Sovereign Pleasures: Comic Play in Antebellum America

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*Sovereign Pleasures* argues that comic performance was central to the imperfectly democratizing public formations of the early United States. In a period when democratic culture was defined less by the promise of expanding suffrage than it was by the politics of popular assembly, an evolving panoply of comic amusement fostered various kinds of public gathering in which competing formulations of the sovereignty of “the people” could find momentary and provisional articulation. While early American literary studies has increasingly turned to the long-neglected materials of theater and performance to expand critical approaches to the democratic public sphere, such scholarship seldom recognizes the laughter that so often propels public assembly and breathes life into popular culture. Beyond simply insisting that we take antebellum theater and performance cultures seriously, my dissertation asks what can be gained by attending to the pleasures of their unserious enterprises. At playhouses and pleasure-gardens, at lyceums and museums, in taprooms and dance halls, at the marketplace and in the streets, publics gathered in the pursuit of fun and enjoyment, embodying a popular culture that imagined itself (with no small measure of ambivalence) to be democratic. *Sovereign Pleasures* delineates these ludic pursuits and the fraught, dissonant forms of collective
feeling they engendered. Individual chapters feature Washington Irving theorizing the
comic sociality of early national democracy from the pit of a riotous playhouse; star
comedians Thomas Wignell, Sol Smith, and Anna Cora Mowatt appealing to the
sovereignty of their local audiences with winking forms of ironized address; virtuoso
dancer William Henry Lane, the first widely successful African American minstrel player
on the commercial stage, contending with the racist structures of blackface comedy; and
Henry “Box” Brown resurrecting the politics of the antebellum carnivalesque with his
abolitionist theatrics. Engaging with scholarship on early American performance culture,
critical studies of the democratic public sphere, and theories of comedy and play, I chart a
cultural history of pleasure that enriches our understanding of the shape and limits of
early U.S. democracy.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ..............................................................................................................................ii

Acknowledgments ...........................................................................................................iv

Table of Contents ..........................................................................................................vii

List of Illustrations .........................................................................................................viii

Introduction ....................................................................................................................1

*Chapter 1*

Agonistic Audiences: Comic Play in the Early National Theater .................................26

*Chapter 2*

Comic Acts: Staging the Audience’s Pleasures ..............................................................68

*Chapter 3*

Minstrelsy and the Virtuoso .........................................................................................126

*Chapter 4*

Funny Mummies: Comic Unravelings of the Antebellum Carnivalesque ...............186

Bibliography ................................................................................................................246
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1
William Dunlap, “Contrast: Scene Last,”
courtesy of the New York Public Library………………………………………82

Figure 2
Playbill for Sol Smith’s Benefit Night (1835),
courtesy of the Houghton Library, Harvard University……………………98

Figure 3
“Mrs. Mowatt as Beatrice” (1851),
courtesy of the New York Public Library……………………………………123

Figure 4
Playbill for The Georgia Champions, featuring “Master Juba” (ca. 1845),
courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University…………………………165

Figure 5
Playbill for The Ethiopian Minstrels, featuring “Master Juba” (ca. 1845),
courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University…………………………167

Figure 6
“Royal Vauxhall Gardens” (1848),
courtesy of the New York Public Library……………………………………180

Figure 7
George R. Gliddon, Proposal (1850),
courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society……………………………214

Figure 8
The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia (ca. 1850),
courtesy of the Library of Congress………………………………………233

Figure 9
Engraving of the Box in which Henry Box Brown Escaped from Slavery (1850),
courtesy of the Library of Congress ………………………………………234
Introduction

Dangerous laughter pursues the naive hero of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux.” Freshly arrived in an unnamed town in colonial Massachusetts, a rustic youth (aptly named Robin) eagerly sets out in search of his kinsman and would-be patron. But at every turn, his inquiries are met with ominous amusement, from the boisterous roar of onlookers at the barber’s shop, to the general merriment of patrons at the local inn, to the knowing titter of the brothel mistress. What this green newcomer doesn’t know is that he has arrived in the midst of a popular uprising against British authority — against, in fact, the very kinsman he seeks. Utterly bemused by the ridicule and rebuffs he receives, Robin consistently fails to register a series of social cues that signal his political disjunction from the general public, until a slyly courteous gentleman offers to wait with him in the church square, where, he assures Robin, the Major will shortly appear. A spectacular display of ritual degradation follows, in which Robin finally confronts his kinsman as he is rolled through the town, tarred and feathered, the centerpiece of a carnivalesque procession. It is a shocking revelation for Robin, a horrifying climax of mob terror and violent overthrow. And in this crucial moment, the popular rumblings that Robin had failed to comprehend burst forth upon him with overwhelming force. He begins to laugh.

Emphatic, excessive, even compulsive in its outpourings, Robin’s laughter is the crux of Hawthorne’s tale of revolutionary overthrow — a tale that pointedly identifies the act of political rebellion as a ritualized form of comedy. In the compact and economical stagecraft of the narrative, Hawthorne adroitly maneuvers Robin into a public arena
where the theatrical triangulation between himself, the Major, and the assembled crowd reconfigures the youth’s entire perceptual framework. As Robin and Major Molineux stare at each other in mutual recognition, Robin feels, with quaking knees and bristling hair, the tragedy of his kinsman’s downfall. But the classically Aristotelian “mixture of pity and terror” that Robin initially experiences gives way to other sensations: “a bewildering excitement began to seize upon his mind; the preceding adventures of the night, the unexpected appearance of the crowd, the torches, the confused din, and the hush that followed, the specter of his kinsman reviled by that great multitude, all this, and more than all, a perception of the tremendous ridicule in the whole scene, affected him with a sort of mental inebriety.” A compounding sense of the ridiculous overwhelms Robin’s tragic sensibility, pulling him not just into an excited state of “mental inebriety,” but into an altogether new relation to the public at large. It is precisely at this moment that “a voice of sluggish merriment salute[s] Robin’s ears,” and he turns to see “the lantern-bearer, rubbing his eyes, and drowsily enjoying the lad’s amazement.” This initial chuckle is infectious, running rapidly through the crowd and setting off a general public uproar: “The contagion was spreading among the multitude, when, all at once, it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street; every man shook his sides, every man emptied his lungs, but Robin’s shout was the loudest there.” “Seized” by the “contagion” of the crowd’s laughter, Robin is brought suddenly, even violently, into relation with a newly formed and reforming public, entering into the carnivalizing practices of popular sovereignty by means of intemperate, irresistible, and

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2 Hawthorne, 86.
above all, pleasurable surrender.

Hawthorne’s 1832 tale of the popular overthrow of British colonial rule develops, like so much of his fiction, a historical romance that throws into relief the cultural politics of his day. While “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” has long been taken as an allegory of antebellum democracy’s popular volatility, the comic aesthetics that underpin its political drama are more often overlooked. Yet Hawthorne’s darkly ironic vision of the frenzied mania and public upheaval that attends democratic self-governance presents a striking formalization of the potent comedy of popular sovereignty. The signal of comic experience and the catalyst for collective unity, the laughter that stalks and finally subsumes young Robin is an instrument of political transformation, for its spontaneous, even involuntary convulsions transmit popular rule from body to body in a mimetic cascade of pleasure-laden action and reaction. To fall into such populist laughter is to make a comedy out of tragedy, and in so doing, enter into a new set of social and political relations. With a shout of laughter that is “loudest of them all,” Robin at once synchronizes and excessively magnifies his corporeal relation to this rebellious crowd, allowing his body to slide into the pleasures of public revolt. In the process, he signals his political realignment from a system of colonial patronage to one of popular rule. Robin’s laugh, in other words, marks his admittance into a new world order. Democracy in the age of Jackson, Hawthorne suggests, flows out of unsettling comedies of popular sovereignty.

_Sovereign Pleasures_ argues that comic performances of popular sovereignty were central to the imperfectly democratizing public formations of the early United States. Comedy has long been marginalized in studies of U.S. democratic culture, but as
Hawthorne’s tale so richly illustrates, the deeply social and socializing forces of comic experience make it a powerful organizer of publics, crystallizing the relations among an assembled people through the production of popular enjoyment. Beyond the fictionalized drama of Robin’s violent delights, antebellum formulations of comic performance and comic assembly made abstract conceptions of popular sovereignty tangibly available to a broad range of Americans, definitively shaping the national democratic imaginary. Many of the comic icons of the period — from fictional figures such as Brother Jonathan and Jim Crow to real-life personas like huckster impresario P. T. Barnum and champion dancer “Master Juba” — forged new forms of collective pleasure that mediated between and among disparate members of the body politic, answering the question, at least for the moment, of who belonged to “the people” of a still uncertain democratic republic. Having fun, I argue, was a key part of the democratic enterprise.

But having fun was rife with contestation. Like the ritual crowd action that incites Robin’s laughter, the comic performances that take center stage in this dissertation do more than simply facilitate social cohesion; they respond to the turbulent conditions of popular rule. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, participatory forms of comic amusement — theater rowdyism, minstrel dance challenges, pseudonymous print humor, comic novels, grotesque body exhibitions, and carnivalesque processions — became important conduits for enacting fractious displays of “the people’s” sovereign authority. These entertainments appealed to a decidedly popular sensibility, fostering publics that often resisted the regulatory order and didactic seriousness of official culture. *Sovereign Pleasures* reconstructs this comic repertoire, showing how the volatile playfulness of antebellum public life informed the agonism of its politics. Comic
performers and their publics, I argue, continually linked the practices of political dissent to the vexed pleasures of popular fun, generating new forms of social pleasure that proved instrumental to the political struggles that defined early experiments in democratic governance.

The Democratic Imaginary — Publics in Performance

In attending to what I call the “comic play” of antebellum publics, my dissertation aims to shed new light on the fraught democratization of public life in the early United States. From the postrevolutionary period to the middle of the nineteenth century, the United States underwent a substantial expansion of political franchise while simultaneously solidifying economic systems of chattel slavery and aggressively extending its territorial encroachments on Indigenous lands. The nation’s trajectory from a geopolitically weak, nominally democratic republic, in which suffrage was limited to propertied white men, to a burgeoning national empire that was fracturing over the irreconcilable conflicts of slavery, gives historical shape to what Rogers F. Smith has called the “multiple traditions” of U.S. civic ideals, a shifting mixture of “liberal, democratic republican, and inegalitarian ascriptive elements” that characterized the struggles over defining American political identity.³ While the political landscape of U.S. self-governance was never (and has never been) wholly democratic, public life in the early United States continually engaged ideas of the democratic — the radical promise of democracy’s expansion, the perils of unchecked democracy, participatory democracy —

³ Rogers M. Smith, Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 6. Smith’s study of U.S. citizenship laws traces the ways in which American law has historically created “forms of second-class citizenship, denying personal liberties and opportunities for political participation to most of the adult population on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, and even religion” (2).
in ways that extended well beyond the right to vote.

In fact, the imagined horizons of democracy in this period were characterized less by the promise of expanding suffrage as they were by the politics of popular assembly: the myriad practices of public gathering through which competing formulations of the sovereignty of “the people” could find momentary and provisional articulation. These figurative and bodily practices developed expressions of popular authority that create, to borrow Jason Frank’s turn of phrase, “the enchantments of democracy,” the “sustaining fictions” that pull citizen-subjects into a democratic political imaginary. While the recent aesthetic turn in modern political philosophy has sought to trace the contours of those democratic fictions, such scholarship has largely failed to recognize just how often they appear in comic garb, playing for public laughs in, say, the blackface mask of Jim Crow or the Yankee stripes of Uncle Sam. The crowd actions, public gatherings, and popular assemblies that made the sovereign authority of “the people” palpably present to early U.S. political subjects were not limited to the revolutionary aesthetics that broadly characterize what Frank terms “the democratic sublime.” As David Waldstreicher and other cultural historians have shown, the politics of popular assembly also included the festive discordances of charivari, the celebratory pomp and circumstance of patriotic parades, and the sportive pleasures of commercial entertainment.


5 An exception is literary studies scholar Angus Fletcher’s transhistorical examination of the intersections of comedy and democracy. See Angus Fletcher, *Comic Democracies: From Ancient Athens to the American Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

methodologies of literary studies and performance studies, my dissertation examines the comic play that guided these unserious, though hardly trivial, traditions of popular assembly to develop a more nuanced understanding of the affective, experiential relations that formulate democratic belonging. Comic enactments of popular sovereignty, I argue, reveal to us the social play that fuels the democratic political imaginary.

What Sovereign Pleasures recovers, then, is a comic archive of antebellum entertainment that presents a new account of the democratic public sphere. American literary studies has long been guided by “a yearning for concepts of democracy,” as Shirley Samuels has recently put it, and there is a rich and varied critical tradition devoted to probing the conditions of democratic culture, much of it informed by theories of the public sphere. Indeed, since Michael Warner’s uptake of the Habermasian public sphere in his field-defining study of early republican print culture, scholars have examined the many competing traditions of early U.S. democracy through histories of literary production and print circulation. In the last thirty years, a wealth of scholarship in this vein has offered significant extensions and challenges to the deliberative parameters of the bourgeois public sphere as originally conceived by Habermas, and more recent studies by Stacey Margolis (2015), Dana D. Nelson (2016), and Derrick Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Mary P. Ryan, Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City During the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Simon P. Newman, Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); William Pencak, et al., eds., Riot and Revelry in Early America (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).


Spires (2019) exemplify the insights Americanists continue to gain from tracing the contested formations of political sovereignty, citizenship, and democratic representation that take shape in literary print culture. What Hawthorne represents in print, however, is a rebellious public that establishes sovereignty of “the people” not through the discursive terrain of literary print culture, but through the somatic pleasures of public assembly. Far from a republic of letters, the mythic origins of antebellum democracy take root, as Hawthorne imagines it, in a kind of roving theatron. While American literary studies has so often turned to writers like Hawthorne to craft the cultural history of a democratic imaginary in the antebellum United States, theater and performance have long been overlooked and undervalued in traditional canons — and more recent anthologies — of nineteenth-century literature.


10 See, for example, Matthew Rebhorn’s recent assessment of this still sizable gap in critical histories of nineteenth-century literature, in which he poses this challenge: “perform the following thought experiment: name your top ten favorite authors from the nineteenth century….Now, list your top ten playwrights from the nineteenth century, or to be even more generous, those who were actively writing before Eugene O’Neill. Or name your top ten plays from the nineteenth century. How about your top five? Three?” (“Introduction: ‘Nineteenth-Century’ ‘American’ ‘Theater’ and ‘Performance,’” *J19* 6, no.2, [2018]: 389-394, 390-1).
gap. Tracing what Joseph Roach has called the surrogations of cultural memory, historians of theater and performance have worked to reconstruct the many repertoires that traveled across circum-Atlantic cultures, showing how performance contributed to shifting formations political sovereignty, citizenship, and national identity.\textsuperscript{11} Increased attention to the embodied and material dimensions of these political categories of public belonging has helped push Americanist discourse beyond the deliberative consensus politics of the Habermasian public sphere to elaborate the political struggles of

democratization in the early United States. Yet critical efforts to recover the political significance of early American performance culture very often recast the cultural play of theater and performance as cultural work, a tacit transposition that masks the ludic pleasures of performance and, by extension, democratic culture in this period.

In truth, this critical elision of play in the quest to evaluate the cultural productivity of performance reflects a much broader intellectual and cultural history of taking performance seriously. In the Western tradition, one dominant strand of this serious-minded critical orientation finds articulation in what Jonas Barish has called the antitheatrical prejudice, a long intellectual history of persistently viewing theater and theatricality as a serious threat to cultural order. Antitheatrical sentiment was of course a powerful force in the early United States, one that decidedly shaped the course of colonial and early U.S. theater history. Beyond the playhouse, the theatricality that proliferated in paratheatrical performances and manifested in the practices of everyday social life was often framed as an even more serious matter of concern. Indeed, both the

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residual civic ideology of virtuous republicanism and the emergent culture of sentiment that broadly shaped the early national and antebellum periods responded to the increasing social fluidity brought on by urbanization and the rise of the middle class by developing texts and practices that registered enduring cultural anxieties surrounding the potential duplicity and hypocrisy of theatrical conduct — the cultural hazards typified by “confidence men and painted women.” But as Karen Halttunen and others have shown, sentiment and sincerity were no less prone to cultivating new kinds of histrionics, and the history of middle-class culture in the early nineteenth century continually demonstrates how the dialectical relation between theatrical impulse and antitheatrical anxiety supplied the foundation for serious-minded forms of cultural engagement: practices that were consciously framed in terms of their social productivity.

Theater was not held apart from this seriousness. As I show in chapter 1, professionals, patrons, and other proponents of the theater often sought to counter antitheatrical characterizations of the playhouse’s social and political dangers with serious-minded arguments of their own, many of which touted the moral and instructive benefits of a “well-regulated” theater. These opposing sides in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century debates over the cultural standing of theatrical entertainments shared a common assumption that the relative value of theater in a democratic republic lay in the question of its social utility: the nature of the publics it assembled, the kinds of citizens it

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16 See also, for example, Lisa A. Freeman’s analysis of the ministerial responses to the Richmond theater fire of 1811, which developed antitheatrical sermons that drew on the dramatic conventions of sentimental melodrama and gothic romance. Lisa A. Freeman, *Antitheatricality and the Body Public* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 189-240.
moulded (or corrupted). But even as intellectual, cultural, and professional elites battled over the status of theater in the postrevolutionary period and well into the nineteenth century, the popular audiences that gathered together at the playhouse saw its value not so much as a site of instruction (moral, political, or otherwise), but as a space for collective play. In other words, the many publics that gathered at the theater and indulged in other theatrical pursuits did not seek to continually justify their entertainments as the means to some socially constructive end. What they sought out were the pleasures of unproductive leisure, the absorption and experiential flow of social activity that is performed for its own sake. More culturally persuasive than the discursive claims of any intellectual debate, more compelling than the straight pedagogy of any didacticism, it was these ludic pleasures that breathed collective life into the democratic imaginary of the early United States.

Rather than insist on taking theater and performance seriously, then, *Sovereign Pleasures* asks what can be gained by attending to the pleasures of its unserious enterprises. At playhouses and pleasure-gardens, at lyceums and museums, in taprooms and dance halls, at the marketplace and in the streets, publics gathered in the pursuit of fun and enjoyment, giving affective shape to a popular culture that imagined itself (with no small measure of ambivalence) to be democratic. My dissertation delineates these ludic pursuits and the fraught, dissonant forms of collective feeling they engendered. By focusing on the comic entertainments that antebellum publics enjoyed, I chart an unserious political tradition that enriches our understanding of the shape and limits of early U.S. democracy.

*Play, Pleasure, and the Comic*
More often sublimated than taken on its own terms in studies of early American literature and culture, play is a crucial feature of cultural production — a foundational, wide-ranging form of human (and animal) behavior that engenders a multitude of epistemic, aesthetic, social, and political practices. Or, as Johan Huizinga has so expansively claimed, “myth and ritual…law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science” can all trace their origins to “the primaeval soil of play.” While play theorists like Huizinga have emphasized the centrality of play to lived experience, scholars of performance and mimesis have illuminated the bodily dynamism of its pleasures, delineating the organic impulses that prompt people to play.

Theorists of mimesis have long identified play as a form of mimetic behavior, often invoking children’s play as evidence of humanity’s “natural propensity” to produce similarities, or imitate. In his essayistic sketch “On the Mimetic Faculty,” Walter Benjamin traces the deep history of mimesis, which has “ontogenetic” origins in childhood make-believe. A process of cognitive expansion, the embodied gestures of a child at play (when he pretends to be, say, a shopkeeper or a windmill) allow him to incorporate the outside world into his own conception of self. Through “this schooling of his mimetic faculty,” as Benjamin calls it, the child adapts his body to the external world, and in so doing, expands his understanding — his boundaries of the self. Part of what Benjamin captures in his evocative description is the phenomenological texture of

mimetic, and more specifically ludic, activity: the way a player’s assimilative engagements with the world cultivate forms of knowledge and growth that fuse the cognitive to the somatic. While Benjamin’s bio-anthropological account of the mimetic faculty links play’s experiential and embodied forms of knowledge production to a sweeping evolutionary history of language, scholars working across a cultural anthropological strain of performance studies have shown how play supplies the ballast for ritual, art, and other forms of cultural performance. In his seminal delineations of the “restored behavior” that exists both in and between theater and ritual, for example, Richard Schechner continually stresses the play of performance — how the performer’s subjunctive enactment of “not me…not not me” across a range of genres “does not so much imitate playing as epitomize it.” As Schechner argues, play lends a provisionality, or flexible “looseness” to systems of cultural production, indeed, to the practices of everyday life. And, as Clifford Geertz has shown through his thick description of the rich cultural significance of the Balinese cockfight, play’s provisional frameworks can also offer its players a form of “metasocial commentary,” an interpretive text from which

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21 Richard Schechner, The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance (London: Routledge, 1993), 41. In Between Theater and Anthropology, Schechner links child’s play, theater’s play, and ritual play together in their shared propensity to create subjunctive frameworks: “the baby — and later the child at play and the adult at art (and religion) — recognizes some things and situations as ‘not me…not not me.’” During workshops-rehearsals performers play with words, things, and actions, some of which are ‘me’ and some ‘not me.’ By the end of the process the ‘dance goes into the body.’ So Olivier is not Hamlet, but he is also not not Hamlet. The reverse is also true: in this production of the play, Hamlet is not Olivier, but he is also not not Olivier. Within this field or frame of double negativity choice and virtuality remain activated…Play itself deconstructs actuality in a ‘not me…not not me’ way. The hierarchies that usually set off actuality as ‘real’ and fantasy as ‘not real’ are dissolved for the ‘time being,’ the play time. These same operations of dissolving ordinary hierarchies, of treasuring things beyond their ordinary worth, of setting aside certain times and places for the manipulation of special things in a world defined nonordinarily: this is also a definition of the workshop-rehearsal process, the ritual process, the performative process” (110). See also Schechner’s Between Theater and Anthropology (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

22 Schechner, The Future of Ritual, 42.
to make experiential sense of the cultural imaginary in which they participate.\textsuperscript{23}

Scholars who trace the “deep play” or the “dark play” of the various social dramas that unfold within a specific cultural context teach us that play is at once complementary and intrinsic to performance; it is an ethological category of activity that signals the porousness between the serious and unserious in cultural production. Without losing sight of this porousness, I remain interested in exploring what the unserious terrain of the ludic brings to the phenomenological conditions of social collectivity and public belonging.

While my dissertation contributes to a body of scholarship that demonstrates how play’s mimetic behaviors undergird more serious-minded forms of cultural production (such as language, science, ritual, religion, or in this case, politics), I also wish to examine the cultural impact of ludic activities that insistently frame their pursuits as “only play,” to take stock, in short, of the value of playing for its own sake. In so doing, I seek to account for what Huizinga calls the “fun-element” of play as it operates in antebellum formulations of social collectivity, considering how the subjunctive and provisional pleasures of ludic enterprise guide the practices of public assembly against the backdrop of a democratizing culture.\textsuperscript{24}

For ultimately, what makes play such a culturally powerful practice is not just that it creates liminal frameworks for imaginatively engaging the conditions of collectivity, but that its mimetic behaviors are uniquely oriented to the production of pleasure.\textsuperscript{25} As we


\textsuperscript{24} Huizinga, 3.

