CHAPTER 5

The "Indecent" Others

While the doors of commercial amusements were opening far wider than ever before, not everyone was being welcomed inside. "Decency" remained the essential element in determining who would and would not be permitted within the public amusement sites, but decency in the abstract was too evanescent a notion. To sustain its integrity and utility, it had to be concretized through reference to an immutably "indecent" other. This was the role assigned to African Americans.

Racial segregation and racist parody were not invented by turn-of-the-century showmen. They became constituent elements in commercial amusements because they were already endemic in the larger society and because they provided a heterogeneous white audience with a unifying point of reference and visible and constant reminders of its privileged status.*

"White" immigrants and ethnicities who dressed appropriately, acted decently, and had the price of admission were welcomed inside the


*While Asians and Asian Americans were also parodied on stage and segregated or excluded in some western theaters, they were never as significant a factor in the amusement world. Most of their leisure time was spent in their own communities; seldom did they venture outside them or attempt to patronize commercial amusements. They were, for this reason, not affected to the same degree as the African Americans by segregation or exclusion.
commercial amusement centers. As Henry James discovered in 1904 on his return to the United States after a twenty-year absence, the "aliens" were everywhere being rapidly Americanized or, as he put it, magically lifted to a new "level," "glazed ... over ... by a huge whitewashing brush." Even the Italians, he found, had lost their "colour," which of all the European "races," they had "appeared ... most to have." James's use of metaphors of color to describe the Americanization of the "alien" was particularly apt. For what most distinguished the American Europeans from the African Americans was the former's ability to lose their "colour."  

Two years after James revisited America, Ray Stannard Baker, the magazine reporter and sometime muckraker, made his own tour of the country. In the articles and book he published about his journey, Baker made explicit what had been implicit in James's musings about ethnicity and race. He noted that, while the "mingling white races," "the Germans, Irish, English, Italians, Jews, Slavs," were being rapidly assimilated into the "nation we call America," the Negro was still not "accepted as an American. Instead of losing himself gradually in the dominant race, as the Germans, Irish, and Italians are doing, adding those traits or qualities with which Time fashions and modifies this human mosaic called the American nation, the Negro is set apart as a peculiar people." Like "blacks in South Africa, and certain classes in India," Negroes were becoming increasingly segregated, "a people wholly apart—separate in their churches, separate in their schools, separate in cars, conveyances, hotels, restaurants."  

This segregation of public facilities was, Baker asserted, a recent development. "Conditions are rapidly changing. A few years ago, no hotel or restaurant in Boston refused Negro guests; now (in 1907) several hotels, restaurants, and especially confectionery stores, will not serve Negroes, even the best of them." North and South, segregation had grown apace with the growth of the cities—and their African-American populations. As C. Van Woodward would assert a half-century later, segregation in the South "did not appear with the end of slavery, but toward the end of the [nineteenth] century and later." It was "essentially an urban, not a rural, phenomenon [that] appeared first in towns and cities and grew as they grew."  

Though segregation had by the early 1900s become national policy, reinforced by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that permitted states and municipalities to establish "separate but equal" public facilities for African-American citizens, there remained significant differ-
resulted in decisions for the plaintiffs, the fines levied were seldom sufficient to force any permanent change in seating policy.8

African Americans protested against discrimination in white-owned theaters but realized that the only alternative to patronizing segregated white theaters was to build their own. As a group of black businessmen explained in August 1901, “It has long been a source of exasperation to the leaders of colored society in Chicago that they could not secure box or orchestra seats in any of the theaters, no matter how much they were willing to pay or how soon they got in line before the box office window. . . . This fact has led to the plan of having a colored theatre in Chicago, controlled by colored people and catering only to colored patronage.” In 1904, Robert Motz opened the Pekin Theatre on Chicago’s South Side with a multitalented stock company of African-American actors, playwrights, and musicians. The Pekin Stock Company produced an entirely new musical show every two weeks—each with up to twenty original numbers. Mott’s venture proved so successful that within a few years white theater owners had “opened several theaters on State Street, catering to black patronage and located only a few blocks south of the Pekin.”9

