisibility;” in other words, by purposefully negating his character the means to react to his misfortunes, he made his suffering visible and his endurance commendable (fig. 4.15).¹⁶⁹



Fig. 4.15: *Bert Williams #7*. Samuel Lumiere, 1921. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. With his signature stance, chin to chest, slouched over with limp arms, knees slightly bent and feet pointing outward, Williams embodied Mr. Nobody’s piteous state. Cantor may have noticed some affinities between Williams’s deportment and that of Jewish “nebekhs” such as Joe Welch’s (see figure 4.13).

¹⁶⁸ Bert Williams, “The Comic Side of Trouble,” *American Magazine* 85 no. 1 (1918): 33.

¹⁶⁹ Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last “Darky”: Bert Williams, Black-On-Black Minstrelsy, And The African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 54.

For Williams, blackface was another tool to give himself visibility. As a comparatively light-skinned Black man, Williams disoriented audiences who were surprised to find that he was “not as black as he was painted.”¹⁷⁰ One British reviewer wrote that the confusion originated from the fact that the makeup “made his darkness visible.”¹⁷¹ Thus, rather than blacking up to hide, he hid his light-skinned face to emphasize his Blackness and, more importantly, let the black makeup *act*. In black-on-black blackface, black paint liberates Black actors from the constraint of embodied Blackness. Contemporary Thing Theory would define black paint on black skin as a signifying “thing” while black paint on white skin as a characterizing “object.”¹⁷² Thing Theory draws attention to the specific situations in which inanimate entities (objects) “come alive” or become “things” to affect the people around them. As Bill Brown famously wrote in the essay *Thing Theory*, “the story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relationship to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.”¹⁷³ In originating a subject-object relation, “things” affect people. They affect different people differently depending on people’s preconceived ideas behind the “thing.” In black-on-black performance, black paint does not represent but rather *signifies* Blackness. In doing so, it affects the audience’s ideas of what it means to be Black.

¹⁷⁰ *London Times* as quoted in Eric Ledell Smith, *Bert Williams: A Biography of the Pioneer Black Comedian* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1992), 64. The titles introducing Bert Williams’s two-reel film *A Natural Born Gambler* (Biograph, 1916) describe him as “comparatively light skinned.”

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² See especially Bernstein, *Racial Innocence* and Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

¹⁷³ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22, 4.

From this perspective, black-on-black blackface can be interpreted as carrying out a function similar to a clown's red nose. Operating like a mask, the red nose is enough to identify one as a clown. As Veronica Coburn and Sue Morrison argue,

The red nose is the smallest mask in the world. The character that is inherent to the red nose mask, the character that must be served, the character that is revealed, is that of the wearer. [...] This fundamental tenet, that the red nose reveals the wearer, is common to all teaching of clown. If it is not then what is being taught is not clown.¹⁷⁴

Coburn and Morrison's clown trainees learn to let the red nose expose their vulnerabilities, fears, joys, and desires, for clowning is not just a display of consummate skill but a window onto the wearer's inner world.¹⁷⁵ Like the red nose, black-on-black blackface can help to open that window and reveal the human behind. Bert Williams utilized the blackface mask and his masterful pantomimes as a clown would: not to play a character but to reveal the wearer. In one of the only two silent films by Williams, *A Natural Born Gambler* (Biograph, 1916), Hon. Bert Williams enters the scene, takes off his top hat, and reveals a smudge in the makeup that clearly marks off his natural upper forehead from the rest of his blackened face. More than a hundred years later, we still wonder whether that was accidental.¹⁷⁶

While in fast-paced vaudeville the relationship between audience and actor is built on the fear of losing the audience's attention, in masked theatre the performer's patience and control allow for a deeper connection with their spectators. When a masked performer enters the stage, they must be first looked at. Before they move or speak, they must be still so that they can be