\textsuperscript{25} Theories of mimesis often note the twinned production of knowledge and pleasure in play’s mimetic acts. For Aristotle, the mimetic activity that begins in childhood and continues into adulthood allows man to “tak[e] his first steps in understanding.” Mimetic objects, moreover, are pleasurable because they allow people to exercise their understanding: “great pleasure is derived from exercising the understanding, not just for philosophers but in the same way for all men” (Aristotle, 34). In his study of theatrical experience, Bert O. States dwells more extensively on the pleasures of mimesis, describing the operations of Benjamin
shall see, antebellum commercial entertainments and other forms of popular amusement created new constellations of public feeling by acknowledging, even foregrounding, the unseriousness of their enterprises— the fact that their publics assemble “just for fun.” I show how this antebellum entertainment culture embraced various forms of ludic activity and playful gesture (the dance, the parade, the hoax, the wink), which, in their very status as “only play,” effectively developed experiential fields of social pleasure that supplied a participatory framework for engaging the vexed relations of early U.S. democratic culture. Critically attending to the pleasures of antebellum publics at play, I argue, offers us a richer, more nuanced understanding of the affective landscape in which the early struggles over what U.S. democratic life should look and feel like unfolded. In examining the play of antebellum comic performance, then, I chart a cultural history of pleasure as a key battleground in democratic politics.

Of course, not all play is comic. But comic modes of cultural play present an important gateway to exploring U.S. democracy’s structures of feeling, for they are not

calls “the mimetic faculty,” or the perceptual practice of producing imitations: “As a virtually automatic act, we very often see faces in the foliage of shrubs or in the billows of clouds. Sometimes the faces are filled with character and nuance, and we are even moved to imagine they have a history or are involved in some immediate drama (‘This face has experienced something painful.’). We know they are only there in the mind’s eye, but the objectivity of the effect produces a strange sense of their being detached from the shrub or cloud, yet at the same time ‘out there,’ outside the mind, unlike a thought-image. They exist, in short, as imitations; and what makes them imitations is not that nature is doing the imitating or that they are copies of faces we already know, projected onto a natural mass, but that they are collusions between objective nature and the subjective holdings of the private brain: they are both fictitious and real, rather like the actor or the puppet. The pleasure such images produce is not joy or some immediate thrill of the sense: it is not exactly fun to look at them. The pleasure, rather arises from a dimension of actuality in which the self and the other are joined and exchange natures, thus offering a momentary solution to the enigma of our ontological isolation from the things of the world.” See Bert O. States, The Pleasure of the Play (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 19-20.

26 Think of, for example, sporting events and other competitive games, games of chance, or perhaps the vertiginous delights of fair rides. Play theorists like Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, and Brian Sutton-Smith remind us of the diversity of play in human and animal behavior as well as the ambiguities of its formal taxonomies. See Huizinga; Roger Caillois, Man, Play, and Games, trans. Meyer Barash (New York: Free Press, 1961); Brian Sutton-Smith, The Ambiguity of Play (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
only necessarily committed to the production of social pleasure, but also actively
highlight the very playfulness of their enterprises. As this dissertation will demonstrate,
the comic mode so often pulls back the curtain on the social play underpinning
democratic culture, relishing in a reflexivity that draws attention to the very conditions
antebellum pleasure-making.

We need only return to the scene of Robin’s laughter to see how this is so. For if
Hawthorne links antebellum democracy to the popular mayhem of theatrocracy, he does
so by delving into the conditions of comic experience, theorizing the distinctive insights
its social relations lend to political subjectivity. In this sense, “My Kinsman, Major
Molineux” is as much a meditation on the comic mode as it is an allegory of antebellum
democracy. Consider, for instance, the ways in which Robin’s predicament enriches a
critical tradition that grounds comedy and laughter in superiority theory. Stemming from
his sense of “the tremendous ridicule” attending his kinsman’s downfall, Robin’s outburst
is an expression of the unbridled scorn that caused classical thinkers like Plato to treat
laughter with suspicion, precisely because its violent convulsions might threaten the
rational self-control of the individual citizen, and by extension, the integrity of a well-
ordered state.27 An intemperate act of aggression, laughter asserts power relations with
destabilizing potential, signaling what Thomas Hobbes would later describe as the
“sudden glory” people feel in themselves in the face of another’s perceived
imperfections, deformities, or, in Major Molineux’s case, complete abjection.28 Seen in

27 In Book III of The Republic, for instance, Plato observes that “whenever anyone gives into violent
laughter, a violent reaction pretty much always follows.” For this reason he argues against representations
of “worthwhile people as overcome by laughter” and even more strenuously against portrayals of the gods
2005), 48.
this light, laughter indexes the self-congratulatory pleasures of comic experience, which continually inscribe the individual’s will to power.

These are inauspicious grounds for forging democratic feeling. And in fact, the tale’s engagement with laughter’s superiority discourse is central to Hawthorne’s withering critique of the populist mob, which he mercilessly likens to “fiends that throng in mockery round some dead potentate” as they parade “in counterfeited pomp, in senseless uproar, in frenzied merriment, trampling all on an old man’s heart.” But “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” is more than a simple condemnation of the political violence that springs from populist laughter run amok. We might think of Charles Baudelaire’s more complex — and more cosmic — appraisal of comic superiority as a critical cognate to the scene of Robin’s laughter. “Human laughter,” Baudelaire writes, “is intimately linked with the accident of an ancient Fall, of a debasement both physical and moral.”

A passion that simultaneously enacts superiority and degradation, laughter is “satanic,” and thus “essentially contradictory” in its manifestation of “an infinite grandeur and an infinite misery.” Baudelaire’s insistence on laughter’s contradictory nature, the way it seems to hold the extremes of human experience together, finds voice in the resounding shouts of Robin’s shock, horror, and delight. While Hawthorne does not share Baudelaire’s sense of revelry in the diabolical pleasures of laughter as such, his tale demonstrates an investment, and even enjoyment, in tracing the political and epistemological dynamism of Robin’s Fall into laughter.

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29 Hawthorne, 86.
31 Baudelaire, 141.
Put another way, Hawthorne yokes the transformation of Robin’s political subjectivity to his descent into ironic consciousness. In fact, Robin’s perceptual shift from tragic to comic experience is as much a mark of his own self-dissociation as it is an act of disidentification with the Major. Remember that the laughter that ripples through the crowd and seizes Robin’s body is not solely laughter directed at the Major, in all his abject glory. Rather, it is the sight of Robin himself, the self-declared “shrewd youth” utterly confounded by the scene before him, that provokes the lantern-bearer’s initial guffaws. In short, it is Robin’s presence, his placement in this spectacular tableau of ritual performance, that spurs the crowd, and ultimately Robin himself, to laugh. Robin’s laughter is thus laughter at the sight of the Major, but also at himself. What Hawthorne stages here, then, is not just the violence of public ridicule, but the way in which its comic pleasures destabilize and split the spectating subject, transforming unreflective naifs into conscious co-conspirators. Comic experience, Hawthorne suggests, forges new political affiliations through this very split, yoking laughing subjects to new collective formations as they fall into the debased pleasures of popular rule.

If Robin’s split subjectivity instantiates what Baudelaire would call the “damnable” contradictions of the laughing subject, it is also suggestive of the reflexivity that underpins comic mimesis — its propensity to turn the proscenium on its head. Laughter inverts the theatrical constellations that Hawthorne uses to frame the Major’s public debasement, turning Robin’s gaze away from the spectacle of his fallen kinsman to the spectating crowd that exults at his inglorious display, and ultimately to his own bodily participation in the public action. Turning around, turning back, rebounding across the public arena, the comic “enacts mimesis,” to borrow Mladen Dolar’s evocative
distillation. Dolar’s account of comic imitation pinpoints this reflexivity, describing how the comic double “stag[es] the very process of imitation,” drawing attention to the presentational parameters of the mimetic act.³² Comic mimesis thus exposes the very conditions of mimesis, an exposure which, in Robin’s case, only further compounds in his echoing laugh. For as Robin mimics the crowd’s laughter with laughter of his own, he inexorably sinks into a comic spiral of reflexivity. It is in this abyss that Hawthorne locates the birth of the democratic social relation, which might also be called Robin’s ironic uptake. Once the crowd has continued onwards in its parade of ridicule, and the dust has settled from the procession’s wake, Robin finds himself once again with his eirôn of a companion — the slyly courteous gentleman who had so deftly steered him to the spectacle of his fallen kinsman. When Robin asks for directions back to the ferry, his companion observes, “with a smile,” that Robin has “adopted a new subject of inquiry”:

“Why, yes, Sir” replied Robin, rather dryly. “Thanks to you, and to my other friends, I have at last met my kinsman, and he will scarce desire to see my face again. I begin to grow weary of a town life, Sir. Will you show me the way to the ferry?”

“No, my good friend Robin, not to-night, at least,” said the gentleman. “Some few days hence, if you continue to wish it, I will speed you on your journey. Or, if you prefer to remain with us, perhaps, as you are a shrewd youth, you may rise in the world, without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux.”³³

Robin’s “dry” response signals his assumption of an ironic attitude on par with his interlocutor, even as it registers the political jeopardy of his now fallen status as a laughing subject. But it is precisely Robin’s withering turn to irony that paves the way for his social inclusion into a postrevolutionary order. In short, the comic sociality that marks Robin’s admission of guilt is the very means through which a “shrewd youth” thrives in

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³³ Hawthorne, 87.
the violent fray of democratizing public life.

Hawthorne’s tale offers us an admittedly limited foray into the full scope of comic theory, but what this brief survey illustrates is how the phenomenological complexities of comic pleasure serve as a crucible for democratic feeling in antebellum culture. What *Sovereign Pleasures* aims to trace, then, is not so much the antebellum history of comedy as a genre (or genres), but the cultural impact of a behavioral and perceptual mode. My approach therefore diverges from traditional literary studies of American comedy and humor, which have tended to define their objects of study through the (largely nationalist) creation of generic and characterological taxonomies. Indeed, since Constance Rourke’s seminal *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931) laid out the dominant archetypes populating early nineteenth-century demotic humor (the Yankee, the backwoodsman, the blackface minstrel), scholars of American humor have devoted their critical energies to the work of categorization: revising, expanding, or reformulating the premise of “American,” “humor,” and its many varieties. While much has changed in the way Americanists approach the question of “the national character,” the critical impulse to taxonomize has endured.34 My interest, however, lies less in mapping a nominative proliferation of comedies and their instantiations of early nineteenth-century political ideologies, but in exploring how the comic modifies the unserious pursuit of pleasure in antebellum public life. Framing the comic as a mode — an adjectival conditioner of many forms of antebellum play and performance — broadens the terrain of critical

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inquiry beyond the historical developments of genre to consider the complex ways in which the comic can both contribute to and reflect upon the thorniness of ludic pleasure as a catalyst for democratic feeling. When antebellum play turns comic, I argue, it is not only a key distributor of violent, fraught, and unequal forms of public enjoyment; it becomes a critical resource for probing the very conditions under which nominally democratic publics claim their sovereign right to pleasure.

The history of genre formation nevertheless remains crucial to understanding the limits and exclusions of the antebellum period’s sovereign pleasures. As we shall see, comic performance genres that emerged in the early nineteenth century, such as blackface minstrelsy and the freak show, constructed new formulas for having fun that became key battlegrounds in the ongoing struggles over the boundaries of public belonging. Such innovations in commercial entertainment took hold of audiences on a mass scale, quickly turning popular enjoyment into the engine of emergent antebellum culture industries. While my dissertation takes stock of the political exclusions and oppressive assertions of power embedded in antebellum structures of popular entertainment, *Sovereign Pleasures* delves into instances of insurgent comic play — performative efforts to subvert, transgress, and reform the conditions through which antebellum publics took their pleasure. By focusing on the rowdy theater patrons, star comedians, dance champions, and abolitionist impresarios that mobilized antebellum publics, my project recovers unserious forms of social engagement as vital political practice.

**Chapter Overview**

I have organized my dissertation around key scenes of comic play, with chapters that move from the early national theater to other sites of public assembly: the dance hall, the
museum exhibition, the street parade. Beginning at the playhouse, my first two chapters chart the sociopolitical dynamics of rowdy theater audiences and the comic entertainments they enjoyed. In “Agonistic Audiences,” I examine historical accounts of riotous public assembly in the early national theater, where patrons enacted a comic mode of playful protest that was predicated on the paying audience’s sovereign right to pleasure. While cultural and professional elites often sought to subordinate this popular tradition of rowdy spectatorship to a politics of deliberative democracy, theater patrons regularly enacted a model of democratic politics that was grounded in contestation and dissent. In fact, the practices of agonistic audiences only rarely devolved into mob violence, precisely because theatergoers largely understood themselves to be at play. Reading various accounts of theatrical disturbance, including Washington Irving’s 1802 depiction of a disorderly audience, I show how theater patrons cultivated a comic mode of sociality, one that foregrounded and maintained the essential playfulness of social contest.

My second chapter, “Comic Acts: Staging the Audience’s Pleasure,” traces the imprint of agonistic audiences on the comic repertoire of the stage in the early United States, showing how comedians like Thomas Wignell and Sol Smith developed popular character types, such as the iconic stage Yankee, that mirrored the unruly publics they sought to entertain. While this comic repertoire underscored the political primacy of the people’s pleasure, it also reinforced the violent exclusions of local cultures, doling out the pleasures of social contest according to hierarchies of race and gender. I probe the political limits of such comic play while charting historical shifts in theater culture over the course of the antebellum period, showing how agonistic audiences gradually
transformed into well-behaved, bourgeois theater publics. Turning to the career of Anna Cora Mowatt, I consider how the winking practices of comic address responded to these cultural shifts while continuing to evoke the ludic pleasures of a democratic imaginary that was never fully enjoyed.

In “Minstrelsy and the Virtuoso,” I turn to the exceptional career of virtuoso dancer William Henry Lane to explore how African American comic play contended with the cultural ubiquity of the antebellum period’s definitive comic genre: blackface minstrelsy. Coming out of the racially mixed dance culture of New York City’s working-class taprooms and dance halls, Lane became one of the few successful Black performers on the commercial stage before the Civil War by staging widely publicized challenge dances that manipulated the racist parameters of blackface comedy. As “Master Juba,” the “King of Dancers” on the minstrel stage, Lane’s comic figurations of virtuosic sovereignty grapple with minstrelsy’s contagious proliferation of a national popular imaginary that was grounded in the politics of white supremacy. The arc of Lane’s career highlights both the possibilities and the precarities of wielding the somatic scripts of minstrel play, providing an early case study in the history of African American entertainers’ ongoing negotiation of the racist structures of U.S. democracy.

My fourth chapter, “Funny Mummies: Comic Unravelings of the Antebellum Carnivalesque,” reassesses the fraught politics of grotesque bodily display by examining antebellum mummy exhibitions, which propagated racist theories of polygenesis. I read press accounts of public mummy unwrappings alongside comically “live” mummies in such popular works as the minstrel play Virginia Mummy (1835) and Robert Montgomery Bird’s Sheppard Lee (1836) to show how the mummy’s grotesque body occasionally
slipped the bounds of popular science and overturned its dominant racial logic. I conclude with the abolitionist career of freedom seeker Henry “Box” Brown, whose public performances prominently featured the postal box that delivered him to freedom, presenting an unorthodox figuration of the revived mummy. Brown’s lectures and carnivalesque processions reclaim the pleasures of the grotesque for the resurrected body and reorganize popular enjoyment around an antislavery politics.

Brown’s reconfigurations of carnivalesque festivity reveal the extent to which comic players intervened in the most pressing conflicts of antebellum democracy. His activism offers one model of how insurgent forms of comic play sought to reformulate the governing structures of popular pleasure, turning ludic publics into engines of greater sociopolitical inclusion. My study of antebellum comic performance highlights such moments of political possibility in the unserious pursuit of fun to provide a new account of democratic public formations, one that takes the full measure of the pleasures of social play.
Chapter One

Agonistic Audiences: Comic Play in the Early National Theater

“We (the sovereigns) determine to have the worth of our money when we go to the theatre,” declares a Boston correspondent writing by the name of “Scobs” in 1846. This theater patron and writer of “A Devilish Familiar Letter” to the New York weekly *Spirit of the Times* says much about the domineering practices of theater audiences in early nineteenth-century America. As one of “the sovereigns,” he recounts with the unabashed entitlement of a paying customer the imperious pleasures of an audience bent upon taking satisfaction: “we made Blangy dance her best dances twice; we made Mrs. SEGÜIN repeat ‘Marble Halls’… and to-night we are going to encore Mrs. Kean’s ‘I don’t believe it!’ in the Gamester. We hope she’ll prove agreeable, and will ‘disbelieve it’ twice for our sakes. Perhaps we’ll flatter Mr. KEAN by making him take poison twice; this latter depends upon the *furor* of the moment.” With an exuberance that fuses crowd action and theatrical pleasure, Scobs describes an audience delighted by its exercise of authority, even as its members prove easily swayed by “the *furor* of the moment.” Indeed, the enjoyment of an evening at the theater resides as much in the prospect of compelling an actor to “take poison twice” as it does in the performance itself, a fact that is here expressly bound to the language of popular sovereignty. A flippant account of an antebellum audience’s right to an encore, Scobs’s “familiar” letter taps into a tradition of audience rowdiness that defined theatrical experience in the opening decades of the

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United States. In the process, it conjoins the belligerent sociality of theater audiences to the dynamic political energies of popular rule with a rhetorical flourish that is glib yet blithely insistent.

What can such a comic conjunction tell us about the relationship between theater and politics in the early United States? How did sovereign patrons of the theater contribute to a broader cultural understanding of the volatile pleasures of popular rule within a newly formed democratic republic? Scobs’s happy fusion of audience rule with popular sovereignty draws on the underlying correspondences between theater and politics, both of which assemble and negotiate a group of people within a shared space. These resemblances were especially relevant to early national discourse, which often took theater as a useful model for apprehending democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville notably deemed drama the “most democratic” of the literary arts because of theater’s capacity to assemble a representative audience: “The higher ranks mix with the middle and the lower classes” and, still more, submit to their opinion. “The pit,” as Tocqueville so memorably puts it, “has frequently made laws for the boxes.” So conceived, theater constitutes a demos that is fueled by the dynamic assertions of populist assembly, or the interplay between stage and gallery, pit and boxes. In short, the playhouse creates a public that politically engages with itself. It is striking that Tocqueville so insistently grafts the democratic onto the discordant demands of popular entertainment. After all, theater’s capacity to furnish forth a demos does not necessarily make it democratic, a point of distinction that also finds voice in the dictatorial zest of Scobs’s theatrical discourse. The

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fact that early national theater audiences presented a model for imagining democracy says much about both the conceptual horizons of democratic politics and the material conditions of the theater in the early United States. Associating democracy with audience rule introduces the mercurial judgment of an imperious public, but it also situates the exercise of that judgment within an arena of play. This ludic orientation of the people’s will — an orientation illuminated by the comic facetiousness of Scobs’s sovereign voice — was crucial to the shared horizons of democratic politics in this period.

This chapter examines a forgotten history of comic social play in the early national playhouse that sheds new light on the democratizing public formations of the early United States. Recent scholarship on the history of early American theater and performance has portrayed the playhouse as a vibrant and unruly site of public assembly where, as Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has put it, the “relations structuring social belonging” might be “performed and legitimately contested.” By underscoring the popular expression that theater enables, such work has recovered the political significance of theatrical enterprise in the early U.S. public sphere. What often remains obscured in early American theater history, however, is just how playful theater publics could be, even in the throes of rowdy protest. I seek to illuminate the importance of play to early national theater’s popular contestations by taking a fuller measure of the political value of simply having fun at the playhouse. The sheer humor of Scobs’s theatrical commentary suggests not only that the agonistic exercise of popular sovereignty was

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predicated on the pursuit of fun but also that the comic mode made the fun of contestation palpable.

In what follows, I make a case for valuing the importance of play as play — that is, as a fundamentally unserious form of social engagement that undergirds the practices of popular sovereignty in the early national playhouse. Play entails, as Johan Huizinga argues, “the consciousness, however latent, of ‘only pretending.’” This unserious, just-for-fun quality pervaded audience conduct at the playhouse, including what have been described as the “quasi-legitimate” theater riots of the early national period. Taking stock of the political energies of various instances of theatrical disturbance, I show how the ludic disorder and social contestation that characterized theater publics — the agonism of early national audiences — informed broader cultural conceptions of popular rule. Unlike more deliberative models of democratic politics, early national theater cultivated a raucous sociality in which spectators engaged with one another and with the stage in an unfolding social contest that was by turns spectacular and uproarious, fractious and exhilarating. Rowdy theater publics thrived on the conflictual dynamics of disorder and dissidence, yet the typically unruly practices of theatrical assembly only rarely devolved into mob violence, precisely because those practices were understood to be playful. Rather than accentuating the strife of public protest, theatergoers more often foregrounded the ludic pleasures to be had in theatrical contest, acknowledging a horizon of popular enjoyment that stood in excess of rational-critical public discourse. This


collective faith in the unserious was possible, I argue, because the outbursts and protestations of early national audiences relied upon a comic mode of sociality, one that highlighted and maintained the essential playfulness of theatrical protest. Indeed, Scobs’s comic boasts take the disruptive practices in which he engages as fundamentally playful. His mock-aggressive humor was not exceptional, but rather participated in a larger tradition of comic play that included theater patrons like Washington Irving and Fitz-Greene Halleck. Such comic play insisted upon the unseriousness of agonistic contest and in so doing valorized early national theater’s tumultuous fun as vital democratic practice.

If Scobs’s comic letter registers the fundamental playfulness of theater audiences’ enactments of sovereign authority, more serious-minded discourse on the theater construed the sociopolitical relations of the playhouse quite differently. Indeed, given the generally raucous tendencies of audience behavior, the popular and politically contentious energies that theater incited were often imagined (usually with some measure of distaste or dread) as the specter of early national democracy’s dissolution into the ungovernable mob. Many early American theater historians have shown how antitheatrical sentiment and antitheatrical anxiety influenced the cultural development of theater and drama from the colonial era to well into the nineteenth century. While it has become commonplace to reference key historical moments of theatrical censorship and restriction (such as, for example, the antitheatricality of Puritans and other religious sects, or the Continental Congress’s ban on theater and other amusements during the Revolutionary War), what is often less appreciated is the extent to which theater’s institutional elites — its managers, its star performers, its literary critics — shared the underlying political logic of their antitheatrical opponents, implicitly conceding the
playhouse’s populist energies to be a potential threat by repeatedly extolling the civic and moral virtues of a “well-regulated” theater. As we shall see, so many of theater’s most outspoken proponents construed the collective play that organized theatrical assembly as a serious enterprise; in so doing, they cultivated and supported a much more limited vision of democratic public life, one guided by an anti-populist politics of civility and deliberative restraint. The discursive dominance of this broadly antitheatrical paradigm, as I call it, is partly why existing scholarship in early U.S. performance history tends to overlook the comic play of theater culture in this period. As I shall demonstrate in a case study involving Fitz-Greene Halleck’s poetic celebration of the Park Theatre in New York, the popular tradition of comic sociality at the playhouse was often subordinated to the political gravitas of civic virtue that largely prevailed among literary and cultural elites.

Despite this subordination, early national accounts of theatrical disturbance offer us a rich archive of theater patrons at play. Through close readings of this archive, I argue that the agonistic audiences of early national theater often took up the reflexive mechanisms of the comic mode to sustain the disorderly pleasures of audience rule. Because the comic mode involves “a self-reflexive theatricality,” as Mladen Dolar argues, it draws attention to the formal conditions of its mimetic enterprises, which, in the space of theater, are invariably enterprises of play.7 To put this slightly differently, the comic mode discloses the play of theater’s mimesis. In the context of early national theater, when audience rule enacted popular sovereignty, and the playhouse posed as a mimetic model for democratic governance, the comic mode regularly revealed the play of democratic politics. In this

sense, the comic — an undertheorized mode in literary and cultural studies of early America — holds key insight in the practices of both early national theater and early national politics.