Though few cities could duplicate Chicago in the variety of live amusements offered by and for African Americans, most large cities by 1910 had at least one black theater. In Jackson, Mississippi, where the manager of the Century Theatre had “refused to book Negro troupes and made Negro patrons use the fire escape to reach the gallery,” a group of black businessmen in 1905 opened the American Theatre in the building that housed the American Trust and Savings Bank, “a Negro institution.” In New Orleans, a black company subleased the Elysium Theatre to present Billy Kershans’ “black” minstrel show. The theater remained segregated under the new management, but it was “the white people [who were] treated with secondary consideration, only having one side of the upper balcony set aside for them, while the Negroes have the entire orchestra, half of the balcony, the whole pit and all of the boxes with the exception of one.”10

In southern cities, the theater-building campaign proceeded with such alacrity that Salem Tutt Whitney, a black producer and performer, commented in 1910 that, while Booker T. Washington could hardly

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have been thinking of show business when he “maintained that the South is the natural field of endeavor for the colored man . . . a trip through the South will convince one that there had been no more rapid progress along any line than in things theatrical. Every town of importance has its colored play-house, and for the most part they are well attended. From empty storerooms and lots in the walls there have grown many creditable theatres with all the modern equipment, capable of seating from 500 to 1,000 persons.”12

There were other “ethic” and “national” theaters in cities across the country, but they were seldom as well-attended as the African-American ones. The Irish in Philadelphia could, if they chose, buy tickets for the “Mae Desmond Players” or travel downtown to see the latest Broadway road show; Russian Jews could patronize cheap English-speaking theaters as well as neighborhood Yiddish houses. Black audiences did not have the luxury of such choices. They patronized the black theaters because they refused to accept segregation in the “white” ones.13

The segregation of African Americans comprised one element in their designation as “indecent” others. Equally important was their representation in parodic form on stage. What Douglas Gilbert has written of the early variety theater remained true in vaudeville and musical comedy in the 1890s and early 1900s. “Most of the comedy . . . was racial” or what we would today call ethnic. Reading through vaudeville programs from the early 1900s, one is struck by the way ethnicity and race were used to identify acts. Singers, sketch artists, dancers, comedians, and acrobats were listed on the “bills” as Irish, Hebrew, colored, blackface, or German. The designation referred not to the performers’ ethnicity but to the “type” of act they presented. Each “type” spoke its own language, dressed in readily identifiable costumes, and had its own routines. The Irish knockabout comics engaged in a particularly physical brand of comedy, tough-guy routines, dances, and songs. Dutch and German comics dressed in peaked cap, short pants, and large wooden shoes. The “Hebrews” sang and told their stories in “stage” Yiddish.14

Some comic teams mixed different types together on stage. Makey and Stewart appeared at Keith and Albee’s Union Square Theater on November 24, 1902, “made up” as a “Hebrew” and an “Irishman.” The Marx Brothers combined three different stage “ethnicities” in their act. Groucho began in vaudeville playing the Dutch role, which later...
celebrating their new status as urban Americans. Still, there were set limits beyond which those caricatures could not proceed. When those limits were exceeded, the ethnic community, or its most vocal defenders, could be expected to take immediate and direct action, threatening theater managers and performers with negative publicity, boycotts, or worse. The reports from the Keith-Albee managers contain, as Robert Snyder has indicated, "repeated references to cuts of ethnic spoofs and nastier expressions such as 'kike,' 'wop,' and 'dirty little Greek.'" In Chicago, representatives of the Jewish community "agitated . . . over the burlesque Hebrew types seen on the stage" and demanded "the suppression of the stage Jew."16