¹⁷⁴ Veronica Coburn and Sue Morrison, *Clown Through Mask: The Pioneering Work of Richard Pochinko as Practised* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2013), 12.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷⁶ Bert Williams, *A Natural Born Gambler*, directed by Bert Williams (New York: Biograph, released by General Film Company, 1916).

seen. Bert Williams's poise, stillness, long pauses, and silences—all key features of the highly technical work that is clowning—gave the audience time to look, think, and make their decision to join in the performance. In Coburn and Morrison's poignant articulation, "when an audience opts to become part of the journey, and to opt-in is their decision, they can then be involved in the revelation. And when revelation occurs, transformation is possible."¹⁷⁷ For Williams's audience, the fundamental "revelation" was that they could separate the masked performance of Blackness (the "thing") from the performer's own Black identity (the idea behind the "thing"). This revelation potentially "transformed" spectators in that it invited an understanding of race beyond skin color and stereotypical character.

As Sophie Tucker's symbolic blackface freed her from the constraints of embodied Blackness, so Bert Williams may have shown Cantor how to expose Blackness as an idea while still wearing the blackface makeup. Like his great teacher, Cantor wore the blackface mask not to hide, but rather reveal the wearer. Black paint in no way characterized Cantor's role; instead, like a clown's red nose, it was a prop that, by *signifying* the idea of Blackness, exposed his Jewishness by means of contrast. In "Pappy and Sonny," Williams advised Cantor not to "push too hard" as "the situation almost carries the scene." By bragging to his fellow porters about his son, a football player, Williams invited the audience to imagine Cantor as a tall, well-built young man like him. Coming out onto the stage as the skinny and sickly Abner, Cantor needed no words or actions, just the endurance to stare firmly at the audience so they could "be involved in the revelation." And as the revelation occurred, a nebbish Jew got to be seen under the blackface mask.

¹⁷⁷Coburn and Morrison, *Clown Through Mask*, 12.

The 1918 edition of the *Ziegfeld Follies* was war themed. In *The Aviator's Test* (Act 2 Scene 18), Cantor was the antithesis of courage, physical vigor, and devotion to the mother country. The scene expanded on the war jokes he and Al Lee had presented in vaudeville, with the addition of a physical examination that confirmed Cantor's character's unsuitability to join the Air Force.¹⁷⁸ Cantor fought hard against both Florenz Ziegfeld and Abe Erlanger to play this scene without the blackface makeup. Erlanger, at the time head of booking for the Theatrical Syndicate which controlled several of the leading houses in America, was backing Ziegfeld with money and theatres in New York and on tour.¹⁷⁹ After watching Cantor playing without makeup at the Atlantic City try-out, Erlanger ordered the sketch cut from the production. Ziegfeld and Erlanger, both of German Jewish ancestry, might have felt uncomfortable with Cantor's Jewish references in his own white skin, especially since these insinuated anti-patriotism at a time when German immigrants were distrusted and even persecuted if suspected of supporting their home country in the war. In blackface, they might have assumed, Jewish references would not be emphasized as much. Cantor threatened to quit the *Follies* if the scene were not restored and he were not allowed to play in it *au naturel*. Ziegfeld and Erlanger luckily gave in, because the sketch turned out to be the biggest hit of the show.¹⁸⁰ For *Variety's* leading critic Sime Silverman, "as far as comedians go, [Cantor] is the backbone and hit of the show [...] He makes his comedy material laughable, and does so especially in the aviator's test scene."¹⁸¹ The *New*

¹⁷⁸ *The Ziegfeld Follies of 1918*, program and scripts, MCNY.

¹⁷⁹ Steve Travis, "The Rise and Fall of the Theatrical Syndicate," *Educational Theatre Journal* 10, no. 1 (1958): 35–40; Donaghey Frederick James, "Theaters," *Chicago Tribune*, October 30, 1924, 19. In 1919, Erlanger broke his partnership with Marc Klaw but remained at the head of the Syndicate.