**Halleck’s Park Theatre and the Antitheatrical Paradigm**

Theaters in early national America were cacophonous spaces of public exchange and display, offering patrons more than simply the standard repertoire of the day. Audiences brazenly booed and hissed actors off the stage when displeased; when pleased, they demanded their right to encores. Spectators yelled and laughed; they stood on benches and put their feet up. They looked at one another, and they put themselves on display. They practiced the latest fashion; they spat at will. They also engaged in political protest and crowd actions. This energetic sociality made the theater an especially vibrant site for both materializing and apprehending a constructed “public.” The spatial distinctions of box, pit, and gallery grouped audience members within an arena of spectatorship that roughly registered the central class relations, racial distinctions, and power dynamics of the period. While fashionable elites socialized with one another in the boxes, the gallery hosted mostly working-class men, servants and laborers whose rowdiness regularly punctuated the performance experience. Many Northern theaters cordoned off a section of the gallery for Blacks; in the South, free Blacks and enslaved people with permission from their enslavers were generally allowed entry into a segregated portion of the theater.  

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the patrician elite often sat in the boxes, while working-class women sat in the gallery and occasionally even in the pit.\(^9\) Meanwhile, the third tier of side boxes entertained sex workers, whose presence persisted until the 1840s.\(^10\) Audience members interacted with one another across these spatial demarcations, looking across well-lit houses to take in the competing spectacles of staged production, fashionable display, libidinal pursuits, and boisterous behavior.

Such vibrant and volatile social dynamics made the playhouse at once a contested site and a site of contestation. Because early national theater assembled and organized audiences into what Lisa A. Freeman has recently described as “body publics,” it was both a locus for popular expression and an institution subject to intense debate and critique.\(^11\) As “both physical space and metaphorical realm,” theater offered a vehicle for

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10 Early nineteenth-century playhouses have largely been characterized as predominantly white male spaces, and several critics have taken the theater as an important nexus for understanding white working-class masculinity in the antebellum period. See, for example, Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Butsch; Chinn. Despite the generally masculinist coding of early American theater culture, non-white, non-male bodies were persistently present in even the earliest audiences of the United States. Bruce McConachie notes that at the turn of the nineteenth century more wives and daughters of the patrician elite sat in the boxes, while “working-class women sat in the gallery and were occasionally seen in the pit” (“American Theatre in Context,” 131). Rosemarie K. Bank argues that the cultural discourse of the period tended to conflate working-class women with sex workers, obscuring our critical understanding of both the presence and conduct of women at the playhouse more generally. See Bank, “Staging Gender: Women Audience Members in the Antebellum American Theatre,” *Theatre Symposium*, 2 (1994: 65-73).

11 Freeman’s transhistorical study of antitheatrical incidents explores how debates concerning the cultural status of theater are necessarily debates over the parameters of the public sphere more broadly, as “competing groups strive to define themselves as representatives not simply of ‘a public’ but of ‘the’
“positing and projecting publics,” enabling early national subjects to imaginatively assert competing models of democratic politics. In fact, theaters very often served as incubators for public demonstration and, on occasion, riotous disturbance, making their assemblies one of the many forms of collective performance, along with street parades, public rituals, and crowd actions, that contributed to early national public formations. These various practices of collective performance served as crucial resources for materializing popular sovereignty in a democratic republic that had yet to fully extend political franchise to all its subjects, and in fact continued to maintain a robust skepticism of unchecked democracy. The playhouse became a site for staging a limited, often disjointed and disruptive popular will that was otherwise constrained by the substantial representative limits of early national political governance. Crucially, it did so by fostering the disorderly social play of the audience. While many patrons understood the raucous social play of the theater to be the backbone of the still emergent political infrastructures of early national governance, this popular understanding was often marginalized in literary discourse, which tended to privilege more serious formulations of public” (Freeman, Antithetical and the Body Public [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017], 5). Theater is therefore a site in which the public itself can be contested, a notion that is borne out not only in the local histories of antitheatrical sentiment, but also in instances of theatrical disturbance. The history of audience agitation and theater riots in the first half of the nineteenth century attests to the political significance of the theater as an important locus for public demonstration and protest. For more on the history and politics of mob riots in postrevolutionary America, see Gilje; Jason Frank, Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). 12 Freeman, 5.

public assembly in a democratic republic.

The occasion of the Park Theatre’s reopening in the fall of 1821 provides a useful illustration of this tension between serious and unserious approaches to the politics of theatrical assembly. A cultural mainstay of early national New York, the Park had, like so many theaters before and since, burned down. After a sudden conflagration had destroyed the building earlier in the summer, the theater’s management rebounded quickly from the loss, rebuilding the city’s most respectable theatrical establishment in short order. The Park’s renewal was touted with much fanfare across the New York press, and in honor of the freshly constructed playhouse, a prize contest was held for the best poetic address to be spoken on opening night. Of the sixty odd submissions received, one came from renowned poet Fitz-Greene Halleck, with the opening notice that the address was to be “spoken by Mr. Oliff,” then Prompter and occasional bit actor for the theater’s company.14 Oliff was a well-known figure to New York audiences at the time.15 Instantly recognizable by his small stature, Oliff’s stage presence would have highlighted the jocular tone of Halleck’s address, which pays humorous homage to the refurbished walls

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14 Submissions to the prize contest came from all over the country, and were subsequently gathered together in a volume that was published shortly thereafter. See The Rejected Addresses; Together with the Prize Address, Presented for the Prize Medal Offered for the Best Address, On the opening of the New Park Theatre, in the City of New-York (New York: Nathaniel Smith, 1821).

15 According to a footnote in the 1860 collection The Croakers, poems by Joseph Rodman Drake and Fitz-Greene Halleck, “Mr. Olliff was for many years Prompter of the Park Theatre, and had risen from the ranks as a call-boy. He was a remarkably small person, having apparently grown but little since a boy; and his diminutive person was the cause of infinite merriment. He had as great ambition to be an actor, as to wield the prompter’s whistle; and always preferred the part of assassins or robbers, in woods, rocks, or ravines, which, contrasted with his small proportions and fierce looks, kept the audience in good humor whenever he assumed a part, which was frequently, as he went on to deliver a message, or fill any occasional vacancy” (Joseph Rodman Drake and Fitz-Greene Halleck, The Croakers [New York: John B. Moreau, 1860], 168-169n147). Passing references to “that well-known character, Mr. Oliff” in William Dunlap’s A History of the American Theatre suggest that Oliff was hardly a discreet stage presence, even in his function as Prompter, and that he increasingly took up acting roles over the course of his career. William Dunlap, A History of the American Theatre, From its Origins to 1832 (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 359-360.
of the city’s premier theater:

As an old coat, from Jennings’ patent screw,  
Comes out clean-scour’d and brighter than new,  
As an old head in Saunders’ patent wig,  
Looks wiser than when young, and twice as big,  
As Mat. Van Buren, in the Senate Hall,  
Repairs the loss we met in Spencer’s fall,  
As the new constitution will (we’re told)  
Be worth at least a dozen of the old -  
So is our new house better than its brother,  
Its roof is painted yellower than the other,  
It is insured at three per cent. ‘gainst fire,  
And cost three times as much, and is six inches higher.16

In all its winking amusement, Halleck’s inaugural poem draws on the underlying parallels between sociopolitical and theatrical structures. As the procedure of its central simile moves progressively from the local networks of city fashion (Jennings’ patent screw and Saunders’ patent wigs) to the latest developments in state politics (the rise of a young Martin Van Buren and the promise of a refashioned constitution), the poem effectively extrapolates from fashion’s latest technologies of social performance to the political machinations of local democratic governance. In the fanciful associative leap, Halleck underscores the theater’s role as a significant cultural and political institution of New York. A new and improved space of public gathering, the Park’s reopening is figured here as an event of social rejuvenation and political reform that ultimately claims

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16 Fitz-Greene Halleck, “An Address On the opening of the New Park Theatre, spoken by Mr. Oliff,” in The Rejected Addresses; Together with the Prize Address, Presented for the Prize Medal Offered for the Best Address, On the opening of the New Park Theatre, in the City of New-York (New York: Nathaniel Smith, 1821), 176-178, 177. Halleck’s penchant for allusions specific to the local politics of early national New York make the humor of his verse difficult to appreciate today without some explanation. While Jennings and Saunders were the well-known tailor and wigmaker of a local New York City, Mat. Van Buren was, at this time, newly elected to the United States Senate by the New York State Legislature. Leader of the Bucktails, a New York faction of the Democratic-Republican party that opposed New York Governor DeWitt Clinton, Van Buren would of course eventually go on to succeed Jackson as President of the United States. The less politically fortunate Ambrose Spencer was Chief Justice of the New York Supreme Court from 1819 until the end of 1822. Aligned with the Clintonians, he was legislated out of office by the state constitution of 1821.
equal pride of place alongside the assembly of legislators in Albany, who were then redrafting the New York state constitution. With this conceit, the poem finds great enjoyment in ironically promoting the cultural status of the Park’s refurbished, slightly taller, and yellower, walls.

Halleck’s poetic bit of puffery on behalf of the new theater ultimately culminates in a reflexive turn to the moment of its own pronouncement. With a newly built, freshly painted, and well-insured theater, all that remains to complete the occasion is an opening speech:

A speech — the prelude to each public meeting,  
Whether for morals, charity or eating;  
A speech — the modern mode of winning hearts,  
And power, and fame, in politics and arts.

Ubiquitous to all sorts of “public meeting,” oratorical performance spans the categories of the political and the aesthetic, yoking social action to social pleasure as it cultivates a sense of collective purpose. If occasional speech inaugurates all manner of public assembly, then the speech of the theater does more than simply echo political oratory; it begins to blur the presumed boundaries between the two.

That, at least, is Halleck’s joke. A good speech is the making of a great politician; it is also the making of a great actor. With a rhetorical flourish that moves from James Monroe’s campaign speeches to John Quincy Adams’s famous Fourth of July address, Halleck’s prologue likens the moment of Oliff’s speech to celebrated political orations of the day, comically inflating Oliff’s otherwise diminutive stature in the process. This flight

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17 The 1821 New York state constitutional convention arose out of a power struggle between Governor Clinton and the Bucktails faction of the Democratic-Republican Party. It resulted in a vote put to the people, and was ultimately ratified in January of 1822. In the Fall, at the time of this poem’s publication, the convention was in the midst of meeting in Albany.

18 Halleck, 177.
of grandiosity culminates in Oliff’s self-proclaimed cultural iconicity:

Yes — If our managers grow great and rich,
And players prosper — let them thank my speech,
And let the name of Oliff proudly go
With Meigs and Adams, Mitchill and Monroe.¹⁹

In company with the likes of Adams and Monroe, the actor’s powers of commanding the audience’s attention mirror the oratorical feats of politicians, in a comic jest that unsettles the usual distinctions between theatrical and political assembly. Halleck’s poem thus celebrates the revival of the Park Theatre through its insistence upon the power of spoken address, whether it be the rhetoric of political speech or the forward step of dramatic parabasis. For if Oliff’s address to the audience launches his exuberant rise to the heights of “Meigs and Adams, Mitchill and Monroe,” it does so through its assumption of the power of “a speech” to fit any occasion, which is to say, to satisfy its audience under any circumstance. And tellingly, the underlying logic that sustains Oliff’s rhetorical flight relies upon the distinctly comic circuitry that inflates the actor’s cultural position. A minor company player who thrived off of his literally undersized appearance, Oliff’s figure materially exaggerates the familiar comic relations of high and low, serious and unserious, sacred and profane, relations which seek to elicit a specific form of pleasure and amusement from the audience, even as they signal a disjunction, or short circuit, within a larger cultural logic. From the mouth of Oliff, theatrical speech comically doubles political speech, such that actors might happily find pride of place among figures of state. Halleck’s poem thus invokes a distinctly comic relation in its association of

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¹⁹ Ibid., 178. In addition to Monroe’s campaign speeches and Adams’s July 4th address, Halleck also references here New York Representative Henry Meigs’s 1820 speech on the admission of Missouri as a state (in which he infamously opposed restricting slavery) and Samuel Latham Mitchill’s 1821 Phi Beta Kappa address, which considered the state of American literature.
theater and politics, accentuating the slide of performance between the two by way of Oliff’s material presence. In the process, the newly reopened Park Theatre assumes an improbable, seemingly preposterous political prominence, one grounded in the playful exchange between a minor player and his local public.

In dwelling on the comic pleasure of Oliff’s unlikely cultural ascent, I aim to draw out the ways in which the very playfulness of theatrical assembly could become an important means of experiencing the democratizing politics of early national public life. By casting theatrical assembly as the comic double of political assembly, Halleck aligns the play of theater, which serves the pleasure of the audience, with the debate of democratic politics, which responds to the will of the people. Yet Halleck’s exuberant parody offers more than just an ironizing take on New York State politics. Because Oliff’s winking address calls out to a knowing audience, the poem’s ironies simultaneously invoke a theater public gathered together in the shared pursuit of play. Such an address invites us to rout the political value of theatrical assembly through the phenomenological conditions of ludic activity. What Halleck offers us, in other words, is a distinctly unserious approach to the critical relationship between theater and politics.

It is important to note, however, that Halleck’s comic figuration of theatrical assembly was never fully realized. When the Park Theatre staged its inaugural performance in 1821, it was significantly not Oliff who stepped forward to pronounce the prize-winning prologue, but Edmund Simpson, the theater’s respected manager. In fact, Halleck’s prologue, though printed and circulated in the New York press, was never actually performed at all; his light verse failed to attract the notice of the prize committee, who probably found its levity somewhat mismatched for the occasion. Instead, the first
place prize went to Boston poet Charles Sprague, whose far statelier poem exalts the civilizing virtues of “the stage” as a site of instruction as well as pleasure. Performed with the authoritative heft of Simpson’s managerial figure, Sprague’s prologue served as a benediction to the new structure, as the recited verse wished that the theater’s “fair dome, in classic beauty reared, / By taste be fostered, and by worth revered.” Sprague’s prologue advances the cultural value of the theater by way of a familiar discourse: theater is a worthwhile pursuit, beneficial to the public insofar as it is guided by “Taste,” which is to say, as long as it sticks to the script. Theater’s celebration is here also implicitly a quite conventional defense against its critics. When done properly, theater cultivates and instructs the people who make up its audience, serving as one of the central institutions of cultural order and advancement.

Sprague’s “official” prologue thus calls forth, even in the midst of its celebratory overtures, old suspicions. Theater may thrive as an institution when its practices adhere to good taste; but if allowed to diverge from predetermined principles, theater may also lead its audiences astray. The fact that the refurbished Park’s inaugural performance opened with Sprague’s poem demonstrates the extent to which even the staunchest proponents of the theater — Edmund Simpson included — participated in a cultural logic of antitheatricality. A definitive feature of American cultural and intellectual history, and indeed, of the Western tradition more broadly, this far-reaching paradigm at once saturated and implicitly organized the systems of cultural value in which both Sprague and Halleck operated. Its fullest and most stringent articulations took the form of

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20 Charles Sprague, “The Prize Address,” in *The Rejected Addresses; Together with the Prize Address, Presented for the Prize Medal Offered for the Best Address, On the opening of the New Park Theatre, in the City of New-York* (New York: Nathaniel Smith, 1821), 11-13, 12.
antitheatrical criticism, which broadly attacked theater as a site of social affectation, loose morals, and false representation. Yet critical suspicion of the theater extended beyond what Jonas Barish has identified as a long tradition of antitheatrical prejudice.\textsuperscript{21} As the language of Sprague’s poem suggests, antitheatrical suspicion so thoroughly subsumed the cultural fabric of the early national period that even theater’s proponents largely internalized the terms of its argument. Under such terms, theater’s success, or at least its recuperation, depended upon its careful regulation, such that its practices might be subordinated to an overarching antitheatrical logic. And indeed, Sprague’s poetic inauguration of the Park Theatre manifests just such a regulatory impulse, disciplining the theater’s ludic arabesques within a juridical framework of artistic surveillance: “Here let the guardians of the drama sit / In righteous judgment o’er the realm of wit.\textsuperscript{22} Good theater, in other words, needs its guardians.

Of course, the implication here is that theater needs guardians to protect it not from some external threat, but from itself. Under the “righteous judgment” of somewhat obscurely figured paternalistic custodians, Sprague’s opening benediction reins in theater’s proclivities, lest theater get too carried away in its play. It is interesting to note, too, the way Sprague’s prologue ties theater’s internal threat to the exercise of wit. The play of theater is also the free play of wit, suggesting the rich overlap between theatrical practice and comic thought. Wit’s play takes flight in the theater, and in the process, lifts theater up to new, implausible heights. The fact that Halleck’s poem performs just such a theatrical ascent in the comic flight of Oliff’s speech demonstrates all too plainly the ways in which the antitheatrical paradigm, embodied in Sprague’s verse, quite literally


\textsuperscript{22} Sprague, 13.
sublimates the comic impulses of theater’s play to more staid notions of cultural authority.

By all appearances a simple footnote in New York theater history, the 1821 prize contest for the Park’s inaugural prologue is in fact emblematic of a much broader cultural orientation towards the theater — one grounded in anxiety and partial to notions of regulation. Rather than embrace the comic sport of Halleck’s prologue, which takes pleasure in theater’s mimetic relation to politics, the Park’s management chose to cast its new building as a well-regulated theater, implicitly accepting the antitheatrical impulse to contain its excesses. This choice registers an abiding uneasiness over the status of theater among early national elites, whose discourse often betrayed an inclination to take the mimetic relation between theater and politics as a threat to the integrity of political practice. Indeed, Samuel Weber has described the longstanding anxiety towards this mimetic relation as rooted in the supposition that “politics as generally practiced claims to be the most effective means of regulating or at least controlling conflict, whereas theater flourishes by exacerbating it.”

Weber’s more universalizing characterization of this tradition of antitheatrical anxiety usefully pinpoints the presumed disjunction between the regulatory forces of politics and the disorderly impulses of theater. By this logic, which operates according to a binaries of order and disorder, theater poses as a dark mirror to political order, the specter of its dissolution. In other words, theater’s mimetic relation to politics might also present the unraveling of an orderly, well-governed people. Doubling political order with a difference, theater brims with the volatile potential to either instruct and regulate the populace it serves, or to unleash its

dissipated and degenerate tendencies.

But if the discourse regarding theater and politics has so often struck an anxious chord, the comic exuberance of Oliff’s rhetorical flight tells quite another story. More delighted than disturbed by the mimetic relation between theater and politics, Halleck taps into a comic imaginary that binds Oliff and his would-be auditors into a social circuit of ironic self-congratulation, a collective bent upon the pursuit of continued enjoyment. The joke of Oliff’s diminutive presence thus refuses to take the play of theater or the debate of politics seriously. In so doing, Oliff’s figure flies in the face of a prevailing discourse suspicious of the unpredictable effects of theatrical pleasures. Instead, Halleck’s poem revels in the play that underpins both theater and politics, presenting an alternative approach to what has so often been perceived as the threat of theater’s wayward influence upon the people. Rather than accept the premises of a broadly antitheatrical logic, which seeks to separate and exclude theater’s play from politics, Halleck’s comic poem capitalizes on the play of theater — in which actor and audience engage with the pleasures of mimesis — to underscore the enduring purchase of theatrical assembly in a democratic republic. The result is a comic treatment of early national theater that illuminates the ludic dimension of public formations. Put simply, Halleck’s poem makes the play of the public palpable. That this particular comic relation was never actually performed on the Park’s stage is itself telling of the political struggle over the social function of theater in the early national period.

What I want to suggest here is that the divergent visions of theatrical assembly that Halleck and Sprague exemplify in their two very different poems — one unserious, the other quite serious — advanced competing models of the democratic public sphere.
While both of these models cast the playhouse as an important instrument for early national democracy, serious-minded representations of public gathering at the playhouse developed a regulatory politics that was in direct tension with the free license of comic play. Theater proponents who took theater seriously, in other words, worked to legitimize the playhouse by neutralizing its popular energies and transforming it into a site of instruction. In fact, from the postrevolutionary period well into the nineteenth century, it was quite common for theater promoters to tout the civic benefits of the playhouse under a democratic republic. Take for example, William Haliburton’s 1792 pamphlet advocating for the repeal of Boston’s theater ban. Haliburton’s argument for a “well-regulated theater” clearly links the entertainments of the stage to the politics of good republican governance, effectively mobilizing the theater as a medium for political regulation and social reform: “There are two ways of reforming mankind, politically, and morally; the effects of the Stage are great in both!…The stage is properly connected with government, an engine in their hands, to impel, direct, or restrain the spirits of a nation!”24 As an instrument of the government, or “an engine in their hands,” the theater can, following Haliburton’s logic, guide the public according to the ideology of republican politics. Sketching out a plan for a theater in Boston, Haliburton envisions a building spacious enough to admit as much as a third of the city’s population, such that “the whole town will have the opportunity of attending at least once a week.”25 Attending the theater thus becomes a form of regular civic engagement, to the point that Haliburton even pitches the proposed theater as a multi-purpose building: a location that might

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25 Ibid., 27.
fruitfully entertain the polis and “accommodate the whole legislative assembly…where they may deliberate free from the noise of carriages, &c.”

Haliburton’s case for a theater in Boston is an exemplary instance of a pro-theater argument internalizing and even reinforcing the regulatory logic of the antitheatrical paradigm. By insisting upon the beneficial role theater might serve in public life, Haliburton effectively turns theater into the handmaiden of republican governance, such that its material space doubles as a site of legislative debate. This embrace of theater’s mimetic relation to political order here tethers theatrical pursuits to ends that are fundamentally pedagogical and constructive in nature. To attend theater, under this model, is to productively participate in the deliberative machinations of republican political discourse, a discourse that is itself conducted within the theatrical space. But in the process, Haliburton dismisses an entire mode of theatrical entertainment that might dilute or even dissipate such a project. In what might be described as an offhanded interdiction, he passingly rejects all lighter forms of theatrical entertainment: “All farces, pantomimes, low-jesting, witticisms, buffoonery, rope-dancing, &c. (which serve only to waste the time and money of the people without any one benefit in return; and have moreover an evident tendency to deprave their taste and corrupt their morals) should be forever banished the Theatre, and all places of public resort, as infinitely beneath the dignity of a polite and sensible people.” This prohibition of all forms of circus spectacle, light comedy, and “low-jesting” effectively delimits the realm of theatrical play, yoking theater to a political model that refuses non-instrumental or trivial forms of popular entertainment. Haliburton’s effort to recuperate theater’s reputation thus entails an

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26 Ibid., 38.
27 Ibid., 12.
unequivocal and even unceremonious excision of a sizable portion of its popular — and comic — repertoire. In curtailing all forms of theatrical entertainment that are deemed “beneath the dignity of a polite and sensible people,” Haliburton’s pamphlet signals not only how the antitheatrical paradigm inflects the very advancement of the theater, but also how such advancement limited the scope of theater’s play in significant ways. For Haliburton, promoting theater meant denying its fun.

But the very notion that the theater, however idealistically instituted under a democratic republic, might actually be purged of its more “trivial” pursuits, is itself a misapprehension of theater’s popular dynamics. Indeed, to excise the “lower” comic entertainments of the playhouse is to deny any notion that appealing to the popular pleasures of the audience might have any value on its own terms. The people’s pleasure, in other words, is here subordinated to the regulation of a republican pedagogy. Arguments such as Haliburton’s demonstrate how the antitheatrical paradigm undergirds early national negotiations of theater’s mimetic relation to sociopolitical order. In the process, such arguments surely also signal a decidedly limited purchase on the political energies of theater’s lighter fare, which is to say, its comic play. In denying theater’s “lower” pursuits — its farces, buffoonery, and light entertainment — this implicitly antitheatrical approach subscribes to a particular model of political discourse, one that presumes deliberation, regulation, and order as central to political practice.