 Sharing the vaudeville bill with the ethnic types were the native-born rubes, hicks, and hayseeds; the "gentlemen" in top hats; and the tramps, hoboes, and newsies. The hayseed acts were especially popular with vaudeville audiences who were only too pleased to see their cultural "superiority" acted out on stage. No matter how "green" the immigrants in the audience, they were always more sophisticated than the country bumpkins on the stage. Vaudeville audiences also joined together to hoot the cajfy "gentleman" acts like that of Ed Wynn, who made his stage entrance with a pipe in his mouth, a bulldog on a leash, and the college cheer, "Rah, rah, rah. Who pays my bills? Pa and Ma." A different, more sympathetic laughter greeted the tramp and hobo characters. W. C. Fields did his tramp juggler routine on vaudeville stages for years with great success. He was but one of hundreds of hobo performers to appear in vaudeville, musical comedy, and later, like Charlie Chaplin, in silent movies.17

The cruelest and most popular of the comedic caricatures were the "coons" or "darkies" whose lineage reached back more than half a century to the antebellum minstrel show, where "stage Negroes" had been played exclusively by whites in blackface.* There were a variety of black comedic characters: the "dandy" preening and bragging about his thick lips, wooly hair, and smart clothes; the imbecile sputtering nonsense and forever "spooked" by hobgoblins; the lazy fool doing all he could to avoid work; the impostor maladroitly impersonating "white" doctors, lawyers, or politicians; and, toward the close of the century,

*Well into the twentieth century, whites in blackface would continue to score enormous commercial success as within and outside vaudeville. No African-American performer would ever make as much money or win as much fame as Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson, and Sophie Tucker, to mention only the most famous of the many performers who spent much of their careers in blackface.
the razor-wielding "coon" who was as foolish as his predecessors, but sexual and dangerous as well.

These negative qualities attributed to "blackness" on stage served to unite the audience in a celebration of its own "whiteness." As David Roediger reminds us, "Blackface minstrels were the first self-consciously 'white' entertainers in the world. The simple physical disguise—and elaborate cultural disguise—of blacking up served to emphasize that those on stage were really white and that whiteness really mattered... All whites could easily participate in minstrelsy's central joke, the point of which remained a common, respectable and increasingly smug whiteness under the makeup."  

The blackface performers who migrated from minstrelsy to vaudeville and musical comedy in the 1890s and early 1900s played the same kinds of shuffling, bumbling, preening characters. So, tragically, did the African-American comedians, singers, and dancers who began to appear on the vaudeville stage in the middle 1890s and were required to portray—in a more "authentic" fashion—the "darky" characters constructed by white performers in blackface. Bert Williams and George Walker, the first African Americans to play the "big time" in New York City, billed themselves as "The Two Real Coons" to distinguish themselves from white performers in blackface. Other African-American performers, many of whom had toiled for years on backwater minstrelsy circuits, followed Williams and Walker onto the vaudeville stage. Some, like Williams and Walker, attempted to "give style and comic dignity to a fiction that white men had created and fostered." Others distanced themselves from the caricatures they acted out by exaggerating the parody. Billy Kersands claimed to have the largest mouth in the world. Ernest Hogan, who billed himself as "the Unbleached American" and wrote, published, and performed his own "coon" song, "All Coons Look Alike to Me," incorporated watermelon eating into his act.  

It is impossible to overstate the popularity of such black misrepresentations in the 1890s and early 1900s. African-American caricatures were a staple of the vaudeville bill, black musicals were playing on Broadway and touring the first-class theaters of the country, and "coon" songs were the hottest-selling item in sheet music. According to James Dornon, "Over six hundred [coon songs] were published during the decade of the 1890s, and the more successful efforts sold in the millions of copies. To take but a single example, Fred Fisher's 'If the Man
in the Moon Were a Coon' sold over three million copies in sheet music form, and this was not exceptional.”