¹⁸⁰ Goldman, *Banjo Eyes*, 68.

¹⁸¹ Sime Silverman, "Review," *Variety*, June 19, 1918.

York Globe confirmed this view, calling *The Aviator's Test* a “good, rollicking, belly-shaking slapstick that recalled the palmy days of Weber and Fields,” a quite insightful comment, considering that Joe Weber and Lew Fields were also Jewish comics.¹⁸²

According to Cantor’s own narrative, he felt the impulse to perform without the makeup for fear of losing contact with the audience. Of his opening in Atlantic City, he remembered: “It was the first time that I felt revealed to the audience and in personal contact with it.”¹⁸³ Sophie Tucker employed a similar rhetoric to describe her feeling of proximity to the audience when she performed without the blackface for the first time: “I got them eating right out of my hand,” she wrote in her autobiography.¹⁸⁴ The way Tucker understood the spectators’ need to feel closely connected to their favorite artists motivated her reveal. Similarly, Cantor decided to show his “real” face to deepen his relationship with the audience. He resolved: “Old blackface must die. In a moment of emergency, I had put on this dark mask and it had helped me to success. Now the audience knew only this cork-smearred face.”¹⁸⁵ This was a carefully thought-out strategy more than Cantor’s romanticized memoir allowed readers to realize. In fact, both Cantor and Tucker were aware that creating attractive off-stage personas was as important as constructing good stage characters. If the audience could get a glimpse of the actor behind the character and match that image with what they read in theatre paper columns, they would feel more invested in the performance.¹⁸⁶ The case of Jue Quon Tai in Chapter 3 has illustrated this strategy in great detail.

¹⁸² Clipping, *New York Globe*, undated, *The Ziegfeld Follies of 1918*, reviews, MCNY.

¹⁸³ Cantor, *My Life*, 187.

¹⁸⁴ Tucker, *Some of These Days*, 63.

¹⁸⁵ Cantor, *My Life*, 187.

¹⁸⁶ Both Tucker and Cantor took responsibility to control their images in the press. They released many interviews during their careers and made sure that their multiple philanthropic enterprises—Tucker particularly in the field of

Without the blackface, Cantor finally felt “revealed to the audience.” However, not even one among the hundreds of reviews covering *The Aviator’s Test* took note of Cantor appearing in his own skin. Tellingly, they all called his character a “whiteface” role, despite no whitening makeup was used or white-identified gestures and vocabulary mimicked.¹⁸⁷ Defining Cantor’s weakling a “whiteface” may have been a statement of relativism vis-à-vis his Jewishness but, more likely, it was the reviewers’ way to draw attention to a substantial change in his performance strategy. Thus, although not explicitly present on stage, blackface ghosted Cantor’s performance and furnished an essential interpretative key for it. As Cantor later stated, “I do the same stuff with or without it [blackface], but folks have me pegged as a blackface man and a blackface man I’ve got to be.”¹⁸⁸ This comment was based on his experience in the Shubert Brothers’ production *Broadway Brevities* two years after *The Aviator’s Test*: because he played without the blackface for the entire show, he received forty letters from people who, as they wrote, thought that they “hadn’t gotten their money’s worth.” Cantor did not “quite understand why people will laugh more at a joke delivered in blackface than the same [joke] without the burnt cork.”¹⁸⁹ The explanation comes easily in clowning terms: take the red nose off, and the clown dies. Cantor’s blackface was funny because it *acted* as a signifying “thing” in relation to his Jewish jokes, physical delicacy, and New York accent. Take the blackface off, and everything else loses its purpose and humor. Cantor’s most devoted spectators felt so connected

children’s protection, Cantor in support of the State of Israel and US immigration rights—received excellent coverage.

¹⁸⁷ *The Ziegfeld Follies of 1918*, reviews, MCNY.