Haliburton was by no means alone in this tacit embrace of the antitheatrical paradigm. As new playhouses sprang up in metropolitan hubs across the country and actor-managers competed for company dominance in emerging regional theater circuits, pro-theater institutionalists broadly sought to characterize theater as a beneficial, and even
venerable feature of any “civilized” society. Such arguments took shape in promotional pamphlets like Haliburton’s, many of which trafficked in a related and perhaps even more familiar genre: the “defense” of the stage. Several of these defenses were direct ripostes to religious attacks on the theater, further solidifying the largely reactive posture that so much of the cultural advocacy for the theater took. Similar arguments continued to echo in actor memoirs and manager “histories” of early American theater, which enjoyed great popularity throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. At the close of her autobiography, star actress Anna Cora Mowatt devotes an entire chapter to prosecute a sustained defense of the stage, a rhetorical performance that seeks to recuperate theater from its reputation of moral degeneracy. In a telling admission of the threat theater can and has posed to a virtuous people, Mowatt enjoins her readers to “reform the errors of the stage, if you would serve the cause of human progress.” Theater manager William Dunlap takes a similar tack in his influential chronicle of early American theatrical productions. More than willing to admit that “there are evils, and perversions, and abuses, attendant upon theatrical exhibitions,” Dunlap nevertheless insists upon the “salutary” effects of the stage in a democratic society: “But is it visionary to suppose a free government, a government of the people, regulating and making more perfect and even more attractive an amusement which the people love, and will have making it a school that shall invite to virtue and teach the truths of history, philosophy, patriotism, and morals?” Within the theater itself, occasional addresses and prologues regularly

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28 David Grimsted provides a useful selected bibliography for this particular tradition of “pithy replies to ministerial attacks.” See his Melodrama Unveiled, 272.  
29 Anna Cora Mowatt Ritchie, Autobiography of an Actress or, Eight Years on the Stage (Boston: Ticknor, Reed and Fields, 1854), 440.  
30 Dunlap, 73.
addressed the audience in terms that were clearly meant to inspire a sense of the theater’s elevated purpose in a virtuous society. Addresses made upon the opening of a new or refurbished theater (like Sprague’s 1821 prize address for the Park Theatre) were especially attuned to the logic of the antitheatrical paradigm, often situating the occasion within a legacy of cultural and dramatic achievement stretching back as far as ancient Greece. Thomas Wells’s 1824 address to the New American Theater in New Orleans, for example, described the new building as “The shield of Morals, and of Song the home - / The nurse of Eloquence — the school of Taste,” speculating that “Within thy walls, perhaps, by Genius led / Shall future Shakspeares sing, or Garricks tread.” Such lofty rhetoric only accelerated to anticipate “the auspicious time, / When bards our own the Olympic mount shall climb.” These occasional addresses operate as benedictions, but in the process, they position theater as part of a larger project of cultural progress and refinement against the backdrop of early national settlement and expansion. For this reason, the genre often involves a call to protect and safeguard the integrity of “the Temple of Drama,” from any corruption or vice, a call which often falls directly upon the assembled audience. On the 1832 opening of the New Theater at Cincinnati, for example, the following rather memorable injunction was spoken as part of the address:

Patrons of genius! be it yours to guard
This virgin temple, spotless and unmarr’d,
High o’er its gates inscribe this ban to sin,
Let not pollution dare to enter in.

The great heights these occasional addresses imagined for the theater were only possible

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because they entailed the risk of cultural debasement, a debasement to which all theater was vulnerable precisely because of the conditions of its public assembly.

While actors and managers defended their profession through the rhetorical avenues made available by the antitheatrical paradigm, theater critics contributed still more through the dramatic reviews and theatrical commentary of literary periodical culture. Much of this literary and cultural criticism rehearsed the antitheatrical paradigm in arguments that returned again and again to the pedagogical utility of the theater — its ability to, in its most idealized state, “instruct and delight” the public. Added to this was a recurring critical condescension towards the heterogeneous audiences that assembled at the playhouse and largely bent theater programs to the desires of “popular taste.” In a rather snide review of an 1823 revival of the enormously popular low comedy Tom and Jerry, for instance, a commentary in the New-York Mirror bemoans the “perversion of public taste,” which seems more inclined to “yawn over the Hamlet of Cooper, and cry bravo! to the buffoonery of Mathews.” The fact that this critic placed star comedian Charles Mathews’ impressive skills of comic impersonation so decidedly below that of Thomas Cooper, the famed tragedian of the day, points once again to an antitheatrical logic that would seek to contain popular judgment and regulate the audience’s pleasure, and in so doing, assert an aesthetic hierarchy that would diminish the value of “unserious” modes of comic performance.34

34 Of course, not all early national popular entertainments were comedies in a generic sense, but the association that Haliburton and other commentators drew between the “lowness” of popular taste and “low” forms of comic and light performance such as farces and circus acts is a significant one. Indeed, this association is highly suggestive of the comic mode’s enduring purchase on forms of popular expression, an insight that has been more fully explored in critical engagements with carnival and the carnivalesque. See Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (Ithaca: Cornell
My interest here, however, is not to simply track the discursive and rhetorical strategies by which theater managers, dramatists, and patrons advanced the cultural legitimacy of the theater in the early decades of the United States, but to consider how such strategies elide the significant and even vital social relations of early national theater’s playful practices. What is lost, overlooked, or suppressed when theater’s play is so insistently sublimated to the judicious oversight of the serious-minded? Put another way, how does the antitheatrical paradigm police the popular energies of theater’s public assemblies? And what might be gained when the mimetic relation between popular rule and the rule of the audience is construed not as a perpetual point of anxiety, but rather as a resource for comic play? As editorial commentary lamenting the baseness of “public taste” so clearly illustrates, theatrical discourse that argued for the legitimation and elevation of the theater as a cultural institution often adhered to an implicitly anti-populist politics, in that it remained committed to regulating the diverse pleasures of “the people,” subjecting popular will to a patrician order maintained by a more general political ideology of virtuous republicanism. While theater managers and actors alike published an array of “defenses” of the theater, recounted in their memoirs the virtues of their profession, and recited prize prologues glorifying the time-honored purpose of “the Drama” to “instruct and delight” the people, the actual practices of early national audiences were nothing so staid. In what follows, I want to turn to the populist and predominantly agonistic energies of those audiences to explore what the antitheatrical paradigm overlooks about both the play of early national theater and, by extension, the play of early national politics.

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University Press, 1986). For another approach to “low performance” in early American theatre culture, see Peter Reed’s Rogue Performances.
Agonistic Audiences

Recovering the comic play of rowdy theater audiences in the early United States requires us to look beyond the serious-minded theater discourse of literary and cultural elites in this period; it also asks us to revise our critical approaches to theorizing the democratic public sphere. Since Michael Warner’s influential application of Jürgen Habermas to what he calls the letters of the republic, a great deal of scholarship in American literary studies has invoked and responded to a rational-critical model of the public sphere, which takes deliberation and consensus building as the constitutive features of democratic political practice. The Habermasian model has continued to serve as a reliable touchstone in Americanist discourse, a point of departure from which to elaborate and ultimately complicate the sociopolitical dynamics of the early United States. Much of that critical elaboration has sought to apply pressure to the political limits of the bourgeois public sphere by attending to the practices of the common and the non-elite, as well as the interventions of excluded or marginalized subjects. Warner’s own theorization of counterpublics has done so largely by studying the mediations of print culture. Meanwhile, a substantial body of Americanist scholarship in performance and theatricality has been particularly attuned to embodied, passional, and provisional forms of political expression that have materialized individual and collective dissent in ways not easily captured by deliberative models of the public sphere. As Elizabeth Maddock

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Dillon argues, “simply expanding” the parameters of the public sphere cannot adequately account for “the persons engaged in scenes of imperial encounter, violence, settlement, and unsettlement.” As critical discourse has steadily sought to recognize the violent exclusions that constitute and enable specific constellations of the public, the Habermasian promise of consensus-based politics has increasingly given way to studies of dissensus.

This recognition of the fundamental conflict of public formations is essential to developing a fuller account of the uneven and halting democratization of social relations in the early national period. However, while critical studies of dissensus in the early United States often stress the contentions struggles and violent erasures that necessarily undergird collective performance, they seldom consider how the pleasures of performance might shape the parameters and possibilities of sociopolitical formations. Put simply, not all conflict is the same, and the cacophony of the early national playhouse provided a distinctly ludic framework for popular assertion and sociopolitical struggle that modulated violent conflict into social contest.

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38 Dillon, *New World Drama*, 17.

39 Play is certainly not absent from Americanist scholarship on the public sphere and the politics of dissensus. Consider, for instance, Warner’s analysis of the Club of She-Romps as a counterpublic (*Publics and Counterpublics*, 109-14) or Dillon’s study of Jonkonnu performance as “a presenting of the African on colonial ground” (*New World Drama*, 205). Such case studies exemplify in different ways the playfulness that often accompanies transgressive performances of dissent. My interest is to focus critically on that playfulness, to account for how the conditions of play make dissensus possible.
playful social dynamics of early national audiences, I seek to provide a more nuanced account of the conditions under which early national publics were constituted and sustained. For if, as many scholars of early American theater and performance have asserted, early national theater offered an important means of public formation and popular expression, it did so by fusing the contestation of the public to the pleasure of the audience. It was this heightened pleasure in theatrical protest that conditioned the very exercise of the public’s will. Those unruly pleasures helped to maintain a broader social tolerance for early national theater riots, which generally held a liminal position between orderly protest and mob rule. A fuller understanding of that liminal position and the audiences that maintained it requires a critical gaze that does not solely dwell on the ruptures of dissensus, but also attends to the frameworks that enabled and sustained sociopolitical contest.

Chantal Mouffe’s agonistic theory of democratic politics can better describe those frameworks while still offering us an alternative to the Habermasian model of deliberative democracy. Mouffe’s embrace of the fundamental antagonism and conflict of what she terms “the political” effectively rejects consensus-based politics. In its place, she advances a political practice that is less invested in overcoming or suppressing the

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40 The “quasi-legitimate” status of theater riots would fade over the course of the antebellum period, as audiences began to separate according to class, and new theaters increasingly catered to the particular tastes of less heterogeneous clienteles. With this stratification of culture, audiences became increasingly subject to regulation, even as popular rowdiness in the theater verged more often into mob violence. These changes in the material conditions of the theater ultimately culminated in the infamous Astor Place Riot of 1849, which violently foreclosed a tradition of popular audience protest and expression. For more on these historical shifts in theater culture, see Gilje; Lawrence W. Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); McConachie, Melodramatic Formations and “American Theatre in Context, from the Beginnings to 1870”; Butsch.

41 Mouffe distinguishes between “the political,” which she understands as the “antagonism that is inherent in human relations,” and “politics,” which she identifies as “the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political’” (Chantal Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox [New York: Verso, 2000], 101).
antagonism of the political as it is in channeling it into a workable system. For Mouffe,
democratic politics operates agonistically, in that it creates a system that allows
adversaries to struggle against one another within specific parameters, thereby
transforming “antagonism into agonism,” such that political conflict might be
productively harnessed to the practices that contribute to cultural formation. Mouffe’s
theorization of democratic politics thus stresses the essential conflict of public formations
while distinguishing the sociopolitical struggles of a collected people from the strife of
public dissolution.

What interests me here is not so much the fact that scholarship oriented towards
dissensus grapples with the conflictual energies at the core of political and cultural
practice, but rather the underlying notion that the essential conflict of public formations
operates through the very ludic qualities of performance itself. Indeed, what is especially
telling about Mouffe’s agonistic political theory is its implicit reliance upon the dynamics
of social play. What is agonism, after all, if not ludic? The very contest of agonistic
engagement entails the framing of event, the staging of action, and the demarcation of a
social arena in which its struggles might unfold, struggles that function symbolically,
standing in for or acting as if they were violent social conflict fully-fledged. The fact that
democratic politics might ultimately depend upon play is hardly surprising, particularly
given Mouffe’s deliberate marshaling of a term with etymological roots in the Greek
agōn, a word that applied to a family of social contests that were ludic in nature.43

42 Mouffe, 103.
43 Though contemporary usage tends to emphasize the violent and painful struggle of combat, agōn
applied to a host of athletic, dramatic, and musical contests that made up festive public culture in ancient
Greece and Rome; it also indicated the verbal contest or dispute that was a prominent feature of Old
Comedy. My point here is that agonism happens in a designated space of play. In fact, the agōn poses as a
significant category in theories of play. See, for example, Roger Caillois, Man, Play, and Games, trans.
Meyer Barash (1961; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001). While not her primary concern, the ludic
Agonism transforms antagonism, channelling its conflictual energies into a medium of productive social contestation, reframing oppositional forces within a contained field of possible action. Agonism, in other words, operates according to the rules of the game.

Of course, the rules of the game are not necessarily fair. By turning to Mouffe’s agonistic political theory, I don’t mean to suggest that early national practices of public contestation were ever fully democratic. In the space of theater, rowdy audiences displayed the dynamic heterogeneity of a democratizing body politic that nevertheless remained deeply unequal and exclusionary, and the parameters of agonistic play were structured according to early national hierarchies of race, gender, and class. While agonism acknowledges the vital importance of contestation to democratic politics, its ludic conditions also facilitate political order, which in the early national playhouse, continued to regulate and exclude marginalized political subjects. However, I want to press upon the ludic dimension of agonism not simply because it illuminates the rules of the game — the possibilities and the limits of political contest — but because the ludic opens up the possible ends of politics itself. For if Mouffe’s agonism insists upon the fundamental strife of public formations, the playful dynamics of its social contests also recognize and make room for the pursuit of pleasure. The play of politics, in other words, organizes and channels the violent energies of the public; like all forms of play, it also yields various and uneven forms of pleasure to its diverse players. What is more, as a fundamentally ludic medium, theater is especially primed to apprehend and generate that heterogeneous and troublingly unpredictable flow of the public’s pleasure. This is in part because theater is intrinsically invested in play. But as accounts of theater audiences in dimension of agonism is not lost upon Mouffe; she brushes up against the realm of play theory in her readings of Wittgenstein, whose focus on language games directly informs her political theory.
the early decades of the United States make plain, the playhouse posited a mimetic
relation to politics, such that audiences doubled and enacted “the people” of a democratic
republic. Audience play thus became a significant means of generating a limited form of
democratic sociality, a sociality that ultimately resisted the politics of deliberative
republicanism.

The Charleston Theatre riot of 1817 provides a comic illustration of this very point.
An incident that resulted from a contract dispute between the theater’s manager, Joseph
George Holman, and his newly imported star actor, James H. Caldwell, the origins of this
public disturbance do not, at first glance, appear to have any particular relevance to the
issue of democratic political practice. Yet extensive commentary on the conflict quickly
took up the language of popular sovereignty, as Holman and Caldwell made their
arguments in the Charleston press. Their quarrel centered on the question of Caldwell’s
benefit night, which Holman had refused to schedule and which Caldwell insisted had
been promised as a condition of his contract. Caldwell penned an appeal “To the Public”
in the local press detailing his grievances and threatening to quit the city altogether.

Because Caldwell was a great favorite of the public, a protest was quickly organized the
following day. Placards and bills were posted throughout the town declaring that “there
should be no Play unless [Caldwell] was given to the wishes of the public,” and in the
evening, Charlestonians assembled at the theater to make those wishes known. An

44 Contemporaneous accounts and related news clippings of the 1817 Charleston Theatre Riot are
collected as part of “Theatre in the Antebellum South,” in the 1994 annual issue of Theatre Symposium. See
46 A Citizen [pseud.], “Theatrical Hub-Bub!” Southern Patriot, and Commercial Advertiser, March 13,
11), 10.
account circulating the local papers afterwards (“Theatrical Hub-Bub!” recorded by “A Citizen”) described how “a very splendid audience” quickly filled the house and waited expectantly for the theatrical event to come. As soon as the curtain rose, “a clamour commenced from the Upper Boxes and a call frequently made for ‘Mr. Caldwell’ and ‘The Manager’…” Holman eventually took to the stage “amidst hisses, and hoots and clapping” only to insist that his quarrel with Caldwell was “a private concern, in which the audience had no right to interfere.”47 The uproar that followed made any performance of the scheduled program utterly impossible. Holman’s stubbornness only seems to have unified the wishes of his audience, as “the tumult which had been hitherto confined to not more than one half the house now became universal. Persons who had taken no part in the affair, now joined the clamour, which was deafening.”48

What is striking here is how swiftly the central concerns of this contractual dispute shift from the question of fair payment to the primacy of the audience’s will. Holman’s mere suggestion that there might be “private” matters best left untouched by public opinion was enough for the diverse members of this particular audience to come together in the rather voluble assertion of their own sense of importance. As a skilled performer with plenty of public relations savvy, Caldwell cleverly marshaled the populist energies of the playhouse to his own benefit. In the midst of the commotion, “Mr. Caldwell was brought into the Pit by some friends” to address the audience.49 With a rather more gratifying display of humility and deference towards the audience, Caldwell openly called upon Holman to answer his charges. Holman’s response was decidedly inadequate:

47 Ibid., 10
48 Ibid., 10.
49 Ibid., 10.
“Mr. Holman again appeared, and amidst the general confusion was heard to say, that the Theatre was not a place for debating, that he would in another place answer Mr. Caldwell. Mr. Caldwell retorted, by observing ‘that in a free country justice could be heard in any place.’ Mr. Holman then retired, after being struck with an apple or an orange, it is not recollected which.” In a fascinating turn away from the original issue of Caldwell’s benefit, the debate here becomes about the very conditions of debate, as both actor and manager perform to the audience, implicitly relying upon “the people” to settle the matter one way or another. Given the circumstances, Holman clearly holds the weaker position, which might be described as classically managerial. Regulatory at its core, his rebuttal to Caldwell is essentially an appeal for the “appropriate” conditions for debate. Tellingly, his argument seeks to disentangle those conditions entirely from the theater’s play, in a move that is inevitably also a deferral of debate itself, and perhaps still more, its foreclosure altogether.

Of course, for Caldwell and his now fully sympathetic audience, the theater is a place for debating, precisely because the theater and its people are in “a free country.” With rhetoric that willingly conflates theater and politics, Caldwell adroitly casts theatrical disturbance as one of the many possible varieties of political debate that can be conducted in a democratic republic. In so doing, he reformulates the very nature of debate itself. No longer a deliberative discourse to be conducted only on particular occasions with explicit rules of etiquette and decorum, debate might take place anywhere, including the theater, and involve modes of behavior (along with the occasional edible projectile) that blatantly exceed the bounds of civility. In other words, Caldwell’s version of “free” debate, which

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50 Ibid., 10-11.
is here inextricably tied to early national conceptions of democracy, includes vociferous protest within its horizon of possible action. And by refuting Holman’s managerial restrictions, Caldwell’s argument challenges the implicitly anti-populist logic of deliberative debate, appealing to a popular sovereignty here embodied by an increasingly raucous theater audience.

The fact that Caldwell ultimately relies upon the primacy of audience rule is suggestive of the gap between the politics of deliberative democracy (here staged in Holman’s utterly unsatisfactory argument) and the pleasure of “the people,” which finds expression in a contentious arena of disruptive behavior. A public demonstration bent upon enacting a level of strife more resonant with an agonistic politics, the audience’s protest escalated into intentional property destruction after Holman’s peremptory dismissal from the stage. Yet the property damage was, on the whole, a relatively orchestrated affair, taking place only after “[t]he ladies were requested to retire, which they immediately did.”51 Indeed, it’s important to note that this destructive display of public opinion was less terrifying and more playful than the antagonistic violence now generally associated with the modern riot. And while Holman did call in the City Guard to quell the disturbance, they proved so ineffectual as to be literally forced offstage: “the citizens compelled them to retire over the orchestra and behind the scenes….This military force seemed to add fuel to the fire, instead of allaying the confusion; the boxes and pit were more or less mutilated. Chaos ensued — the lights were extinguished — and about half after nine the people retired.”52 A chaotic evening certainly, but one without bloodshed, and comfortably concluded by bedtime. In this sense, the Charleston Theatre

51 Ibid., 11.
52 Ibid., 11.
riot of 1817 remains within the boundaries of agonistic play, in that it largely comports with the “quasi-legitimate” practices of rioting more broadly in the revolutionary and early national periods.

To be sure, commentary in the press in the wake of this theater riot took issue with the destruction of property. A letter signed by “Civis” denounced “the acts of a mob,” condemning the “demolition committed on the Theatre” as “highly improper.” The relative uneasiness over property damage undoubtedly arose out of the imagined potentiality of a slippery slope — an inexorable slide from theatrical protest to mob rule. But such concerns remained largely subordinate to a more powerful conviction of the rights of the audience. That conviction was importantly grounded in an understanding of theatrical protest as agonistic play, a mode of public contestation not to be confused with unrestrained violence. After all, Holman was not assaulted by a rock, but by a piece of fruit. If the issue of property damage was subject to further debate in the press, it was deemed unequivocally not deserving of the police force with which it was met: “Mr. Holman had the power of preventing these excesses,” opines “Civis,” “and he ought to know that to call in the military, is not the custom of this country.”

There is a ludicrous dimension to this scene of Holman’s humiliation, and this is, I want to suggest, a vital condition of the audience’s political victory here. Caldwell’s staged protest valorizes the agonistic play of popular rule, but it’s the piece of fruit lobbed at Holman that tips this theatrical disturbance into the comic mode. To assail an unaccommodating manager with fruit isn’t just a display of dissatisfaction, precisely

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54 Ibid., 12.
because the fruit is so markedly not a rock. A ludic assault that announces itself as ludic, the hurled fruit generates pleasure out of the very conditions of its unseriousness, making it not just playful, but comically so. At once a form of unruly contestation and a means of extracting fun out of an ongoing dispute, the fruit missile that so felicitously hits its managerial target serves as a physical punchline, a point of violent contact out of which the people’s pleasure erupts. This is not to suggest that the audience is uniformly in the throes of a general hilarity, though it is difficult to imagine the complete absence of laughter in such circumstances. Nor do I wish to diminish or trivialize the political energies of rowdy audiences — far from it. Rather, the frisson of this fruit projectile involves an act of playful protest in which the unserious, non-catastrophic fall of management fuels the audience’s pursuit of pleasure, pleasure that the manager’s regulatory impulses would otherwise seek to foreclose. That such comic play facilitates the pleasures of audience rule suggests the comic mode’s instrumental role within an agonistic politics. Because the comic mode so insistently underscores the ludic conditions of social contest, it can ensure that the play of democratic politics endures.

**Irving’s Comic Sociality**

The political significance of comic play to early national public formations was not lost on Washington Irving, whose humorous sketches often turned to theater as a central metaphor or urban life. To close this chapter, I want to consider Irving’s well-known and decidedly comic rendering of a rowdy theater audience as part of a broader cultural effort to put into practice a sustained alternative to what I have been calling the antitheatrical paradigm. Michael J. Collins has aptly described how Irving took theater as “a
synecdoche” for the social performances of early national New York. But for Irving, it was precisely the agonism of theater that made it such a compelling site for cultural criticism. In his *Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle*, early sketches appearing the *Morning Chronicle* from 1802 to 1803, Irving dwells extensively on the antics of the playhouse as seen through the eyes of his pseudonymous avatar, Jonathan Oldstyle. This well-known and decidedly humorous rendering of an early national theater audience offers a sustained theorization of the vital role of comic play to a democratic political practice of popular contestation:

I was much amused with the waggery and humor of the gallery, which, by the way, is kept in *excellent* order by the constables who are stationed there. The noise in this part of the house is somewhat similar to that which prevailed in Noah’s ark; for we have an imitation of the whistles and yells of every kind of animal…. Some how or another the anger of the gods seemed to be aroused all of a sudden, and they commenced a discharge of apples, nuts & ginger-bread, on the heads of the honest folks in the pit, who had no possibility of retreating from this new kind of thunder-bolts. I can’t say but I was a little irritated at being saluted aside of my head with a rotten pippin, and was going to shake my cane at them; but was prevented by a decent looking man behind me, who informed me it was useless to threaten or expostulate. They are only *amusing themselves* a little at our expence, said he, sit down quietly and bend your back to it. My kind neighbor was interrupted by a hard green apple that hit him between the shoulders — he made a wry face, but knowing it was all in joke, bore the blow like a philosopher.