The intent to caricature and humiliate blacks was evident not only in the coon song lyrics (most often written by whites) but in the illustrations for the sheet music as well. The comic black figure had existed for a long time before the coming of the coon songs, but, according to J. Stanley Lemons, "the treatment of blacks in illustrations [had] presented them as humans." Not so the sheet music of the 1890s that pictured them with animal features. Like the trading cards issued by a number of advertising companies in the late 1880s, the sheet music illustrations showed "blacks with big mouths, big ears, oversized hands and feet, sloping foreheads (meant to indicate limited intelligence), and behaving in exaggerated and ridiculous fashion."

The lyrics were even more explicit in portraying African-American inferiority and indecency. As in the past, "coons" were represented as ignorant, indolent, and dishonest, but increasingly in the early 1900s, they were depicted as bullying and violent as well.

I'm the toughest, toughest coon that walks the street,
You may search the wide, wide world my equal never meet;
I got a razor in my boot, I got a gun with which to shoot,
I'm the toughest, toughest coon that walks the street.

The lyrics of the coon songs, Dornon suggests, conveyed an unmistakable message: "Blacks are potentially dangerous; they must be controlled and subordinated by whatever means necessary. They must also be segregated; set apart, for it was also clear in the coon song lyrics that they wanted to be white—to break down the most important barrier of all—the boundary separating 'us' from 'them.'" The longing to be white included a longing for the power that would come with "whiteness," the power to employ and humiliate white men:

I've got a white man working for me,
I'm going to keep him busy you see.

and to bed white women:

I've got a big brunette, and a blond to pet,
I've got 'em short, fat, thin and tall.

By the early 1900s, African-American performers singing coon songs, dancing cakewalks, and playing the comedic "darky" roles had become so popular and so in demand that white performers who had previously had vaudeville all to themselves began to demand their removal from the stage. A few African-American stars responded by spending more time in Europe and Australia, where, they claimed, there was no race prejudice. However, most black performers, not unused to such bigotry, continued to accept whatever billings came their way regardless of the hostility exhibited by the white performers.

The prejudice of white vaudevillians and the tastes of white audiences strictly circumscribed the performance boundaries of African-American stars. No more than one "colored" act could appear on any vaudeville program at the same time; African Americans (with few exceptions) had to perform in blackface, speak and sing in dialect, wear funny costumes, sing "coon" songs, and end their acts with a cakewalk or some other kind of "darky" dance. While other performers, no matter what their ethnicity, were permitted to regularly "make up" as "blacks," "Hebrews," "Irish," the only groups blacks were allowed to parody were "darkies" and occasionally the Chinese. As a writer in the Philadelphia Tribune, a black newspaper, complained in 1907, white people "don't care to see a black man imitate the white folk, but they have nothing to say about George Primrose, Billy West, George Thatcher, Lew Dockstader, George Wilson and a number of other white men, who have got rich by blacking their faces and imitating the Negro." Only in the black theaters were the black performers permitted to imitate whites.

Though many black performers were talented dancers and singers as well as comics, their value on the vaudeville stage rested almost exclusively in their ability to make their white audiences laugh at them. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued, perhaps in exaggerated fashion, in Dialectic of Enlightenment, "To laugh at something is always to deride it... A laughing audience is a parody of humanity... Their harmony is a caricature of solidarity." Bert Williams described the source of his audiences' pleasure in much the same terms. He was convinced that his success on stage depended on his humiliation, his always "getting the worst of it." Williams played what he called the 'Jonah man,' the man who, even if it rained soup, would be found with a fork in his hand and no spoon in sight, the man whose fighting rela-
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tives come to visit him and whose head is always dented by the furniture they throw at each other."[28]

Although Williams, like Adorno and Horkheimer, claimed to be speaking of "laughter" in general, not whites laughing at blacks, there can be little doubt that the element of derision in the laughter of the white audience viewing black performers was of a different quality than it would have been had the audience been integrated. Adorno and Horkheimer scorned the "solidarity" of the modern audience as a "caricature," but they did not deny that it was a form of solidarity. The "white" audience assembled to laugh at blacks came away from the experience with a sense of solidarity united by their shared distance from the objects of ridicule.[29]

Other ethnic groups had some success in banning tasteless and offensive slurs, but African Americans could not threaten a boycott (they were too small an audience to matter), take direct action, or exert much political pressure. Their only recourse was to call on white theater managers, song publishers, and performers to be more sensitive; their only media for doing so were the columns of black newspapers like the Indianapolis Freeman and journals like Crisis.