¹⁸⁸ “Cantor Finds Jokes Go Better in Black,” *New York Tribune*, April 23, 1922.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

with his blackface persona that they sent personal letters asking him to reconsider giving it up. Clearly, they did not need Cantor to “reveal” his identity, as the “revelation” had taken place *thanks* to his mask. The “fundamental tenet, that the red nose reveals the wearer,” can be true of blackface too.

Cantor recuperated his Jewish blackface and continued to perform it for the pleasure of his most nostalgic spectators until the end of his career (fig. 4.16). From the combination of Jewishness and Blackness, he originated his own original image of Jewish Americanness. José Muñoz’s theory of disidentification describes how minoritarian performers operate within the dominant culture but reject assigned roles to forge ambiguous combinations that produce new possibilities and identities.¹⁹⁰ Cantor’s Jewish blackface was modern, urban, and intellectual; in other words, the opposite of the stereotypical old-world, rural, uneducated Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe as he had been depicted by nativist racial theory and “stage Jew” types in the previous three decades. At the same time, his blackface contradicted images of Black masculinity as primitive physical prowess and ignorance. Within white vaudeville’s dominant culture, Cantor rejected both the role of blackface minstrel and “stage Jew” to forge a combination of the two that, as a result, produced a wholly new conception of Jewish American masculinity expressed in wry humor, cunning intellectuality, and delicate mannerism. His “minoritarian” performance was not subversive or, as Henry Bial would frame it, was not meant to “overturn the entire applecart;” yet, his revisionist approach to both Black and Jewish stereotypes successfully “address[ed] issues of racial and ethnic discrimination.”

¹⁹⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4–8.



Fig. 4.16: Eddie Cantor applying black greasepaint in front of a triple mirror. Photographer unknown, August 3, 1946. Milwaukee Journal Negatives Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, ID 124529.

Jews in Blackface as Totemic Figures

Jews had almost entirely taken over blackface performance by the early-twentieth century. In addition to Sophie Tucker and Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson, George Burns, George Jessel, Nora Bayes, and Fanny Brice all got their start in popular entertainment by exploiting explicit blackface vocabularies. Tucker's and Cantor's early acts simply recycled stereotypes; similarly, Jolson's first blackface skit, "The Hebrew and the Coon" reiterated racist images of both Jews and Blacks.¹⁹¹ But Jewish blackface performers also made something new. Later in their careers,

¹⁹¹ Rogin, *Blackface, white Noise*, 97.

they moved away from explicitly reproducing blackface minstrelsy's types, yet continued to reference Blackness symbolically through music and voice, dance styles, and blackface masks that "revealed" the wearer's Jewishness. In the words of Gary Giddins, the shift from minstrelsy to vaudeville carried race down to the Lower East Side, while Jewish performers turned to African American-derived music and dance to create the image and sound of modern, urban America.¹⁹²

One question still remains unanswered: why blackface? Or, as Irving Howe famously put it, why did "Black become a mask for Jewish expressiveness?" In *World of Our Fathers*, Howe explains the affinity of Jewish performers to blackface as an instance of *immigrant* outsiders adopting the mask of the *native* outsiders: "with one woe speaking through the voice of another" Jewish performers "reach[ed] a spontaneity and assertiveness in the declaration of their Jewish selves."¹⁹³ This argument takes only the Jewish perspective into account; in fact, it disregards two important points that this study has substantiated. First, as Claire Jean Kim argues, racial formation and expression happen in a "field of racial positions" where one racial group is "triangulated" with reference to at least two other racial communities.¹⁹⁴ Second, the affinity to blackface has not been exclusively Jewish; in minstrel shows it was Irish before Eastern European Jews arrived in America.

¹⁹² Gary Giddins, *Riding on a Blue Note: Jazz and American Pop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 144–5.

¹⁹³ Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 563.

¹⁹⁴ Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–38, 107. A field of racial positions "is continuously contested and negotiated within and among racial groups, both at the elite level and at the level of popular culture and everyday life."