Amusement drives the disorderly social pursuits of this passage. Oldstyle’s attention is initially drawn to the gallery’s antics precisely because he takes ironic pleasure in their irrepressible rowdiness. Wryly noting the total ineffectuality of the constables stationed to maintain order, Oldstyle’s enjoyment stems from the voluble sway of the gallery in the theatrical space, even as the patronizing quality of his humor casts such volubility as rudely animalistic. On one level, Oldstyle’s account makes plain the extent to which

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55 Collins, 1.
theatrical spectatorship involves the negotiation of competing acts of public expression and spectacle, such that attention readily shifts to the most dominant performers in the room, which, as this passage shows, are quite often nowhere near the stage itself. More significant though are the multifarious pleasures that such competing acts engender. The gallery’s belligerence supplies its members with the satisfaction of theatrical dominance while simultaneously feeding Oldstyle’s humorous eye. Agonistic interplay generates multiple avenues of pleasure, which variously thrive on the friction of dissension and dissonance.

Oldstyle’s pleasure is tempered by a significant amount of aggravation. However, the sudden volley of apples, nuts, and gingerbread that dominates the latter portion of this passage only further emphasizes the social pleasures of ludic hostilities. Although Oldstyle’s irritation mounts at “being saluted” with “a rotten pippin,” he nevertheless registers the missile as a communicative gesture, a hail that demands social recognition from its target. The “thunder-bolts” of angry gods, this smattering of food doubles as the dispensation of divine justice, a weaponized instrument of agonistic adjudication. It is precisely the gallery’s arbitrary exercise of judgment that at once constitutes their sovereign power and furnishes their amusement. Pleasure, in other words, is a necessary component to the gallery’s exercise of sovereignty. And as Oldstyle’s philosophical neighbor makes clear, theater is best enjoyed by spectators who readily submit to the pugnacious pleasures of agonistic play.

Oldstyle’s fellow compatriot of the pit articulates an approach to the violent discord of the playhouse that might look like the path of least resistance. Oldstyle even acknowledges the strategic advantages of his neighbor’s ironic resignation when he
witnesses the fate an irate Frenchman, who, in a moment of exasperation, “jumped upon his seat, shook his fist at the gallery, and swore violently in bad English. This was all nuts to his merry persecutors; their attention was wholly turned on him, and he formed their target for the rest of the evening.” Calling this pit member “an irritable little animal,” Oldstyle assumes an amused distance that registers the downsides of resisting unruly behavior in the theater while taking the “merry” persecution of the gallery in stride. But if theatrical enjoyment requires a measure of submission to violent assault, as Oldstyle’s neighbor suggests, it surely also signals an acceptance of play as play. To take the gallery projectiles “all in joke” is to successfully access the pleasures of theatrical pursuits. It is also to facilitate a system of sociopolitical play that harnesses the antagonistic energies of “the people” into a system of agonistic contest, protest, and recognition. In this sense, Oldstyle’s philosophical compatriot in the pit articulates a model of spectatorship that embraces the turbulent political energies of the ludic theater public. Tellingly, this model relies upon an essentially comic orientation — a demonstrable capacity to take things “all in joke.”

Irving crafts a humorous sketch that doesn’t just represent the ludic hostilities of the playhouse; it presents a comic approach to theatrical experience, where the model spectator is one who appreciates the joke of social contest. This comic model of reception could be taken simply as an ironized gesture of class containment — a patronizing dismissal of the gallery’s populist energies as mere jest. The ironic stance posited by Irving’s philosopher of the pit is, however, a far from stable position, in that it remains firmly seated within the tumultuous arena of theatrical play. Because the theater offers no

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57 Irving, 14-15.
58 Irving, 14.
secure position from which to observe the play of its participants, its volatile dynamics exceed any one spectator’s efforts to contain or master the pleasures of its various pursuits, a fact that the philosopher of the pit knows all too well. Rather than quell or diminish the significance of popular expression, this model spectator’s comic uptake of the gallery’s antics acknowledges both the play and the pleasures of an agonistic public. In so doing, he demonstrates a comic investment in recognizing and foregrounding the pleasures of social contestation, pleasures which facilitate collective affiliation even as they thrive on the conflictual energies of public assembly.

It is worth stressing the fact that Irving’s philosopher of the pit rests assured in his supposition that the play of theater is ultimately “all in joke,” for such comic insistence on the unseriousness of theater’s play helps to maintain its agonistic pursuits. To experience the play of the audience as comic is to both acknowledge and exercise pleasure as a key component of sociopolitical contest. This comic approach to the cacophonous sociality of theater publics does more than simply counter rational-critical models of public discourse with a happier form of popular contestation; it reveals the essential fact that such acts of contestation emerge from collective systems of play. Irving’s comic philosophy, in other words, recognizes play on its own terms. Such comic play not only valorizes the ludic pleasures to be had in the throes of social contest; its perceptual practices ensure the continued circulation and proliferation of enjoyment across a raucous and disorderly public.

Irving’s comic turn suggests that agonism maintains its ludic conditions to the extent that the bulk of its players understand themselves to be at play, which is to say, their ability to take a joke. Indeed, it is only through this comic understanding that agonism
guards against the threat of its own dissolution into outright antagonism. To take seriously what ought to be taken in jest is to risk compromising or even collapsing the ludic system (with all its uneven and multifarious pleasures) through which popular political expression might be performed and negotiated. Seen in this light, the stakes of Oldstyle’s good humor are very real indeed, for its absence might materially contribute to the political destabilization of agonistic play, when the theater public slides into mob violence. Irving’s comic theater thus presents a theorization of democratic social relations that reveals the crucial fact that democratic publics need to play. Democratic publics constitute and contest their social relations through play. It is only in play that the imperfect conditions of a democratizing culture can be politically negotiated and sustained. Still more, democratic publics need to understand themselves to be at play. Without that broader collective understanding of the importance of play and its pleasures, democratic publics face the specter of their own violent political dissolution. And because democratic publics need to understand themselves to be at play, the comic mode serves as a vital resource for political cohesion, a social commitment to unseriousness that early national players like Irving saw as integral to an ongoing democratic imaginary.

However, if Irving makes a case for the value of comic play to democratic politics, he doesn’t take into account the very real political exclusions that agonistic audiences often helped to maintain in the period. The social commitment to unseriousness in the early national playhouse did not fully extend to all patrons of the theater. As Marvin McAllister has delineated, theater manager William Brown’s persistent efforts to establish an African American theater in 1820s New York faced an outpouring of white aggression that was fueled by precisely this culture of agonistic play. The “laughter-
loving clerks” who eagerly sought out any “fun” to be had by causing a ruckus at the city’s Black theater, and whose systematic riots eventually made Brown’s innovative theatrical ventures impossible to maintain, reveal the stark disparities of who was and was not entitled to play (and in what manner) in the early national playhouse.59 Such antics reveal too how swiftly the “fun” of a popular joke can go too far, becoming so aggressive that it loses sight of the unserious, pushing agonistic play into the unfiltered violence of antagonistic conflict. While theater patrons like Irving viewed comic play as a vital resource for asserting the primacy of the people’s pleasure, early national theater history nevertheless also repeatedly demonstrates the precarities of agonistic politics — the slippages and shortcomings of an evolving democratic cultural imaginary. The next chapter traces the contours of that shared imaginary by exploring how agonistic audiences interacted with the comic repertoire of the early nineteenth-century stage.

59 See McAllister, White People, especially 46-51.
Chapter Two

Comic Acts: Staging the Audience’s Pleasure

In the midst of *The Battle of Eutaw Springs* (1807), William Ioor’s patriotic dramatization of the Revolutionary War, a brief history of a comic player unfolds. Freshly arrived in America, a newly impressed sailor confesses to his Lieutenant in the British encampment that he has no military experience. He is “Oliver Mathew Queerfish, esq. comedian, equestrian, harlequin, and so forth,” and he finds himself “in the wild woods of rebellious America” quite by accident. As such, he provides the obligatory low comic relief in a nationalist play primarily concerned with instilling patriotic fervor in its local Charleston audience. Yet Queerfish’s unintended American debut is more than a convenient appendage in Ioor’s play, for the oddities of his journey introduce a comic reflection on the play of theater and the fashioning of national identity. In a nutshell, Queerfish is shipped off to America for playing the rowdy spectator too well. After a successful benefit performance at the circus, Queerfish rounds up his fellow performers for a night of fun. Disguising themselves as sailors, they decide to “kick up a row” in the shilling gallery at the Drury Lane Theatre. “Out we sailed,” as Queerfish relates it, undoubtedly with much physical verve, “astonished audience — quizz’d orange-woman

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2 William Ioor was a Charleston playwright and a staunch Republican. His plays were patriotic productions, performed for his local audience. *The Battle of Eutaw Springs* was performed only a few times in Charleston, once in Richmond, and once in Philadelphia. For more on the play’s production history, see Charles S. Watson, *The History of Southern Drama* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 33-34.
— kick’d door-keepers — beat watch — and then, returned home: that is, all but poor Pilgarlick!” Mistaken for an actual sailor by a press-gang, Queerfish finds himself forced onboard a ship bound for the colonies. His predicament is one that echoes a point of friction between Britain and the United States in Ioor’s day, as the issue of involuntary impressment was a political flashpoint that figured heavily in the run-up to the War of 1812. But Queerfish doesn’t just evoke the political conflict of Ioor’s immediate moment here; he stages the making of an American citizen, an identity that he enthusiastically embraces by the play’s end. The transformation from British subject to American citizen is thus enacted by a comic actor who quite literally plays the role of comic actor. Tellingly, that role also involves playing the part of the disruptive audience member, activating a reflexive circuit of unruly fun that is only flung farther afield by the state military power that otherwise seeks to quell disorder. In the nationalist economy of Ioor’s play, this comic act of agonistic interplay is inextricably bound to the creation of a new sociopolitical affiliation, as Queerfish stands before his local audience to say “here am I in America.”

In this chapter, I trace some of the many iterations of this comic act over the course of the early national and antebellum periods, showing how star actors harnessed the rowdy play of their audiences to an evolving repertoire of cultural and political particularity within the United States. In roles that mirrored the ludic pursuits of the publics to which they played, comic performers at once staged and addressed the unruly spectators they sought to entertain, deliberately foregrounding the mimetic interplay between audience

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3 Ioor, 13.
4 Like many other dramatists of the period, Ioor had a specific comic actor in mind. Ioor created the role Queerfish for Matthew Sully, the popular low comic of Alexander Placide’s company (Watson, 34).
5 Ioor, 13.
and stage. Taking the raucous conduct of the audience “all in joke,” as Irving’s Jonathan Oldstyle put it, these comic acts acknowledged the play and the pleasures of social disorder, and still more, translated the implicitly comic sociality of early national theatrical experience to the generic structures of stage comedy. While this comic repertoire reflected a larger transatlantic theater culture that embraced the participatory dynamics of popular audiences, it also responded to the particular sociopolitical conditions of democratic culture in the early United States. In the process, a tradition of comic performance emerged that actively fostered a culture of popular theatrical assembly organized by an agonistic politics — a ludic mode of popular contestation that stood in excess of deliberative, rational-critical models of consensus-based politics. If, as I have argued, early national audiences understood the political value of having fun (that is, taking play as play), the comic repertoire of early nineteenth-century theater sought to perpetuate that social commitment to public enjoyment. Comic performers activated and proliferated a comic sociality in their audiences, encouraging a collective relationality that acknowledged the ludic conditions of disorderly conduct at the playhouse, and in so doing, sustained the political viability of popular contestation. Focusing on the stage performances that these audiences enjoyed, I underscore how the ludic practices of spectatorship in the early national and antebellum periods contributed to the sociopolitical horizons of comic performance. Moving from comic spectator to comic actor, I explore the mimetic circuit of play between the two, revealing the extent to which early national and antebellum theater culture stressed their fluid interchangeability.

The comic acts I study offer new avenues into the underexamined archives of the early nineteenth-century stage. Long neglected in traditionally print-centric and
nationalist approaches to American literary studies, the repertoire that audiences most
often enjoyed in this period was never purely “native” in origins, nor did theatrical
performance adhere strictly to the scripts of dramatic texts. Rather, plays circulated
widely across networks of circum-Atlantic performance and proved endlessly adaptable
to the material conditions and political constellations of local audiences. For this reason,
even the most patriotically nationalist of stage performances — Ioor’s play included —
registered their participation in a complex nexus of transatlantic influence, cross-cultural
transmission, and provincial particularity. Scholarship in early American and Atlantic
theater history has done much to flesh out the cultural impact of this stage repertoire,
delineating how dramatic productions continually mediated shifting formations of class,
race, and gender. From patriotic restagings of the revolution, to melodramas of heroic
masculinity, to the plantation nostalgia of the minstrel show, to what Amy E. Hughes has
called the “dramaturgy of reform” in activist theater, the drama of early national and
antebellum theater was instrumental to advancing a diverse and often competing array of
political ideologies.\footnote{Amy E. Hughes, \textit{Spectacles of Reform: Theater and Activism in Nineteenth-Century America} (Ann
Arbor: University of Michigan, 2012), 12.} While my focus on the antebellum comic repertoire contributes to
this body of work, my primary aim is not so much to critique the politics of dramatic
representations as it is to explore the ludic pleasures that propel theater’s heterogeneous
and evolving public formations. By delineating a theatrical tradition of comic sociality,
then, I give an account of the contested politics of the playhouse that is critically attentive
to the provisional frameworks of social play. In the process, I draw on the reflexivity of
the comic mode, which highlights the ludic conditions of the social practices it modifies,
to develop a methodological approach to the archives of nineteenth-century theater that
better captures the political purchase of the unserious in antebellum public life. What I seek to do, in other words, is to read against the grain of the antitheatrical paradigm — an essentially serious-minded approach to theater’s cultural function that subordinates the ludic pleasures of the playhouse to a regulatory politics — so as to recover the significance of popular enjoyment as an organizing principle of theatrical assembly.

Reading for the play, which is to say, reading comically, yields a much richer and more nuanced understanding of the historical repertoire of the period, for it reveals a strain of agonistic politics that found its fullest expression in the dynamic immediacy of live performance. Beginning with Thomas Wignell’s signature performance of Jonathan in Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast*, the comic acts I describe chart this alternative tradition, one that celebrated the cultural and political value of the people’s play in ways that resisted the logic of the antitheatrical paradigm. The hermeneutics of reading comically also help us to see the social limits of popular enjoyment in the antebellum playhouse. As my study of Sol Smith’s theatrical adaptations will demonstrate, the comic activation of agonistic interplay in the space of theater hardly advanced a shared imaginary of social equality (much less social justice), despite the theater’s commitment to the collective pursuit of pleasure. Although comic actors like Smith sustained and proliferated a popular democratic imaginary by recognizing the importance of the people’s pleasure, their performances only partially acknowledged the diverse claims of their heterogeneous audiences, often reinforcing the violent exclusions of a local hegemony. As a result, the agonistic play of the comic repertoire restricted access to its unequally distributed pleasures even as it insisted upon the claim to pleasure that all theatergoers shared.

Comic actors thus invoked a horizon of social plenitude that they themselves failed to
fully figure forth within the arena of the playhouse, meting out the pleasures of social contest according to hierarchies of race and gender in the period. Over time, the unfulfilled promise of agonistic play was increasingly sublated to the logic of the antitheatrical paradigm, as the growing commercialization of antebellum entertainment industries gradually turned unruly spectators into well-behaved, uniform audiences. As the composition of theater publics shifted towards a more stratified system of highbrow and lowbrow entertainment, the politics of comic sociality in the playhouse transformed, and upper and middle-class patrons eventually discarded the pleasures of social contest in exchange for the bourgeois enjoyments of a well-regulated theater. The genealogy of comic performance that I explore here chronicles this historical trajectory in the career of Anna Cora Mowatt, but it also reveals its contingencies, marking in the embodied immediacy of theatrical moment the ludic trace of democratic social pleasures still wished for, but not yet enjoyed.

**Jonathan’s Laughter: Agonistic Theater and the Making of a Comic Type**

One of the more provocative implications of Queerfish’s diverting history is the proposition that becoming “American” begins in the playhouse. This process of becoming does not, however, rely upon the patriotic or didactic possibilities of staged representation. The productions of the stage do not inspire any kind revolutionary spirit in Queerfish, nor do his performances push him to internalize the principles of virtuous republicanism that guided so much of the official politics of the early national period. Instead, he mimics the raucous conduct of the gallery spectator, tapping into the fun of popular contestation. Joseph Roach has pointed to the central role of mimicry in the history of American performance, a seemingly derivative castoff of mimesis that
“characterizes performances of many kinds in the repertoire of the emerging American actor, who raised it to the level of a national art form.” What I trace through Queerfish and other antebellum comic roles is a metatheatrical mode of mimicry that engaged the popular energies of audiences against the backdrop of an unevenly democratizing cultural field. Such mimicry contributed to a comic typology that would dominate a cultural imaginary of national self-representation over the first half of the nineteenth century. Yet traditional narratives of canon formation, cultural particularity, and the emergence of a dramatic “tradition” largely construe the patterns of stage comedy as a reflection of a deliberative, antitheatrical republicanism. For this reason, theater history has failed to recognize the imprint of the agonistic audience on the repertoire of the period.

Consider, for example, the most canonized of early stage comedies, Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* (1787). Long touted as foundational to the development of drama in the United States, the play often serves as a kind of canonical placeholder for what is usually treated as a minor and largely derivative dramatic tradition before the advent of the twentieth century. The fact that Tyler’s play tends to stand out amidst a largely neglected archive of early American drama speaks to the ways in which rich and complex performance histories of early American theater have been flattened by critical frameworks of nation and canon formation. Such critical frameworks have nevertheless consistently elevated *The Contrast* precisely because the play so explicitly stages the political and ideological debates surrounding a still nascent national identity in the postrevolutionary era.

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As its title suggests, the primary action of this stage comedy turns not so much on its loosely held marriage plot, but on the contrasts made between characters embodying a cultural ethos of virtuous republicanism and their ostensibly more ludicrous foils — cosmopolitan New Yorkers with a taste for fashion and British mannerisms. In the contest for the virtuous Maria’s hand and fortune, the play pits the forthright Revolutionary veteran Colonel Manly against Billy Dimple, an urban elite with an appetite for luxury and a suspicious polish gleaned from his recent European tour. When Dimple’s dissolute and predatory conduct is ultimately exposed, the patriot Manly emerges victorious, making for a happy ending in which the logic of patrician republicanism ostensibly triumphs over the encroaching dangers of cosmopolitan commercialism. By ridiculing the social affectations of a growing capitalist culture and rewarding the seemingly straightforward sincerity of a republican patriot, Tyler’s stage comedy advances a familiar argument that casts the allure of theatricality, here associated with the social performances of an elite, nondemocratic, and particularly British political system, as a threat to the integrity of the early republic. Yet as many critics have noted, *The Contrast* relies upon the social play of theatricality even as the pedagogy of its satire promotes an antitheatrical politics. As a result, the comedy’s central conceit reflects the

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8 Scholarship on *The Contrast* has stressed the internal tensions of the play in a number of different ways. For many, the play’s central contradiction resides in the enduring purchase of theatricality in a culture of republican sincerity. John Evelev has shown, for example, how Colonel Manly, the play’s hero and most evidently purist of mouthpieces for republican ideology, appears strangely prone to theatrical declamations of noble sentiment and patriotic fervor (John Evelev, “‘The Contrast’: The Problem of Theatricality and Political and Social Crisis in Postrevolutionary America,” *Early American Literature* 31, no. 1 [1996]: 74-97). This apparent “clash between ideology and aesthetics,” as Gary Richardson describes it, is only furthered by the play’s uneasy status as both a departure from and extension of a dramatic tradition largely characterized as British (Gary A. Richardson, *American Drama from the Colonial Period through World War I: A Critical History* [New York: Twayne, 1993], 47). Though the play’s Prologue exclaims, “Exult each patriot heart! — This night is shown, / A piece, which we may fairly call our own,” the claim to a nationally distinctive drama is rooted less in aesthetic innovation than in a political localism coded as democratic (Royall Tyler, *The Contrast: Manners, Morals, and Authority in the Early American Republic*, ed. Cynthia A. Kierner [New York: New York University Press, 2007], 38). Even as the Prologue
complex relationship between theater and politics in a democratic republic, even as the resolution of its plot generally insists upon clear winners and losers.

Taking the pedagogy of the play’s satire at face value, critics have often characterized *The Contrast* as an earnest, if perhaps unsuccessful, push for ideological unity against the backdrop a new and still uncertain democratic republic. As Trish Loughran puts it, the play “express[es] a powerful nationalist wish,” a wish for political consensus that it articulates in the face of “profound regional differences.” Yet, as Loughran and others have variously demonstrated, *The Contrast*’s ideological assertions fail to dispel the social behaviors that it ridicules. This failure arises out of what many scholars have identified as the fundamental disjunction between the play’s form and its politics; in his deployment of theatrical form to neutralize the dangers of theatricality in early republican culture, Tyler finds himself “unable to resolve the tension between the demands of his comic aesthetic and the ideology he wishes to present.”

9 Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 177. In her reading of *The Contrast*, Loughran argues that “the play’s primary reality is not one of consensus at all but of discord” (177). Her recovery of the regional politics embedded within the play and its production history complicates national histories of consensus-based politics, though she ultimately asserts that “*The Contrast*’s guiding ethic is…the federal and federalizing work of consensus across the divides of faction at any cost” (Loughran 195). While I share Loughran’s critical turn from consensus to discord, my reading of *The Contrast* will show that its agonistic energies complicate its relationship to the politics of consensus.

10 Richardson, 50. Other versions of this argument figure prominently in critical discussions of this play. Jeffrey H. Richards, for example, points to Tyler’s incongruous choice to portray “antitheatrical...
Gary Richardson, which effectively sets the typically class-conscious comedy of manners against the more democratic values of early republican ideology, is especially pertinent for my purposes because it brushes up against the potential impact of comic practice upon systems of sociopolitical order. Of course, Richardson’s comments on comedy are limited to a distinct stage genre, which he folds perhaps too easily into the binaristic tension between theater and politics that he and many others have tracked in this play. Under this rubric, comedy simply resides on one end of the theatrical and political equation that the play anxiously and unsuccessfully tries to resolve.

But what happens when the comedy of this early American play is taken as more than simply the sum of its generic conventions? What if we pursued the insights of comic spectatorship that were modeled in the previous chapter by theater patrons like Irving’s philosopher of the pit? In short, what if we read for the joke in Tyler’s agonistic play? Such an approach pushes better captures what symptomatic readings of The Contrast miss: the uneven and volatile pleasures of sociopolitical conflict. Reading comically recasts the agonism of The Contrast’s sociopolitical contest not as its central problem but as its central play, recovering the audience’s pleasure as a crucial conduit for democratic political practice.