As Sylvester Russell wrote in the Indianapolis Freeman in 1904, song publishers and performers had stopped using the words "shee-nee" and "dago" to avoid offending Jews and Italians. There was, however, no such sensitivity when it came to "nigger," "darky," and "coon." "Colored song writers have never insulted any of the white races. Why then should the song publishers accept a manuscript that would insult the Colored race? The best class of cultivated white people of the North do not appreciate the word 'nigger.' The ignorant 'stick-weed' variety performer who thinks he pleases in forcing this word upon the public is very much mistaken... Colored people regard this word as an insult and an injustice to their race. There is no humor in the words 'common nigger.'"[30]

More prevalent—and ultimately more damaging from the point of view of African Americans—was the widespread adoption of "coon" to refer to blacks. The term, which, David Roediger claims, had once been a common word for "white country persons," had by the early twentieth century been transformed into a racist slur. Where black performers had used the word "just to amuse or to cause laughter," white audiences had adopted it to insult the entire "race," a writer for the Indianapolis Freeman argued in early 1909. "A show goes to a country town—some low down, loud mouth 'coon shouter' sings 'Coon,
hosts with his confusion, "These people [the blacks] ... are nearer your blood, nearer your temper, than any of these bright-eyed, ringleted immigrants on the East Side. Are you ashamed of your poor relations? Even if you don't like the half, or the quarter of negro blood, you might deal civilly with the three-quarters white."32

North and South, Wells's questions were met with the same sorts of answers, all testifying to the "mania" with which whites explained and defended segregation. "One man will dwell upon the uncontrollable violence of a black man's evil passions ... another will dilate upon the incredible stupidity of the full-blooded negro ... a third will speak of his physical offensiveness, his peculiar smell which necessitates his social isolation." More than once, Wells was told stories about light-skinned blacks who married "pure-minded, pure white" women who gave birth to children "black as your hat. Absolutely negroid." Anecdotes such as these about the "lamentable results of intermarriage" were used not simply as an argument "against intermarriage, but as an argument against the extension of quite rudimentary civilities to the men of color. 'If you eat with them, you've got to marry them,'" Wells was told. There was no acceptable compromise, no halfway point between miscegenation and segregation.33

What this thinking on the part of whites meant for African Americans was obvious. There was no escape from biological destiny, no way blacks could change their appearance, rid themselves of what Wells's hosts had called their "evil passions" or their "peculiar smell." The "taint" of black blood was such as to render attempts at respectability foolishly. To sacralize public amusement spaces and sanctify their audiences as decent, African Americans had to be excluded or segregated within them. No exceptions could be permitted.

African Americans, alone among the American peoples, were considered to be not only lacking in respectability but also constitutionally incapable of acquiring it. For H. G. Wells, visiting the United States in 1904, this fact of American life was virtually inexplicable. Try as he might, he could not understand the attitudes of white Americans toward "colored" people, especially as many of these "colored" people were, he discovered, "quite white" and had "the same blood," the same Anglo-Saxon blood, flowing in their veins as the oldest, finest southern planter families. Wells was particularly confused by the difference between the way southern European immigrants and African-American "natives" were treated in the city's public spaces. Though many of the blacks had patrician white ancestors, they were shunned and segregated. European "immigrants," on the other hand, who shared no biological or cultural heritage with American whites, were afforded every social courtesy and right. Wells confronted his southern