Michael Rogin and Jeffrey Melnick acknowledge the operations of “racial triangulation” and emphasize the function that Jewish blackface had vis-à-vis whiteness. Rogin criticizes Howe by writing: “Where Howe sees only solidarity, I see transfer as well. Switching identities, the jazz singer acquires exchange value at the expense of blacks.”¹⁹⁵ The “exchange value” is for Rogin in the currency of white Americanness. He famously claims: “by joining structural domination to cultural desire, [blackface] turned Europeans into Americans.”¹⁹⁶ Similarly, in *A Right to Sing the Blues*, Jeffrey Melnick argues that by gaining access to Black music and performance forms, Jews showed “evidence of their racial health—that is, of their whiteness.”¹⁹⁷ As a result, by performing Blackness, Jewishness acquired cultural capital in the eyes of white Americans. My analysis aligns with both Rogin’s and Melnick’s but also contributes two original insights. First, I demonstrate how Jewish utilitarianism could turn into genuine professional relationships with African American role models, collaborators, and colleagues. Secondly, I show how Jewish blackface went beyond simply declaring the performers’ Jewish identity and instead produced an original performance vocabulary to express Jewish Americanness as a liminal identity within American performance culture and society.

Caught in the middle of their “disassimilation process,” second-generation Jewish American artists tackled what Andrea Most theorizes as the code-switching between their Jewish rural past and American urban future; a Jewish system of community obligations and America’s defense of private rights; and between a Judaic-inflected conception of gender and liberal revisions of gender roles. Their “peculiar versatility” eased these negotiations, while blackface

¹⁹⁵ Rogin, *Blackface, white Noise*, 100.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹⁷ Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 12.

provided them with a toolkit to operate within the dominant culture. The blackface “tools” were familiar to many; yet their recombinations produced a brand-new conception of Jewish Americanness that was both proud of its traditional past and excited to participate in making a new cosmopolitan and racially integrated future for America. While the phrase “identity politics art” emerged out of the 1960s Civil Rights movement, second-wave feminism, and gay and lesbian liberation movement, I argue that Eddie Cantor’s and Sophie Tucker’s was art that substantiated and politicized their particular identities.¹⁹⁸ Their Jewish blackface was more than just racial mimicry; it was a cultural platform from which they conveyed new notions of Jewish Americanness. Tucker’s music, lyrics, voice, and physical presentation fused the image of the empowered African American female blues singer with the sexually overt “Belle Juive.” As a result, sonic and visual blackface assisted Tucker in performing an idea of Jewishness as brash, provocative, and physically conspicuous femininity. Cantor’s Jewish blackface opposed both the Jewish rural patriarch and ignorant minstrel clown stereotypes. By means of contrast, his use of explicit blackface performed Jewishness as intellectual, humorous, and delicate masculinity.

W.T. Lahmon’s theory of blackface as “lore cycle” helps to explain not only the return of blackface throughout history but also the possibility of repurposing blackface performance vocabularies to create something completely different and original. The history of blackface in the United States is not a linear progression from foundation and expansion to decline and disappearance. Rather, blackface performance is a cultural and aesthetic cycle that is reinvented in different eras according to societies’ cultural and political needs. Lahmon reminds us that

¹⁹⁸ Key thinkers who contributed to the theorization of identity politics in society and art include Franz Fanon, who in *Black Skin, white Mask* wrote about the pervasive experience of being an oppressed Black person living in a white-dominated society (1967 in English translation); Edward Said, who critiqued the Western world’s representation of the Eastern world in *Orientalism* (1978); and Homi K. Bhabha, who further developed Said’s work by exploring the histories and meanings of racial stereotypes in *The Location of Culture* (1994).