It is only by taking such a comic approach that the democratic politics of Tyler’s iconic Yankee Jonathan can be fully appreciated. Played by English immigrant and comic actor Thomas Wignell, Jonathan follows the model of the rustic English under servant but

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native heroes in a form — the staged comedy of manners — that exposes them to deflation.” This mismatch yields “a propaganda drama that entertains - or is it entertainment with a dose of patriotism tossed in?” (Jeffrey H. Richards, Theater Enough: American Culture and the Metaphor of the World Stage, 1607-1789 [Durham: Duke University Press, 1991], 279). Approaching the same problem from a different angle, Bruce McConachie describes Tyler’s project as a playwright as “modifying American republicanism to reconcile it with theatrical entertainment” (McConachie, “American Theatre in Context, from the Beginnings to 1870,” 130).
with a distinctive geopolitical flair. More than his comic vernacular, Jonathan’s sociopolitical particularity finds expression in his populist assertions of equality, which display a self-satisfied entitlement no less equal to that of Colonel Manly, the upstanding revolutionary veteran he serves. Yet Jonathan’s populist energies refuse to conform neatly to the civic virtue that his employer so enthusiastically espouses. As an avowed sympathizes with Shays’s Rebellion, Jonathan makes clear that the political will of the early national popular subject does not necessarily align with the interests of patrician elites. A recalcitrant and potentially even rebellious citizen-subject, Jonathan performs a role that hints at the fragility of the early republic, marking the boundaries of the state’s political negotiation of “the people,” a limit beyond which agonistic contest might dissolve into antagonistic conflict. Under more serious circumstances, Jonathan might very well overthrow the government for which Colonel Manly fought.

But the conditions under which Jonathan takes the stage are decidedly unserious, and this comic play merits closer attention than it has generally received. A stock character who simultaneously embodies regional, national, and political particularity within a circuit of circum-Atlantic exchange, Jonathan stands as a significant nodal point at which the practices of theater and sociopolitical identity converge. While scholars have taken Jonathan as indicative of the latter’s impact upon the former, I want to consider this equation in reverse: in what ways might Jonathan also signal the play of theater in early national democratic identity?

It is not so much what Jonathan does to American theater as what the play of theater

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does to Jonathan. In a well-known comic digression, in which Jonathan recounts his accidental visit to a New York playhouse, *The Contrast* crystallizes a national type by invoking the disorderly play of the audience. This staged performance of comic reportage is an important forerunner of Washington Irving’s humorous theater criticism, but it is told from a gallery god’s point of view, rather than from Irving’s more urbane position in the pit. Jonathan enthusiastically describes how he finds himself swept up into the gallery seating, where he takes in the impressive sight of the audience — “a power of topping folks” — along with the dissonant “squeaking” of fiddles and the “tarnal blaze” of lights.

A spectacle that nearly overwhelms (“my head was near turned”), this theatrical collective does more than simply arrest Jonathan’s attention; it pulls him inexorably into the orbit of its action. As his gallery companions start to exercise their right to rowdiness, stamping and hissing “like so many mad cats” and demanding popular Irish tunes of the orchestra, Jonathan quite naturally falls in line: “Gor, I — I liked the fun, and so I thumpt away, and hiss’d as lustily as the best of ’em.”

Carried away by “the fun,” Jonathan’s pleasure transforms him into a theatrical subject, a willing member of an audience in pursuit of satisfaction. As such, Jonathan hisses “as lustily as the best of ’em,” affirming and vociferously asserting his presence by imitating his neighbors. In turn, these acts of mimetic play engender a clamorous camaraderie; theater’s fun thus generates an uproarious fellow feeling, interpolating and binding its subjects together in a circuit of discordant social pleasure.

The very fun of theater, then, works upon those who, knowingly or unknowingly, enter into its fold. And undoubtedly, part of the fun here is Jonathan’s unwitting and

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guileless enjoyment at an establishment that he otherwise refers to as “the devil’s drawing-room.”\textsuperscript{13} The fact that Tyler’s decidedly antitheatrical Yankee serves as the exemplary model for the agonistic pleasures of theatrical experience is of a piece with the play’s larger concerns over the role of theatricality in a newly formed republic. Scholars have pointed to Jonathan’s innocent enjoyment of the theater in spite of his avowed antitheatrical sentiment as evidence of the play’s contradictory relationship to its own theatricality. But insofar as Jonathan’s theatrical fun appears to undermine his own self-declared antitheatrical position, he embodies not so much the irresolvable tension between the play of theater and the politics of the early republic, but rather the comic sociality that would exuberantly celebrate their incongruous and inseparable conjunction. For even as Jonathan undermines his ostensibly antitheatrical position, his professed fun in the theater’s gallery also operates metatheatrically — it is a socializing gesture towards those very members of the audience whose vociferously exuberant presence would have undoubtedly contributed to the comic play of this scene.

Jonathan’s fun constructs a circuit of mimetic exchange in which the stage Yankee imitates his gallery friends, who respond in kind, reenacting the pleasures of theater’s agonistic play, which proliferate and redound upon the various players within the theatrical arena. This relational play with the audience becomes all the more striking when the reflexive irony of Jonathan’s playhouse romp is taken under consideration. A role designed for the famed actor Thomas Wignell, Tyler’s Jonathan slyly draws attention to the player that plays him, in a speech that details the staged entertainments he enjoyed. Following his somewhat incoherent rehearsal of a performance of “The School for

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 70.
Scandalization,” better known as Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* (1777), Jonathan describes to his giggling interlocutor (the much amused maid, Jenny) an afterpiece involving “a soldier fellow, who talked about his row de dow, dow, and courted a young woman…” A clear reference to John O’Keffe’s popular comic opera, *The Poor Soldier* (1783), in which Wignell played the comic role of Darby to much acclaim, Jonathan zeros in specifically on “one little fellow” he found especially “cute”:

Jenny: Aye! who was he?

Jonathan: Why, he had red hair, and a little round plump face like mine, only not altogether so handsome. His name was —Darby;—that was his baptizing name; his other name I forgot. Oh! it was Wig—Wag—Wag-all, Darby Wag-all, — pray, do you know him?— I should like to take a sling with him, or a drop of cider with a pepper-pod in it, to make it warm and comfortable.

With a winking nod to a knowing audience, this joke thrives on the very theatricality of the theater. Simultaneously embodying the roles of amateur spectator and professional actor, Wignell’s Jonathan activates and even insists upon the perceptual oscillation between the two, underscoring to his audience what Bert O. States has described as the “binocular vision” of theatrical experience. The self-referential quality of this joke doubles down on the phenomenology of the theater while drawing attention to itself as

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14 Ibid., 72.
15 Ibid., 72.
16 Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 8. States’s phenomenological approach to theatrical experience takes theater as a medium that is at once significative and phenomenal. For States, theater serves as a site of disclosure, where the presentation of images produces meaning not simply through their representational value, but also through the affective charge of corporeal presence. Theater thus enables the spectator’s perceptual oscillation between the image and the real object, and is in fact “intentionally devoted to confusing these two orders of signification” (States, 36).
the instrument of a cacophonous and unruly sociality that is also fundamentally comic. At once Jonathan and Wignell, spectator and actor, this stage Yankee performs the role of the comic actor (“Wag-all”) whose business it is to call out to his audience (“pray, do you

Figure 1. William Dunlap’s illustration of the final scene of The Contrast, as it was performed at the John Street Theatre. Wignell is featured front and center in the role of Jonathan, at the ready for a fight. “Contrast: Scene Last,” Print. Courtesy of The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.
know him?”), in a flagrant solicitation for applause that is also a metatheatrical flourish. Playing to the gallery seats through his very enactment of the gallery spectator, Wignell’s performance is an explicitly self-conscious hail that effectively encodes the comic sociality of theater (in which actor-spectators engage in an agonistic system of play with waggish resolve) into the typology of this early national stock character. In this sense, the raucous, vibrant, and above all ludic energies of the theater are foundational to the shaping of a figure so persistently taken as the embodiment of early national democratic ideology. Attending to the comic interplay of Jonathan’s theatrical fun reveals a political dynamism that is far more complex and agile than the pedagogy of virtuous republicanism with which he has so commonly been associated. And to enjoy the joke of Jonathan’s fun is to engage theater’s comic play as it fosters a mode of perceptual enjoyment that both accepts and perpetuates the volatile pleasures of its agonistic audiences.

What is more, to the extent that Jonathan appears to subvert his own antitheatrical position, his figure comes to stand for the ludic pleasures that resist the containment of the antitheatrical paradigm. In other words, the utter theatricality of Jonathan’s antitheatricality becomes not so much a symptom of the play’s ambivalence towards theatrical practice, but instead an instantiation of the comic play that exceeds and even overwhelms the antitheatrical paradigm, enfolding its various disciplinary impulses into the theater’s ludic system. In fact, the primacy of comic reception as both a theatrical and sociopolitical practice is baked into the very ethos of Jonathan, who simply cannot help his own theatrical enjoyment. While the involuntary nature of Jonathan’s pleasure at the theater speaks to the tantalizing powers of theatrical experience to carry its subjects off, it
also stands in marked contrast to the moralizing didacticism and behavioral pedagogy advanced by the regulatory regime of the antitheatrical paradigm. This is a point that Tyler comically illustrates in a later scene between Jonathan and his effete, dandified counterpart, Jessamy. Servant to the fashionable and morally questionable Billy Dimple, Jessamy plays the snobbish cosmopolitan to Jonathan’s naive rustic in a series of comic scenes that capitalize on their contrasting character traits. This foiling actually takes shape in part through a dialogue on theatrical conduct, in which Jessamy patronizingly remonstrates Jonathan for his overly enthusiastic theatrical enjoyment: “I was told by a friend of mine that you laughed outright at the play the other night, when you ought only to have tittered.”

Jessamy’s ensuing exhortations to Jonathan to regulate his laughter — part of a larger project of refinement — ultimately imagine theater’s social play as a highly calibrated skill:

Jessamy: Why you know, Mr. Jonathan, that to dance, a lady to play with her fan, or a gentleman with his cane, and all other natural motions, are regulated by art. My master has composed an immensely pretty gamut, by which any lady, or gentleman, with a few years close application, may learn to laugh as gracefully, as if they were born and bred to it.

Jonathan: Mercy on my soul! A gamut for laughing — just like fa, la, sol?

Jessamy: Yes. It comprises every possible display of jocularity, from an affetuoso smile to a piano titter, or full chorus fortissimo ha, ha, ha! My master employs his leisure-hours in marking out the plays, like a cathedral chanting-book, that the ignorant may know where to laugh; and that pit, box, and gallery, may keep time together, and not have a snigger in one part of the house, a broad grin the other, and a d—d drum look in the third. How delightful to see the audience all smile together, then look on their books, then twist their mouths into an agreeable simper, then altogether shake the house with a general ha, ha, ha! loud as a full chorus of Handel’s, at an Abbey-commemoration.

Jessamy’s absurd vision of the theatrical audience operating as a trained orchestral organ

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17 Tyler, 90.
18 Ibid., 90-1.
imagines the social body as a harmonious choral performance in which the different segments of the audience “keep time together.” Such social unity entails the careful corralling of “the ignorant” into a coordinated action that follows the meter of a musical score. Art merges into collective social performance in this fabulation of a fashionably ordered collective, exerting an aesthetic regulation that would transform the body public into a concert that performs for its own, or at least Jessamy’s, entertainment. Of course, grotesque undertones creep through this fantasy, which involves mouths “twist[ing]” into an unnaturally unified “simper” to complete what Jessamy deems a “delightful” theatrical experience. Far removed from the agonistic pleasures modeled and generated in the accounts of both Tyler’s Jonathan and Irving’s Jonathan Oldstyle, Jessamy’s ideal audience works in synchronous concert towards the expression of a larger aesthetic project, a project that outright disciplines the dialogical tensions and fractious uproar of audience sociality.

To be sure, the politics of Jessamy’s fantastical elaboration of an audience of well-trained laughers is broadly aligned with a Chesterfieldian art of pleasing. In this sense, the utter ridiculousness of Jessamy’s conceit poses in part as a satiric jab at the theatrical mannerisms and fashions of an aristocratic British tradition. And indeed, the comic business that follows, in which Jessamy attempts rather ineffectually to teach Jonathan to laugh according to his master’s gamut, might easily be read as nothing more than a further elaboration of this satiric project. I want to suggest, however, that insofar as

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19 Irving’s choice of pseudonym for his early forays in theater criticism rather fittingly recalls and contributes to the tradition of Yankee Jonathan that flows out of Tyler’s play.
20 Carefully studied by Billy Dimple (the play’s rakish fop and Jessamy’s employer), Chesterfield is a comical touchstone in *The Contrast*, serving as yet another marker of both Dimple’s and Jessamy’s allegiances with a theatricalized form of British elitism. For more on the role of Chesterfield in Tyler’s play, see Evelev.
Jonathan’s failed lesson in laughter counters the elitist affectations of Jessamy’s studied aesthetics, it also signals Jonathan’s comic disjunction from his own antitheatrical politics. As Jessamy rehearses a joke from “Ben Johnson” out of his master’s gamut book, Jonathan proves utterly incapable, even downright unwilling to temper his laughter according to the notations. Instead, Jonathan’s uncontained guffaws burst forth at the joke’s punchline, overwhelmingly exceeding the directives of his would-be instructor: “But, Mr. Jonathan, you must not laugh so. Why you ought to have tittered piano, and you have laughed fortissimo.”

Jonathan’s irrepressible enjoyment ruptures Jessamy’s regulatory impulses, illustrating the very paradox of imagining the passional burst of laughter as an exercise in aesthetic control. Jonathan’s laugh, in other words, can be neither artificially summoned, nor can it be checked. The laughter of comic experience, as Jonathan shows, seizes the body in spite of itself.

Jonathan’s laugh thus resists what Anca Parvulescu has described as the “civilizing of laughter,” a historical process whereby “excessive, passional, uncontrollable laughter” is gradually conditioned into the calm sophistication associated with “the production of the modern smile.” A bodily spasm of pleasure that exuberantly exceeds the disciplinary restraints of what is essentially a social conduct book, Jonathan’s “natural” laugh tramples upon the gestures of distinction through which Jessamy elaborates his social pretensions. At the same time, the hearty “ho ho ho!” that erupts from Jonathan’s mouth overwhelms and overturns the antitheatrical stamp of his character, as it signals his bodily

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21 Tyler, 92.
22 Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 7. Parvulescu’s study of laughter as “a passion” traces the historical emergence of the “normative aesthetics of the smiling face” (7). Central to her account is a resistance to notions that would place the smile and the laugh on the same spectrum. As Parvulescu puts it, we “most often smile when we cannot laugh; and a smile rarely develops into a genuine laugh” (7).
engagement not simply with Jessamy’s scripted joke, but with theatrical experience writ large. In this sense, the very absurdity of the perfectly modulated laugh, as these comic underservants stage it, moves beyond the more narrow satiric argumentation of Tyler’s comedy of manners to illustrate the irrepressible pleasures of agonistic play itself. Laughter, in other words, refuses here to neatly align with the antitheatrical impulses of Jonathan’s republicanism, which would subordinate theater’s play to a serious-minded mode of deliberative political practice, just as laughter here also counters the residual elitist politics that shape Jessamy’s aspirations of class mobility. Jonathan’s laugh registers the popular pleasures that an agonistic model of democratic politics does not so much discipline or contain, as it harnesses and channels into an ongoing system of play. It is these pleasures that are vital to the perpetuation of a democratic political imaginary. Jonathan’s laughter — the laughter of theatrical experience — signals the unruly waywardness of the people’s pleasure, which is never completely bound by the ideological strictures of any political order. And to the extent that Jonathan embodies the popular subject of a democratizing culture, his laugh serves as a crucial reminder of the pleasures that make up a viable and ongoing system of agonistic political play. Jonathan’s laugh, in other words, links theatrical play to the popular vitality of early national democratic politics.

This was far from Jonathan’s last laugh. A comic character whose popularity endured well beyond Tyler’s play and Wignell’s signature performance, Brother Jonathan became a fixture of nineteenth-century theater, appearing again and again in stage comedies on both sides of the Atlantic, even as his figure rapidly proliferated across print culture, in

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23 Tyler, 92.
newspapers, periodicals, and almanacs.\textsuperscript{24} The persistence of Brother Jonathan suggests the lasting imprint of theatrical pleasure on antebellum culture, a comic echo of agonistic sociality that continued to reverberate well into the middle of the century. But the comic sociality that Jonathan’s laughter helped to materialize was not strictly confined to the tradition of the stage Yankee. Comic interplay with active and even rowdy audiences was in fact a boundless resource for comedians specializing in various “lines of business,” from the ever popular stock role of the “Irish type” to blackface minstrel performance. And if Wignell’s Jonathan played to the cosmopolitan audiences of the John Street Theatre, the comic sociality on which his performance turned was by no means exclusive to New York audiences. As theater’s reach expanded in the Jacksonian era, actors toured across increasingly established theatrical circuits that linked transatlantic metropoles,

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\textsuperscript{24} The figure of Jonathan reappeared in a number of stage productions in early decades of the United States. It was not until the 1820s, however, that the stage Yankee became a truly ubiquitous presence on the Anglo-Atlantic stage. Like Wignell’s original stage performances, these later Jonathan acts grew out of a culture of transatlantic imitation and exchange. English comic Charles Mathews, famed for his skills in mimicry and impersonation, played his own version of “Jonathan W. Doubikins” at the English Opera House in London as part of his \textit{Trip to America} (1824). Mathews developed this character and others (including, most notably, a blackface caricature that was an important forerunner of minstrel show performance) following his 1822-23 tour of America. The success of his \textit{Trip to America} and subsequent \textit{Jonathan in England} (1824) led to a number of imitators, including American comic James Hackett, whose early performances drew upon Mathews’ style and source material. Hackett became a star in America, showcasing his Yankee roles in popular vehicles such as \textit{John Bull at Home}; or \textit{Jonathan in England} (1828). Other performers emerged in the 1830s and 1840s, including George Handel “Yankee” Hill and Joshua Silsbee. These star actors and many others performed the Jonathan role in perennial favorites of the antebellum repertoire like \textit{Jonathan in England} and \textit{The Forest Rose} (1825). Of course, Jonathan was also an emblematic figure in antebellum print culture. Political cartoons featuring “Brother Jonathan” date back to the Revolutionary period. As a visual icon, Brother Jonathan was often depicted in contrast to his British counterpart John Bull. As such, Jonathan character typology conjoined a popular vernacular imaginary with a nationalist discourse that gathered visual coherence through Atlantic exchange. Print caricatures became more discernibly generic as they absorbed and reflected the same visual cues that stage Yankees of the 1820s and 1830s displayed in their costuming. Added to this was the plethora of Jonathan-centric comic verse and anecdotes circulating in newspapers and periodicals of the antebellum period. Jonathan was naturally a central feature in many of the jokes collected in comic almanacs and jest books that abounded between the 1830s and the Civil War. For accounts of the historical stage Yankee, see Francis Hodge, \textit{Yankee Theatre: The Image of America on the Stage, 1825-1850} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964); Walter J. Meserve, \textit{An Emerging Entertainment: The Drama of the American People to 1828} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), especially 208-268. For more on the history and iconography of Brother Jonathan in antebellum popular culture, see Winifred Morgan, \textit{An American Icon: Brother Jonathan and American Identity} (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1988).
regional hubs, and frontier towns. With new and sometimes makeshift playhouses springing up across this ever larger network, audiences gathered together in the shared anticipation of theater’s entertainments, with all their attendant social pleasures. Against this backdrop, actors and managers regularly drew upon the dynamics of comic sociality to satisfy the diverse and cacophonous demands of their patrons. In so doing, they invoked a shared horizon of social plenitude in the playhouse that was driven by the unruly play of the people, contributing to a popular democratic imaginary that exceeded the politics of the antitheatrical paradigm.

**Sol Smith, “Our Copiahian,” and the Limits of Agonistic Theater**

One of the insights that a comic reading of *The Contrast* lends is just how responsive the scripts of early national stage comedy were to the conditions of the audience. Understanding the feedback loop between the ludic audience and the comic actor resituates the generic patterns of comic performance in the midst of that dynamic mimetic exchange, linking the political energies of comedy to the immediacy of theatrical moment. Reading for the play highlights the protean social relations of local audiences, as the portable iterations of embodied comic acts mediated the shifting public formations that organized live theatrical assembly. Those local public formations invariably shaped the scope of comic sociality in the space of theater, demarcating what a politics of agonistic play could and could not imagine.

Actor-manager Solomon Franklin Smith’s savvy negotiation of his Southwestern audiences charts these agonistic political horizons. A key player in the development of trans-Appalachian and Southern theater, “Old Sol” was a popular low comic actor
specializing in old male roles. Activating the comic sociality of his local antebellum audiences was central to Smith’s theatrical success. Much like James H. Caldwell, his contemporary and eventual rival for dominance in the English-speaking theater of New Orleans, Smith built a reputation as a clever manager and a public favorite by deftly mediating the diverse pleasures of his largely southern and sometimes rustic audiences. To do so, he often returned to signature roles like Mawworm of *The Hypocrite* (1769) and Darby of *The Poor Soldier* (1783) freely taking part in a transatlantic theater repertoire in which eighteenth-century British comedies still enjoyed heavy circulation. What’s particularly interesting about Smith’s comedy, however, is the way he adapted such roles to speak to the dynamic social relations of his own audiences. This tailoring of the repertoire to fit the audience often made for highly localized performances that were metatheatrical in nature and agonistic in politics. Smith’s adaptations, in other words, generated a comic sociality in the theater that embraced the rowdy play of the audience.

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25 Originally from upstate New York, Sol Smith worked as a strolling player through much of the Southwest before rising to a position of prominence as one of the preeminent theater managers of the southwestern circuit. With his partner, Noah M. Ludlow, Smith opened a theater in St. Louis, established a winter season in Mobile, and competed with James Caldwell for New Orleans audiences. With the opening of the New St. Charles Theater in 1843, Ludlow and Smith firmly established their dominance in New Orleans, a dominance that extended to the entire Southwestern circuit for the next decade. In addition to his successful theatrical career, Smith was also an accomplished writer who regularly contributed humorous stories and anecdotes to the *St. Louis Reveille*. His career illustrates the porous relations between the business of antebellum theater and the development of Southwestern humor. For more on Smith’s role in Southern and Southwestern theater history, see Watson, 48-51; James H. Dorman, Jr., *Theater in the Antebellum South, 1815-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 173-201. Accounts of Ludlow and Smith in histories of Anglophone theater in New Orleans can be found in John S. Kendall, *The Golden Age of New Orleans Theater* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952); Nelle Kroger Smither, *A History of the English Theatre in New Orleans* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967). Useful accounts of Smith’s contributions to St. Louis theater can be found in William G. B. Carson, *The Theatre on the Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932); Carson, *Managers in Distress: The St. Louis Stage, 1840-1844* (St. Louis: St Louis Historical Documents Foundation, 1949). For more on Smith’s career as a literary humorist, see Fritz Oehlschlaeger, ed. *Old Southwestern Humor from the St. Louis Reveille, 1844-1850* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990). And of course, Smith provides an extensive freewheeling firsthand account of his own recollections of the stage in Sol Smith, *Theatrical Management in the West and South for Thirty Years*, ed. Arthur Thomas Tees (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968).
Smith’s recurring adaptations of George Colman the Elder’s *Manager in Distress* (1780), which dated back as early as the 1820s and continued as late as 1860, illustrate this very point. A brief two-scene Prelude that typically opened a theater’s program, Colman’s light farce was regularly produced both in British and American theaters for more than half a century, serving up a playful homage to audiences just settling in for an evening’s amusements. In fact, *Manager in Distress* is steeped in the very business of theater, as it stages the conundrum of a manager unexpectedly faced with the prospect of a full playhouse and no show to put on. Restricted by the whims of the London patent committee and suddenly bereft of all his actors, Colman’s manager has no choice but to cancel the night’s entertainments. This basic premise makes for a light Prelude whose central conceit turns upon the Prompter’s direct address to a live, and presumably expectant, audience. As apologetic overture, this Prompter’s address pulls spectators into the live action of the Prelude, staging an exuberant affirmation of the audience at large. Indeed, the Prompter cannot even complete his opening apology to the audience before an “Irishman, from the Pit” interrupts him: “Oh, upon my soul now, that’s no rason at all — have not we got the playhouse for all night — and mayn’t we be the play actors ourselves?…why should your foolish Manager pay his Actors for talking, when the Publick will pay him for letting them talk themselves?”

According to this persistent pit member’s argument, the play of theater occurs simply by virtue of having a ready and willing public, an inversion of the presumed “order” of theatrical production that celebrates the collective role of the audience. That role, moreover, is intensely dialogical, a fact that is put on full display as other “members” of the audience chime in from the

boxes and the gallery, each equally insistent upon being heard. And because “the most material part of a Playhouse is the Audience,” Colman’s Prelude ends like any good farce: the show goes on.\textsuperscript{27}

Sol Smith would put on various versions of his own \textit{Manager in Distress} over the course of his career, performing on small “backwoods” stages and in venues as opulent as the glittering St. Charles Theatre in New Orleans. The fact that Smith kept returning to \textit{Manage in Distress} as a reliable staple in his theatrical repertoire speaks to the portability and sustained popularity of Colman’s Prelude across the networks of nineteenth-century theatrical performance. On one level, then, the longevity of this farce suggests a broader transatlantic theater culture tilted decidedly towards the participatory pleasures of an audience in open dialogue with itself and the stage. Even more telling are the alterations Smith made to localize this comic Prelude to his Southwestern publics. Over the course of his career, Smith produced different iterations of \textit{Manager in Distress}, adjusting or elaborating its basic conceit to suit the needs of the moment. While no formal script of his earliest adaptations survives, humorous retrospective accounts of this piece point to intriguing divergences from Colman’s original.\textsuperscript{28} For one, Smith seems to have entirely

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\item At the height of his career as an actor, accounts of Smith’s humorous antics both on and offstage abounded in both the regional and national literary press. Smith would later collect and reprint some of these anecdotes in his personal memoirs, including the one penned by H. Kerchival, Esq., editor of the \textit{Louisiana Compiler}, discussed below. See Sol Smith, \textit{The Theatrical Apprenticeship and Anecdotical Recollections of Sol. Smith…Comprising a Sketch of the First Seven Years of His Professional Life; Together with Some Sketches of Adventure in after Years} (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1846), 211-15. A similar account of this version of \textit{Manager in Distress} also appeared in the \textit{St. Louis Reveille} in 1845. Like Kerchival’s account, this sketch is retrospective, dating Smith’s performance to “some time in the year 1825” and locating it in “one of the inland towns of Mississippi,” a town that was “then a village but now a city.” Signed by “Thunder,” the author of this later comic sketch is likely one of Smith’s colleagues, if not Smith himself. Such retrospective accounts are no doubt at least somewhat apocryphal in their nostalgic homages to “Old Sol” in his element; this does not make the comic sociality they recall any less exemplary of the kind of theatrical pleasures that were readily available to an antebellum popular imaginary. In fact, they model the several ways in which theatrical experience was absorbed, transmitted, and proliferated in antebellum print culture. See Thunder [pseud.], “‘Old Sol.’ Once More.” in \textit{Old Southwest Humor from the
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dispensed with Colman’s preliminary scene, in which the Manager is first confronted with the predicament of having a full house and no actors. Without the explanatory framework of this initial scene, Smith’s audience was simply addressed with an apologetic announcement cancelling the evening’s scheduled entertainments. In this stripped down version, Smith pulls Colman’s conceit into a more immediate conflict with the assembled audience, whose expectations are directly engaged and disappointed. Bypassing the fictional worldmaking of the introductory scene, Smith turns Colman’s farce into a practical joke; in so doing, he ratchets up the participatory dynamism of the Prelude, pushing his audience into agonistic play.

At the same time, Smith links the comedy of the audience’s disappointment specifically to the incapacitated actor. According to H. Kerchival’s retrospective account of an 1828 performance that took place in Port Gibson, Mississippi, the apparent cause of the manager’s difficulty arose not, as in Colman’s script, from any issue with patents (a predicament stemming from the distinctly British system of legitimate and illegitimate theater), but from Sol Smith’s “sudden indisposition.” The beloved “Old Sol” was, put simply, “dead drunk!” Smith’s reputed intoxication riffs on a common enough occurrence in antebellum theater, and the trope of the drunken actor speaks to the perceived degeneracy or “lowness” of theatrical performance so prevalent across a culture guided by the antitheatrical paradigm. In this way, Smith exaggerates the problem of theatrical legitimacy that sets Colman’s original Prelude in motion, effectively


30 Ibid., 214
wallowing in the excessive pleasures that mark the theater as an illegitimate profession. In other words, the Prelude’s celebration of the audience’s pleasure is predicated not on the loss of a patent — the theater’s failure to legitimize itself — nor on the manager’s loss of reputation, but on the star actor’s entirely comic descent into bodily baseness. The conditions through which Smith’s farce activates agonistic play within the audience are thus inextricably wrapped up in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the “lower bodily stratum,” whose grotesque pleasures resist the very premise of theater’s claims to cultural legitimacy.\(^\text{31}\)

It should come as no surprise that Old Sol wasn’t drunk, but bent upon staging the audience’s pleasure. For the Port Gibson audience of 1828, this entailed a character act tailored to a regionally specific popular imaginary of Copiah County, the neighboring county situated further inland of the Mississippi River. Yet Smith’s highly localized rendition of the rustic bumpkin also recalled a tradition of agonistic interplay dating back to Wignell’s Jonathan. As the audience registered its disgust with Smith’s nonappearance in the usual fashion (“groans, hisses, shouts, are heard in every direction”), Kerchival describes a most exemplary show of protest from an especially voluble patron:

At this crisis a raw, rough, uncouth, green, *Copiah* looking creature, (which, God knows, is sufficient to prove any man the *nonpareil* of awkwardness,) is seen to rise from one of the most prominent seats in the house, and heard to exclaim in the loudest tone of voice, “Hello! *I say*, stranger! Look a ere! I be d—d if you serve me that ar kind of a trick! I’ve walked all the way from *Copiah State*, and paid my dollar jist to see this *show*, and you musn't come that ar kind of a tale over me! *Mister* Solomon Smith ain’t sick, if he is, I’m d—d, and I’ll have a fight or look at this *show*.\(^\text{32}\)

Determined to be entertained, this “*Copiah* looking creature” stands up for the audience’s

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\(^{32}\) Kerchival, “Old Sol Smith,” 214
right to enjoyment, fusing the delights of theater to the rights of the people under the material guise of the popular subject. With his dollar paid and admittance gained, this theater patron asserts his claim to satisfaction in an arena of agonistic play — a claim that might be equally fulfilled by a fight or a show. And indeed, the effect of this display is the generation of the very satisfaction that the specter of the comic actor’s absence briefly calls into question. Even as this “rough-hewn customer jerks off his coat, rolls up his shirt sleeves, and struts down the aisle, swearing that ‘he’d have a fight or see that show!’” the entire playhouse is “convulsed with laughter.” The local Copiahian, in short, has taken his night of theatrical entertainment into its own hands, and in the process, carries the rest of the audience in tow. It is precisely the collective laughter amidst the general confusion of dissonant demands, roughshod performance, and popular protest that coalesces — in fact convulses — theater patrons and professionals alike into a shared experience of social plenitude and enjoyment.

What is it exactly about this theater patron’s outburst that convulses the whole audience? What kinds of bodily and social pleasure does such laughter register? As Kerchival’s account has it, a great deal of audience laughter stemmed from the culmination of this practical joke, in which the irascible backwoods bumpkin made his inexorable way to the stage: “Our Copiahian continued his way down the aisle, through the musicians, and about the time he mounted the stage, the audience discovered in him, the features of the long-wished-for ‘Old Sol Smith!’” Yet the delight of the audience’s discovery here, which follows longstanding and familiar patterns of comic dissimulation and recognition, is neither unidirectional nor monolithic. As with Wignell’s Jonathan,

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33 Ibid., 214
34 Ibid., 214-215.
Smith’s Copiahian traverses the conventional boundaries between actor and spectator, creating a phenomenological oscillation that effectively foregrounds the centrality of the agonistic audience to the project of antebellum theater. But as with any good joke, the diverse pleasures of its punchline are far more complex than the basic mechanics of its execution. Laughter reverberates in Smith’s theater, but at what is more difficult to say. Spectators might have laughed at the outrage of the country rube, or perhaps more ungenerously at his uncouth appearance and manner. Or perhaps they laughed at the spectacle of the petrified managerial figure (played here by Smith’s brother Lem), looking as though he “was going to be knocked into a cocked-up-hat, or in the middle of next week.”35 Some might have laughed knowingly, recognizing Smith’s disguised figure from the start, while others laughed at the pleasures of sudden disillusionment, the experience of “being had.”36 And still more must have laughed at other members of the audience, as onlookers took in the diverse display of one another’s responses. In this arena, laughter comes from all directions, its targets multiplying as its bodily convulsions circulate across an assembled people. For this reason, the political energies of the laughter Smith calls forth are manifold, encompassing the pleasures of social superiority (laughing down), popular transgression (laughing up), and ironic instability (reflexive laughter) that make up the comic sociality of an agonistic theatrical experience. The laughter of Smith’s theater, in other words, contains multitudes.

My aim here is not to definitively fix audience reception to comic performances long past. Rather, I want to suggest that the laughter of this playhouse was necessarily open,

35 Ibid., 214.
36 Smith’s performance can easily be characterized as a theatrical hoax. For more on the dynamics of the hoax in antebellum culture, see Jonathan Elmer, Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 174-226.
multifarious, and diverse precisely because it sprang from a collective assembly
deliberately oriented towards the pleasures of agonistic play. The laughter that erupted
out of such play was, as Kerchival describes it, convulsive. It was also collective,
contagious, and at times contradictory; it expressed, in short, the cacophonous dissonance
of overlapping and competing modes of reception that nevertheless shared in the common
project of theater’s comic sociality. Indeed, Smith’s version of Manager in Distress plays
upon these very conditions, and to appreciate its comedy requires more than simply
accounting for its basic “trick” upon the audience; it calls for an understanding of both
the volatility and the appeal of the people’s play. Smith understood and capitalized on the
contentious disorder of his audience, and still more, implicitly tied his theater publics to a
democratic political imaginary. For as Smith enacted a most exemplary instance of
theater protest, he so convincingly played the provincial bumpkin as to bind his audience
together in the pleasures of collective self-recognition, which is to say, the unruly and
pleasurable fray of popular rule. This is in fact what makes Smith’s divergence from
Colman’s original Manager so politically significant. The very rudeness of Smith’s
Copiahian, coupled with an outburst threatening enough to flirt with the specter of a riot,
mark a major departure from the polite interjections and largely deliberative protestations
of Colman’s endearing Irishman of the pit. Rather than enact an elevated or idealized
model of audience conduct, Smith’s Copiahian dispenses with the practices of a well-regulated theater, instead tapping into a popular political imaginary that understands the value of contestation as central to the vitality of popular enjoyment. It is essential that the people’s pleasure guides this agonistic political imaginary, for it shapes the horizons of collective belonging and social plenitude evoked in the performance of what Kerchival calls “Our Copiahian.”

What I hope to make present by recalling Smith’s continuous stagings of some version or another of “Our Copiahian” is an early national and later antebellum tradition of theatrical performance that deliberately generated comic sociality out of the disorderly conditions of the theater — a sociality that in turn helped materialize a shared democratic imaginary rooted in an agonistic politics. Such performances resisted the serious-minded pedagogy of the antitheatrical paradigm, which continued to exert its regulatory, implicitly anti-populist logic in ways large and small in nineteenth-century culture. I do not wish

Figure 2. Playbill for Sol Smith’s Benefit Night in Montgomery, Alabama, June 10, 1835. The first performance of the evening is “a prelude in one act,” called “Manager in Trouble, or the Closing Night!” in which Smith plays the role of “Knowing Joe, from the Piney Woods.” Harvard Theatre Collection of playbills and programs concerning male “stars”, TCS 71. Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.
to suggest, however, that the agonistic politics of Smith’s comic sociality (or the comic sociality of antebellum theater at large), posed as some sort of panacea to the seemingly intractable political and social injustices of the period. The popular appeal of “Our Copiahian” was by no means some utopian alternative that might prove commensurate to the task of enacting or even imagining the full sovereignty of “the people.” While Smith’s comic play provided avenues of social pleasure that ordinarily eluded the top-down, unidirectional limitations of the antitheatrical paradigm, it did not guarantee full and equal access to such pleasure for all those assembled in the public space of theater. In fact, much of the pleasure in Smith’s theater was predicated upon the marginalization and exclusion of those players who might threaten to overthrow or otherwise reformulate the sociopolitical conditions of theatrical play itself.

An 1860 script of a much more elaborate version of Smith’s Prelude hints at this underlying reality. Written during his retirement years, this surviving playscript closely mirrors descriptive accounts of a particularly memorable performance given nearly a decade earlier at the magnificent St. Charles Theatre in New Orleans, which Smith managed with his partner Noah M. Ludlow from 1843 until 1853.37 These later iterations

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37 The manuscript for this 1860 version, “A Scene before the Curtain, or, the Manager in Trouble,” is reprinted in the 1968 edition of Smith’s Theatrical Management in the West and the South for Thirty Years. Editor Arthur Thomas Tees connects this manuscript to one of Smith’s final appearances onstage, which was part of a benefit performance for his son, Sol, Jr. (also an accomplished actor) in St. Louis. See Sol Smith, “A Scene before the Curtain; or, the Manager in Trouble” in Theatrical Management in the West and South for Thirty Years, ed. Arthur Thomas Tees (New York Benjamin Blom, 1968), xiii-xx. While this particular script clearly dates to 1860, both Smith and Ludlow’s memoirs recount a highly successful performance of a very similar version of Manager in Distress on opening night of the 1851-52 season at the St. Charles in New Orleans. By Smith’s account, the evening commenced “with a prelude from my pen - no, not from my pen exactly, but from my brain, the actors taking the words from my mouth at two rehearsals” (Theatrical Management, 225). Though Smith didn’t take the trouble to record the script for this New Orleans performance, I take the later 1860 manuscript as a useful approximation of the comic business Smith developed at the St. Charles in 1851. Smith describes the 1851 New Orleans production with particular fondness: “I never knew an audience better pleased than they were with this little piece. It was founded on the idea of Colman’s MANAGER IN DISTRESS, and all, or nearly all of our actors being strangers in New Orleans, the effect was all the greater. Mark Smith personated a Frenchman in the boxes,
no longer featured an outraged Copiahian charging the stage. Instead Smith more closely approximates Colman’s original by scripting multiple comic interjections and protestations from representative members of the audience. Unlike Colman’s Manager, these actor-spectators take on a local flavor, evoking the particular social types that might be found at the St. Charles, including, among others, an indignant “Frenchman,” clamorous “Boys,” a rather correct “Old Citizen,” and an “Irishman” far more willing than Colman’s original to cause a disturbance in the pit. In the 1860 script, the manager receives and reads aloud a belated letter of excuse from Smith as part of an ad hoc attempt to placate his disgruntled audience. Smith’s letter is of course part of the hoax, but in a postscript he suggests that in his absence the manager might apply to his “old friend and neighbor Dr. McDowell,” whose lecture on “the Varieties of the Human Race,” Smith alleges, “will no doubt satisfy the audience better than anything I could do.” This proposal lays the groundwork for further comic dispute, as Dr. McDowell is a scripted role planted in the audience, more than ready to throw his own voice into the fray of general confusion. But as the postscript to Smith’s letter concludes, the doctor is “not a handsome man — but he is a powerful speaker, always pleases his hearers, and always gives the Abolitionists fits.”

The comic fallout of this postscript largely centers on Dr. McDowell’s mild umbrage and made up for the part in such a way that nobody knew him. Mr. Sloan represented an obstreperous Irishman in the pit so well that he was summarily expelled from the house by the police, and it was with some difficulty he was saved from incarceration in the Calaboose! Mr. Perry (our leading actor) played his part so naturally (in the parquet) that he was hissed amid loud cries of “Turn him out!”’ (Smith, Theatrical Management, 225). Ludlow corroborates Smith’s account in his own memoir, including Mr. Sloan’s narrow escape from the “calaboose” — it was indeed an especially memorable performance. See also Noah M. Ludlow, Dramatic Life As I Found It, ed. Richard Moody (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966), 717.

38 Smith, “A Scene before the Curtain; or, the Manager in Trouble,” xviii.

39 Ibid., xviii.
over the “impudence” of Smith’s benign jab at his physical appearance. More significant though are the elements of this note that apparently no one in the theater is ready or willing to dispute — that Dr. McDowell “pleases his hearers” with scientific lectures that are clearly proslavery arguments, designed to enrage abolitionist activists.

In an offhanded aside, Smith here ties the shared pleasures of this assembled audience firmly to a regime of white supremacy, offering up a reflection of his local antebellum public that affirms its racist hegemony even as it dismisses the contestation of any strident political dissenters and obscures the claims of the enslaved. This aside is all the more provocative because it serves too as a reminder of the curiously persistent refusal to acknowledge Black theater patrons as fully participating members in the social play of antebellum theater. In fact, both free and enslaved Blacks made up a significant portion of Southern theater audiences, but as their absence in Smith’s farce indicates, this by no means ensured that their voices were included as a vital part of the theater’s comic sociality. Instead, the only protest to the prospect of McDowell’s racist lectures comes

40 Ibid., xviii.
41 Smith’s McDowell caricatures the scientific racism popularized by such figures as craniologist Samuel George Morton, Egyptologist George R. Gliddon, and slaveholding surgeon and anthropologist Josiah C. Nott. For more on the popular race science of the antebellum period, see Chapter 4.
42 The shifting political energies of this joke are extremely difficult to pin down and must have varied significantly depending on the context of the performance. Because no earlier script survives, it is unclear whether this particular McDowell joke was included in earlier performances such as the one given in 1851 at the St. Charles Theatre. We can only speculate that a New Orleans audience of the 1850s might have received such a line with greater uniformity than a St. Louis audience of 1860. Smith himself was a Unionist during the Civil War and actually voted to abolish slavery in Missouri in 1861. His longtime business partner Noah Ludlow was proslavery but against secession, a point of friction that probably contributed to the famous feud that erupted between them in the late 1850s. If Smith’s personal politics generally ran against the grain of southern ideology, he nevertheless built a highly successful career in the Mississippi valley, a feat that necessarily required modulating the politics of his performances to the proslavery hegemony of white spectators in his audiences.
43 Most theaters operating in the antebellum South relied upon the patronage of both free and enslaved Blacks to support ticket sales, including Smith’s theaters in New Orleans and St. Louis. For more on the composition of southern antebellum audiences and the regulation of Black spectatorship, see Dorman; Watson; Kendall; Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649-1849 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 131-164.
from the reliably exasperated Irishman of the pit, who unceremoniously thunders, “Oh boderation with your lectures! Let us have the play!”\textsuperscript{44} McDowell’s lecturing thus becomes the unacceptable replacement to Smith’s comic act not because the racism of its pedagogy is contested, but because pedagogy is a poor substitute for the play of the people, making for a takedown of the antitheatrical paradigm that only a comedian like Smith could achieve. For in Smith’s theater, the pleasure of the play is paramount.

Yet such moments of comic sociality in Smith’s theater also mark the limits of collective enjoyment in the agonistic playhouse — the way the pleasure of “the people” seems to blithely erase the presence of those players in the audience whose personhood was so systematically denied in the world outside the theater. If Black patrons enjoyed evenings at the St Charles Theatre and elsewhere across the Mississippi valley, they were not enfolded into the collective imaginary that Smith forged in the social play of theatrical audiences. While the antebellum theater may have granted its players access to the pleasures of popular protest, then, it hardly ensured political recognition or inclusion into what was acknowledged to be “the people.” Recognizing this tacit omission in Smith’s farce makes plain how entrenched power structures manifested in the space of theater, registering the differences of race, gender, and class across an audience that modeled a “body politic,” ultimately shaping the parameters of play for theater patrons according to those differences.

Simply put, theatergoers were never presumed equals when they entered a playhouse in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the pleasures of popular contestation necessarily took hold on an uneven playing field. The point is an obvious one, but it

\textsuperscript{44} Smith, “A Scene before the Curtain; or, the Manager in Trouble,” xvii.
nevertheless holds substantial weight for understanding the diminishing utility of agonistic theatrical experience in the antebellum period. As a resource for constructing an imagined horizon of collective enjoyment, the potential of agonistic play proved far more tenuous for players systemically marginalized by cultural hierarchies of race and, as we shall see, gender, precisely because popular enjoyment so often delimited and even overwrote how such players might take their pleasure at the theater.\(^45\) This troubling dynamic has found articulation in the continued and perhaps over-stressed characterization by theater historians of early national and antebellum playhouses as predominantly white male spaces (despite the persistent presence of non-white, non-male bodies even in the earliest theaters of the United States). And it gains still more clarity when the curtailed early history of Black theater culture is considered. Marvin McAllister’s work on Black theater in 1820s New York has shown how William Brown’s efforts to foster integrated audience formations that specifically catered to the enjoyment of Black collectivity were repeatedly subject to violent disruption by both white patrons and white police.\(^46\) The eventual foreclosure of Brown’s theatrical ventures reflects the challenges agonistic audiences posed to spectators, actors, and the occasional manager invested in securing greater agency and inclusion for all patrons and performers. It is perhaps in part for this reason that Brown and his performers, including star actor James Hewlett and an up-and-coming Ira Aldridge, turned more often to the regulatory logic of

\(^{45}\) Interestingly, Smith’s 1860 version of Manager in Distress also fails to script any women speaking up in the audience, though Colman’s original did include two fashionable ladies in the boxes. The reason for these telling omissions is tied to the political differences between a well-regulated theater and an agonistic one, as my study of Anna Cora Mowatt’s career shows.

the antitheatrical paradigm, taking recourse in arguments that celebrated the respectability of Black patrons and the talent of Black actors while admonishing the unruly and riotous disturbances of rowdy white spectators.\textsuperscript{47} Even if such arguments and appeals to the general public could not successfully counteract the systemic racism of New York theater culture, they illustrate the ways in which the antitheatrical paradigm presented a more promising platform upon which to expand access to the pleasures of the theater, even as its logic necessarily disciplined and limited the manner in which those pleasures might be enjoyed.

For white women, the antitheatrical paradigm was the necessary means of laying greater claim to theatrical pleasures, as their presence in the theater substantially increased from the 1840s onwards. Although women regularly attended theater and gladly took part in the agonistic play of audiences throughout the early national period, the institution was often coded as a disreputable, potentially dangerous source of entertainment for any “virtuous,” which is to say, white middle-class, woman. This was of course partly due to the practice of admitting sex workers into the third tier boxes, a custom that never failed to scandalize a substantial proportion of (usually male) theater critics. For women who felt less beholden to such moral qualms, the possible modes of

\textsuperscript{47} According to McAllister, Brown’s aim was to offer Black patrons “a refined evening of fantasy, transgression, and training without fear of physical assault” (164). To that end, Brown “attempted to control his integrated audiences” through various marketing and security measures, including the erection of a partition in the pit “to separate potentially unruly whites from refined blacks” (165). Though Brown catered to both working-class and genteel Black patrons, his advertisements “continually targeted ladies and gentlemen,” discouraging the rowdy practices of white working-class spectators. Despite these efforts, Brown’s theatrical productions were repeatedly subject to riot and mayhem, and his actors were regularly exposed to the threat of injury and occasional arrest. The antitheatrical paradigm underpins the most legendary (and perhaps apocryphal) of Brown’s public protestations of these racist hostilities. Following the 1822 riot at Brown’s American Theatre, when white rioters forcibly stripped the costumes from the players’ backs, Brown allegedly posted a placard that read: “White people do not know how to behave at entertainments designed for ladies and gentlemen of colour.” It was impossible to envision a free and open Black theater culture without enforcing the social discipline of a well-regulated theater. See McAllister, especially 131-183.
theatrical pleasure available to them were generally characterized as acts of fashionable display and social gossip. Although such modes of social play contributed greatly to the cacophony of theatrical experience, “respectable” women were generally precluded from rowdier and more aggressive forms of contestation. These dynamics changed over time, however, as the antebellum period witnessed a gradual stratification of culture that included the self-sorting of audiences into theaters catering specifically to highbrow, lowbrow, and increasingly middlebrow tastes. A key part of this historical shift in theatrical formations was the opening of antebellum theater to middle-class women. This was a process in which managers and performers sought to bring an air of respectability to their theaters, marketing their programs as opportunities for innocent bourgeois leisure in a cultural environment increasingly driven by consumer capitalism. The rise in the 1840s of museum “lecture rooms,” such as those established at Moses Kimball’s Boston Museum and P. T. Barnum’s American Museum in New York, repackaged and marketed theater as educational entertainment with broad appeal to women and families. These marketing strategies, which also included banning alcohol and introducing matinees, were specifically made to attract middle-class women to the theater, and stand as one of the clearest and most successful demonstrations of this significant shift in antebellum theater culture. Indeed, the success of the museum theater model shows just how closely

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48 Hence, for example, the necessity of dismissing all women from the theater at the vital tipping point of the 1817 Charleston Theatre riot over the Caldwell dispute. See chapter one for more on this theatrical disturbance.