social and cultural history “is full of returning repressions;” when they return, lore cycles may seem to come out of nowhere, yet there is always some type of history, “an archive of unrealized ambitions,” lurking from behind.¹⁹⁹ While in the 1870s blackface minstrelsy declined in theatres, it did not disappear. At each later surge—from the Jazz Age to rock n’ roll and as recently as rap and hip hop—there has been an initial period of genuine fascination. Lahmon claims that “only after it has served its several salutary functions does the dominant representation of blacks predictably degrade into abusive travesty.”²⁰⁰ Expert participants in the lore cycle recognize and take pleasure in layering the palimpsest. Revisions may emphasize one layer over another, yet all revisions encapsulate all the layers of history. Lahmon calls these palimpsests “totemic figures:” these are “heavily heaped” cultural objects that contain all the residue from previous cycles—the “salutary” as well as the “abusive”—and revive the function of their predecessors creatively even when the recipients are not aware of the history delivered.²⁰¹

Eddie Cantor’s and Sophie Tucker’s blackface personae were such totemic figures. They participated in the blackface lore cycle and, together with their audiences, contributed to its renewal. Tucker’s collaborations with both Jewish and African American artists exposed her to the contested racialized histories of American music and dance; in fact, her original combinations of Jewish and Black referents in her acts encompassed both African American original performance materials and their subsequent white appropriations. Similarly, Cantor was aware of minstrelsy’s history and types. His original “darkey” and “dandy” types contained both

¹⁹⁹ W.T. Lahmon Jr., “Turning Around Jim Crow,” in *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*, Stephen Johnson ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 35, 22.

²⁰⁰ W. T. Lahmon Jr., “Ebery Time,” 282.

²⁰¹ W.T. Lahmon Jr., “Turning Around,” 22.

blackface minstrelsy's racist history and, a layer above, revisions of both Black and Jewish stage stereotypes popular well after the demise of minstrelsy. Both Cantor and Tucker layered the palimpsest and created their own topcoats by combining elements from different layers. In so doing, their characters fulfilled what Lahmon argues is the ultimate function of "perilously licensed" lore cycles: to help "culture negotiate its many parts."²⁰² Such an understanding of the function of Jewish blackface also revises the meaning of the American "melting pot:" what holds us together is not similarity, but our investment in continuously re-imagining lore cycles as ways to engage in dialectical relations with different people and different cultural products.

²⁰² W.T. Lahmon Jr., "Ebery Time," 282.

Epilogue

September 26, 2019.

Update regarding *La Tía Mariela*:

The National Museum of Mexican Art is saddened to share that the US Department of Citizenship Immigration Services (USCIS), under the current administration, has officially denied granting touring visas for the cast and crew of Mexico's Once Producciones, which was set to bring its production of *La Tía Mariela* to Chicago later this week to perform as part of *Destinos*, Third International Latino Theater Festival.¹

In a written denial to the museum's artistic director, USCIS claimed that the play *La Tía Mariela* (Aunt Mariela) was not "culturally unique." As the festival organizers allegedly sent insufficient evidence to prove otherwise, USCIS officers decided that the stories of Yucatan playwright Conchi León's twelve aunts were not worthy representatives of Mexican culture at the Chicago International Latino Theater Festival. Acting as surveyors of cultural authenticity and artistic merit, USCIS denied visas for the show's cast and crew.

In this instance, the practice of exclusion at patrolled national borders moved beyond the confines of race, ethnicity, and nationality into the realm of art and performance. This incident may seem just a momentary anomaly during a period of heightened scrutiny of immigrants, yet a deeper study of the history of immigration law and racial performance in the United States reveals that both have jointly influenced understandings of race, notions of cultural authenticity, and belonging to the national ethos over the last one hundred and fifty years. By examining racial impersonations by American immigrant performers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I set out to expose the historical origins of the intersection between

¹ Herrera Greenspan, "With Visas Denied, 'Destinos' Festival Continues Without the Mexican Play 'La Tía Mariela,'" *Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 2019.

immigration policy, performance, and racial thought. Moreover, by theorizing racial impersonation as an act of identity formation that simultaneously values and challenges authenticity, I emphasized its potential to contradict conventional racial meanings, even those that are codified in immigration policies.

Irish American Pat Rooney and May and Kate Elinore, Chinese American Lee Tung Foo and Jue Quon Tai, and Jewish American Sophie Tucker and Eddie Cantor changed the way racial impersonation had been used in American entertainment to portray non-white peoples. Each used unique stage techniques to reproduce, recombine, and ultimately subvert long-established stage repertoires. They *im-personated* or gave body to new, self-conceived ideas of hyphenated Americanness. Paradoxically, as the title of this study squarely puts it, they *embodied race* to perform their ideas of and right to *American citizenship*. In doing so, they underscored that for immigrant subjects, “Americanness” is an everchanging process of self-creation constituted by daily embodied practices in response to mainstream racialization and immigration laws.

Immigrant racial impersonations achieved three main results. Firstly, by revealing identity and the performativity of identity to be mutually constitutive dimensions of the self, they showed how admittance into or exclusion from the American mainstream is often just a matter of presentation. Secondly, by bringing together disparate racial and ethnic stereotypes, tropes, and forms of cultural expressions, immigrant racial impersonators suggested that different identities can and do often coexist in one body. This racial and ethnic plurality on one hand called attention to white American-born spectators’ unfamiliarity with the hyphenated experience in America. On the other hand, it redefined the American “melting pot,” as Eddie Cantor once wrote, “in terms of theatre:” not as a hot pot in which all differences are dissolved and lose their identity, but rather as a “variety show” in which “every act is welcome if it helps the show in toto, where

merit gets you billing—not your bloodlines.”² Lastly, by staging multiple types of racial descriptors, immigrant impersonators created opportunities for both performers and audience members to connect across racial lines. These connections could stem from wholesome laughter, as the Elinore Sisters and Eddie Cantor have shown; an effort towards faithful cultural representation, as was the case for Pat Rooney’s dances and Lee Tung Foo’s national songs; or the intriguing blurring of boundaries between actor and role, as Jue Quon Tai and Sophie Tucker have demonstrated.

This study reveals how in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century multiethnic popular theatres, immigrant racial impersonators politicized their hyphenated identities to help Americans negotiate their culture’s many parts. This study also demonstrates the role of racial impersonation to produce racial and ethnic meanings that supplement, amend, or contradict institutional definitions of citizenship. Citizenship, as Salamishah Tillet argues, predicates itself on both legal definitions and myths of the nation such as public monuments and oral, written, or performed national narratives.³ Irish, Chinese, and Jewish American racial impersonators performed their own original narratives to either denounce exclusion or claim belonging to the American national ethos. As a result, and despite incrementally restrictive immigration policies, these immigrant groups developed forms of racial and ethnic identity that, as Kevin Kenny writes, are “an integral part of the process through which immigrants have normally become American.”⁴

² Eddie Cantor, *The Way I See It*, Phyllis Rosentour ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959), 65.

³ Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁴ Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History* (Harlow, UK: Routledge, 2000), 148.

The same cannot be said for American-born or diasporic Black subjects who, since the country's foundation, have been excluded from monumental as well as narrativized mythologies of nation-building. When it was first conceived, the scope of this project omitted the analysis of Black racial impersonators due to the incomparability of their "second-class" citizenship to white-looking and Asian immigrants' journeys towards naturalization. Five years and two American presidencies later, Black artists in whiteface, yellowface, or impersonating Irish and "Hebrew" stock characters appear to be the most effective subjects of investigation to grasp racial impersonation's political potential to comment on exclusive definitions of citizenship and the American white power structure. Amidst critical debates on both police reform and immigration policy during this time of increased police brutality and refugee crisis, I wish to emphasize the need to integrate discussions on Black and immigrant performance in pursuit of racial and social justice.

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