50 Richard Butsch refers to this historical development as the “re-gendering of theater,” which he links to a growing consumer culture (66). For more on this midcentury shift in theatrical formations, see McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*; Butsch 66-80.
the marketing of theater to women was tied to the logic of the antitheatrical paradigm, as
the popular energies of theater were effectively “contained” to suit the bourgeois political
sensibilities of middle-class women. By mid-century, theater was increasingly construed
as a well-regulated space of public consumption, even a legitimate site of moral
instruction for a respectable public. In short, the pleasures of popular contestation were
no longer cultivated, such that the increased presence of women in the theater, as Richard
Butsch observes, “coincided with loss of audience autonomy.”

Developments such as these irrevocably altered the social relations of theater
audiences at this historical juncture; they also had significant impact on the politics of
comic sociality as it came to be practiced in the antebellum theater. The meteoric career
of New York elite turned star actress Anna Cora Mowatt indexes these substantial shifts,
in many ways posing as a model for expanding women’s access to a fuller range of
theatrical play while tilting the dynamics of audience interplay in a decidedly more
bourgeois direction. For if the comic play of Wignell’s Jonathan and Smith’s Copiahian
channeled and amplified the agonism of early national and antebellum audiences, the
comic sociality at work in Mowatt’s hugely popular *Fashion* (1845) registered the
contradictory political energies of a theater culture in transition. We should consider
Mowatt’s stage comedy as more than simply a historical touchstone in an old-fashioned
canon of American drama. A satiric comedy of manners that taps into the excesses of
antebellum consumer culture, *Fashion* stands at a crossroads in comic practice in early
American theater, negotiating the tensions between a deeply gendered desire for the
pleasures of social play and the encroaching pedagogy of the antitheatrical paradigm.

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51 Butsch, 80.
Anna Cora Mowatt and the Ends of Comic Sociality

I’ve been foregrounding throughout this chapter a certain kind of comic act that gets staged again and again in early American theater: a star comedian performs the role of the theatrical spectator, revealing the audience to itself as in fact the star of the show. This performance was in many ways literalized in Mowatt’s serendipitous career, which swiftly took shape following the failure of her husband’s financial ventures. The daughter of New York aristocracy (directly descended from one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence), Mowatt circulated in high society before her professional turn, engaging in a social life filled with amateur theatrical performances and occasional outings to the Park Theatre.52 Her earliest professional ventures on the New York stage — first as local playwright of Fashion, or Life in New York (1845) and then later in the very same season, as star actress in the ever-popular Bulwer-Lytton melodrama The Lady of Lyons (1838) — were much anticipated events in the New York press and beyond. Mowatt was a sensation, packing playhouses with audiences eager to cheer a local novice to the heights of international stardom.53 In reviews that ranged from effusive to dismissive, critics unanimously recognized her as a theatrical phenomenon of significant import for a “national” drama. As The Albion’s review of Fashion rather boldly declared,
Mowatt’s play “has decisively established the fact, that the time has arrived when a strictly American Drama can be called into existence. Mrs. Mowatt herself, has but presented us with the ‘Waverly’ of her series.”\textsuperscript{54} Such commentary speaks to the ways in which the local performance of provincial particularity — or “Life in New York” — swiftly came to embody a national discourse of literary and dramatic production, making for fascinating and somewhat bizarre associative leaps like the one above. Likening the cultural significance of Mowatt’s \textit{Fashion} to Scott’s \textit{Waverley}, this reviewer calls forth a shared relation of provinciality within Anglophone culture that transposes the local onto the national, a transposition that largely underpinned contemporaneous critical discourse surrounding Mowatt’s debut as both a playwright and a performer. In a very real way, then, Mowatt’s career follows the trajectory of a by now familiar comic trope: a player from the audience takes the stage as a winning professional. For Mowatt, however, this trajectory was necessarily conditioned by gendered standards for public conduct in antebellum culture, and her ultimate success entailed a great deal of careful calibration to maintain her status as a respectable woman in New York society.\textsuperscript{55} With \textit{Fashion}, she

\textsuperscript{54} “The Drama: Park Theatre. — The New Comedy.” \textit{The Albion, A Journal of News, Politics and Literature}, March 29, 1845. Other reviews were more critical in their appraisals of the play, but still framed their critiques within the framework of a national or “American” drama. \textit{Arthur’s Ladies’ Magazine}, for example, considered \textit{Fashion} unequal to “many of the sterling old English comedies,” but nevertheless approved of it “because it is American, and, inspires a love of country” (“Editor’s Table,” \textit{Arthur’s Ladies’ Magazine of Elegant Literature and the Fine Arts}, June 1845, 287). \textit{The Democratic Review} took a more caustic tone, declaring the “so-called comedy of “Fashion” has “too little humor in it for comedy, and too little force for satire.” Even so, this negative review acknowledged the significance of the play’s success: “its performance proved one thing incontestably, that a good audience can be easily called together to witness an American play” (“Miscellany.” \textit{The United States Magazine, and Democratic Review}, April 1845).

\textsuperscript{55} Mowatt’s path to the stage, as she recounts it in her autobiography, charts this calibration. Immersed in the logic of the antitheatrical paradigm herself, Mowatt initially viewed an acting career with suspicion. Her first performances were public readings, a genre deemed more appropriate for “respectable” ladies. Tellingly, she also chose Boston — a city with an even stronger antitheatrical cultural logic than her own New York — to make her debut. Over the course of her New York run of performances, she received an offer to perform for the Park: “I well remember the indignant reply I gave the gentleman who communicated to me this offer. The recollection of that answer has often rendered me forbearing towards those who I have since heard violently denounce the stage, and who were as ignorant as I was at the period
accomplished this not by directly embracing the agonism of early American theater, but by recasting the pleasure of the audience, transforming its volatile cacophony into a performance of refined complacency.

Mowatt was herself no stranger to rowdy and disruptive audiences. But the luxurious setting of her enormously popular comedy of manners, with its sumptuous drawing room, elaborate conservatory, and largely well-heeled players hardly acknowledges, much less encourages, the more disruptive and boisterous energies of the antebellum playhouse. Instead, *Fashion* envisions an audience that is itself fashionable, which is to say, largely invested in social performances of bourgeois respectability. Indeed, insofar as *Fashion* takes the glittery luster of New York’s *nouveau riche* as its central object of comedy, it necessarily focuses on antebellum gestures of class distinction, from the ill-informed and poorly executed Francophilia of Mrs. Tiffany, to the exorbitant frippery of her daughter, Seraphina, to the equally vacuous verses of drawing-room literati, as ostentatiously declaimed by one T. Tennyson Twinkle. Even as *Fashion* pokes fun at pretentious New Yorkers — and in many ways presents a comic elaboration upon the effete posturings that Royall Tyler had first mocked through characters like Billy Dimple and his servant Jessamy — it addresses its audience as members of the very same social network. As Prudence, the gossipy maiden aunt of the

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56 On one memorable occasion shortly after her New York debut, Mowatt single-handedly quelled an audience protest. During a Philadelphia performance of *The Lady of Lyons*, the audience turned on her romantic lead, who was visibly inebriated onstage. Seeing that “the pit had risen in a body with evident intention of violence,” Mowatt “rapidly entreated their forbearance,” in an address so convincing that “applause took the place of hisses” (Mowatt Ritchie, *Autobiography*, 230).

play, puts it at the closing Epilogue, “I told you *Fashion* would the fashion be!”

Mowatt’s ironic enfolding of her own play into the very logic of fashion certainly makes for some clever word play. It also casts the audience as the ultimate arbiter of fashion. In this sense, to attend the play *Fashion* is to be constituted as a fashionable spectator, a member of an audience that is far more committed to a repertoire of social refinement than it is to the agonistic satisfaction of would-be patrons like “Our Copiahian.”

This does not mean, however, that *Fashion*’s fashionable theater has evacuated the dynamics of comic sociality — far from it. Mowatt’s epilogue, after all, not only wryly declares *Fashion* as all the fashion; it does so through the very same comic techniques of audience interplay by which Smith’s Copiahian so felicitously stormed the stage. With a closing speech addressed directly to the audience, Gertrude, the play’s heroine, calls only for plaudits that are justly due, an appeal that does more than simply show due deference to an ostensibly discerning public:

Ger: *(to audience)* But, ere we close the scene, a word with you, —  
We charge you answer, — Is this picture true?  
Some little mercy to our efforts show,  
Then let the world your honest verdict know.  
Here let it see portrayed its ruling passion,  
And learn to prize at its just value — *Fashion*.  

Gertrude’s final rhetorical flourish closes this comedy with a traditional plea for applause while also constructing a call and response that is mutually constitutive. The audience’s applause here confirms the play’s “just value,” or the aptness of its satiric “picture” of antebellum New York society. In the process, this collective signal of approval crystallizes those assembled together in the theatrical space under the “ruling passion” of

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59 Ibid., 62.
fashionable social performance. To “prize” *Fashion* is also to participate in the world of fashion. Importantly, this ironic circuitry of self-affirmation thrives upon the dialogical play between actor and audience, which is to say, the comic sociality that circulates across actors and spectators alike, confusing the distinction of those roles across the whole playhouse. The result is a play that, as Edgar Allan Poe so deftly put it, satirizes “fashion as fashion.”

Poe’s extended review of the initial 1845 production of *Fashion* at the Park Theatre is characteristically exacting in its criticism, but this economical summary of what he understood to be the play’s essential cleverness nevertheless demonstrates the usual astuteness with which he distilled the mechanics of antebellum popular culture. For Poe, Mowatt’s comedy of manners is a satire that is consummately reflexive, a satire that undermines its own satirical argument in an interpellative gesture that, instead of disciplining the audience it hails, delightedly elaborates the social relations that make up the chief source of its ridicule. Poe is surely right to put his finger on the ironic reflexivity baked into Mowatt’s critique of fashion. Indeed, Karen Halttunen has influentially argued that this reflexive, “lightly satirical attitude” signaled “a new acceptance of the theatricality of social relationships” in middle-class culture more broadly.

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61 In an initial review based on an advance copy of the script, Poe largely panned Mowatt’s play, using it as a platform from which to critique what he viewed as the generally hackneyed unoriginality of American drama at large. A followup review after the play’s debut was, by Poe’s acerbic standards, far kinder. He admitted to feeling so deeply interested in the play’s public reception that he went “to see it every night since its first production; making careful note of its merits and defects as they were more and more distinctly developed in the gradually perfected representation of the play.” See Poe’s “The Theatre: The New Comedy by Mrs. Mowatt.” *Broadway Journal*, March 29, 1845; “Prospects of the Drama — Mrs. Mowatt’s Comedy.” *Broadway Journal*, April 5, 1845.

Haltunnen, *Fashion’s* comic reflexivity indexes the decline of a “sentimental culture” that was deeply anxious of dissimulation and hypocrisy in antebellum social practices — a culture, in other words, that was guided by the logic of the antitheatrical paradigm. But if Mowatt’s comedy of manners diffuses the anxieties of a serious-minded “sentimental culture,” as Haltunnen formulates it, it does so by marshaling the comic sociality of the antebellum theater.

What are the consequence of applying this comic sociality to an ultimately fashionable endeavor? What happens to the popular energies of the audience when the social pleasures of comic play are so utterly bourgeois? Resituating Mowatt’s play within a theatrical tradition of comic sociality complicates cultural studies of theatricality in the antebellum period. *Fashion* does not so much herald the emergence of a newly theatrical cultural order as it marks the political transformation of comic sociality in antebellum theater culture. I want to suggest here that *Fashion* invites a mode of comic reception that circulates across the space of theater and in many ways recalls the ironic attitude of Irving’s philosopher of the pit. But while figures like Irving’s philosopher, Wignell’s Jonathan, and Smith’s Copiahian explicitly cultivate comic sociality as the means through which to materialize and sustain an agonistic political imaginary of democratic collectivity, the underlying political dynamics of *Fashion* fail to construe the assembled audience as diverse players in the midst of an ongoing social contest. Rather, the comic sociality of Mowatt’s theater envisions an audience more or less uniformly bound together by the practices and promises of antebellum consumer culture. Mowatt’s version of theatrical assembly, in other words, takes satisfaction not from the fractious dissonance of audience rule, but from the uncertain promise of bourgeois cultural performance.
In this way, Mowatt’s *Fashion* offers a heightened flashpoint in the cultural transformation of audience behavior over the course of the nineteenth century. By the time of its much anticipated debut in 1845, the Park Theatre had largely solidified its position as the “elite” theater in a city that had seen the establishment of many new theaters in the past thirty odd years. While the Park had in earlier times competed with other New York theaters like Chatham’s or the Bowery with programs designed to appeal to socioeconomically diverse audiences, such diversity had faded by the 1840s, as audiences stratified and individual theaters increasingly catered to the tastes of a specific class of the city’s population. With its ironizing nod to high society, *Fashion* encapsulates this very trend, reaffirming the Park’s reputation for attracting the city’s fashionable elite. The fact that *Fashion* calls forth an audience aspiring to fashionable status, less prone to the contentious displays of agonistic heterogeneity that characterized theater in earlier decades, signals Mowatt’s savvy capitalization on the gradual shifts of nineteenth-century theatrical formations. Magnifying bourgeois performance in the playhouse, *Fashion* galvanizes the cultural trends that secured theater for women like Mowatt. Importantly, Mowatt’s invocation of a bourgeois audience also entails the uptake of the antitheatrical paradigm, since the very practices of such an audience promise the harmonious elegance of a well-regulated theater. And in fact, this embrace of

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63 To be sure, the Park had long been viewed as the “elite” or most fashionable of theaters in New York, a status it held since the early national period. This reputation certainly shaped the cultural authority of the Park’s management, which manifested in various ways, including, for example, in its competitive suppression of William Brown’s “minor” African Grove Theatre. However, we should be wary of applying twenty-first century assumptions about the nature of “elite” and “working-class” forms of entertainment to the early national and antebellum periods. Such class-based categorizations can obscure the more fluid and protean nature of cultural consumption in the early nineteenth century. As Lawrence Levine and others have demonstrated, Shakespeare was by no means “high” culture, and New York patrician elites would have also enjoyed equestrian and other “lower” entertainments at the Park. For more on the history of theatrical entertainments and its intersections with status and class, see Levine; McConachie; Grimsted; Butsch; Lott. For more on the history of the Park’s rivalry with the African Grove Theatre, see McAllister.
the antitheatrical paradigm at a structural level is borne out more explicitly in the play itself, as the very plot of *Fashion* — in which the antics of a social parvenue are disciplined by an apparently more forthright farmer from upstate — pays lip service to the by now residual politics of virtuous republicanism. Mowatt thus endows the calcified figure of the country bumpkin with the moral authority and disciplinary power of “official” democratic culture; we have traveled a long way from the bodily spasms of Jonathan’s laughter.

One thing that becomes clear from all this is the political pliancy of comic sociality as it came to be deployed in the space of antebellum theater. Once enacted through the rowdy call and response of Wignell’s Jonathan and his fellow gallery gods, comic sociality was in Mowatt’s theater disentangled from any notion of audience rule as a form of ongoing social contest. Instead, comic sociality came to in many ways tether the experience of popular enjoyment to a polished cultural order maintained by the logic of the antitheatrical paradigm. If this reformulated version of bourgeois comic sociality feels like a relapse into a thinly-veiled conservatism of popular containment, it should be remembered that it was precisely such conservative gestures that secured Mowatt’s far from assured position as both a professional player and a respectable woman in the eyes of the public.\footnote{As Faye E. Dudden has observed, women who took the stage in the nineteenth century emblazoned the risks of women appearing in public more generally. To be public is to be present “in the body,” which “carries with it the inherent risk of being taken as a sexual object against one’s will — in sexist deprecation, in sexual harassment, in physical assault” (Faye E. Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790-1870* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994], 3). According to Alison Piepmeier, Mowatt negotiated those bodily risks through a strategic manipulation of sentimental and sensational discourses. By “veil[ing] herself in sentimentalism,” Mowatt managed to explore “sensational behaviors while still maintaining her respectable middle-class status” (Alison Piepmeier, *Out in Public: Configurations of Women’s Bodies in Nineteenth-Century America* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004], 16-17). For an extended historical study of nineteenth-century actresses negotiating the gendered parameters of public performance, see also Sara E. Lampert, *Starring Women: Celebrity,*}
working in an arena commonly associated with prostitution than by writing a play that aggressively satirizes the conduct of antebellum women? Mowatt’s recourse to the regulatory pedagogy of the antitheatrical paradigm, which found articulation in both her plays and her personal autobiography, surely facilitated her professional success in a culture that still largely viewed working women, and especially those working in public, with suspicion. In this sense, Mowatt’s career provides one more demonstration of how the antitheatrical paradigm might be applied to essentially liberalizing ends, offering an incremental approach to cultural change. That the politics of agonistic play did not appear to present any immediate or comparable usefulness to Mowatt’s theatrical project is telling of the more limited purchase of its application.

But this does not make *Fashion* an ideologically conservative dud. On the contrary,

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65 Mowatt was necessarily sensitive to the public perception of women who took the stage. As she put it, “the too often contumulously uttered name of ‘actress’” characterized a public relation in which professional women “nightly practise forgetfulness of self, and of their private sorrows, to earn their bread by delighting a public who misjudges them” (Mowatt Ritchie, *Autobiography* 215). Her negotiation of those gendered dynamics in her own highly successful career sought to ameliorate those perceptions through essentially conservative means. In her *Autobiography*, Mowatt argued to reform “the lingering abuses in our theatres,” including “the demoralizing effect of allowing any portion of the theatre to be set aside for the reception of a class who do not come to witness the play” (Mowatt Ritchie, *Autobiography* 445). This carefully elliptical argument against allowing sex workers into antebellum theaters works to decouple the culturally entrenched association of women and prostitution in the theatrical space. Mowatt thus advances women’s claims to theatrical play and its pleasures by promoting a version of a well-regulated theater guided by the antitheatrical paradigm. Importantly, this effort to broaden women’s access to the theater also seeks to ban certain women from the theater. In fact, this approach of regulated liberalization for women in the theater (and in public more generally) was baked into nineteenth-century sentimental culture more broadly. In her 1873 *Work: A Story of Experience*, Louisa May Alcott would offer up a fictionalized version of this very same negotiation between the greater independence that women’s labor promised and the perceived threats that it posed to the social status and moral virtue of middle-class women. Her sentimental but intrepid heroine runs through what is essentially a checklist of the various professions open to women: servant, governess, seamstress, and perhaps the most dangerous of all, actress. Alcott’s delicate treatment of this most public of all her heroine’s professions makes clear that the theater is by no means a den of sin, though she does not reject its potentially corrupting influence out of hand. While she portrays respectable young women making a fair living out of theatrical performance, Alcott checks her own heroine’s theatrical ambitions, cutting the pleasure of her successful benefit performance short with a rather prophetically arranged stage accident. Public women like Mowatt and Alcott were careful to couch the professional advancement of women within a discursive framework that also kept them in check. In this sense, their liberalizing gender politics continued the regulatory logic of the antitheatrical paradigm. See Louisa May Alcott, *Work: A Story of Experience* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1873), especially 34-55.
so much of the liveliness of Mowatt’s play springs from the contradictions that lie at the
center of its official pedagogy. The plot, for example, doesn’t make sense, and in ways
that exceed the incoherent twists so common in comedies and melodramas of the period.
As the excessively fashionable Mrs. Tiffany and her eligible daughter Seraphina fall prey
to a French conman posing as a Count, the level-headed and more stylistically demure
heroine of the play, Gertrude, attempts to expose the imposter suitor through a
convoluted scheme that involves her impersonation of a French maid on the night of the
Tiffany’s grand ball. Meanwhile, Adam Trueman, an old-fashioned gentleman friend
visiting from the country, spends most of the play wandering about the Tiffany’s house
castigating the excesses of fashion. When Gertrude’s stratagems to expose the faux-
Count end in disastrous failure, she still manages to save her virtuous reputation by way
of a well-placed letter of explanation. Trueman, who has by now become the moral and
financial arbiter over all, immediately forgives Gertrude, reveals his true status as her
grandfather, and simultaneously furnishes her with both an inheritance and a husband.
The Tiffany’s are then summarily banished to the morally purifying countryside.

On the surface, this all makes for a fairly traditional social comedy that reliably
executes the paternalistic moralizing commonly associated with the antitheatrical
paradigm. Indeed, Trueman is the veritable mouthpiece of this cultural logic, spewing
condemnation on virtually everyone he encounters, from the “Jezebel” Mrs. Tiffany
down to the racist portrait of her minstrelized dandy servant.66 For Gertrude, Trueman
modulates his admonishments into a somewhat gentler patriarchal bark: “Never tell a lie!

66 For more on Mowatt’s engagement with the trope of the Black dandy, see Monica L. Miller, Slaves
to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diaspora Identity (Durham: Duke University Press,
2009), 77-136.
Let your face be the looking-glass of your soul — your heart its clock — while your tongue rings the hours!”

But it is precisely the ironic instability of Trueman’s own claims to this moral high ground of virtuous republican simplicity that make the plot of Fashion run. For all his waxing poetic on honest dealings, “true independence,” and the superiority of “Nature’s stamp” to fashionable artifice, Trueman is in fact incapable of holding fast to his declared ideological position. This ideological instability comes to the foreground in the play’s denouement, when Trueman reveals his previously concealed relation to Gertrude. His extended speech recounts the history of his daughter’s unhappy marriage to a mercenary, and his subsequent determination (and willingness to lie) to shield his granddaughter from such a fate:

I swore that my unlucky wealth should never curse [the child], as it had cursed its mother! It was all I had to love — but I sent it away — and the neighbors thought it was dead. The girl was brought up tenderly but humbly by my wife’s relatives in Geneva. I had her taught true independence — she had hands — capacities — and should use them! Money should never buy her a husband!

Trueman’s revelation is striking for a number of reasons, not least of which is the extraordinary conjunction of paternalistic control and willful abandonment of his granddaughter. In his opaque formulation of “had her taught,” the ostensible moral arbiter of this play signals both the commanding reach and impersonal remove of his satellite pedagogy, implicitly undermining any notion of Gertrude’s supposed “true independence.” Trueman’s peculiar strategy for Gertrude’s upbringing is problematic enough on its own terms — taken at face value, Gertrude’s temporary loss of birthright and banishment to Geneva seems an unnecessarily harsh mode of instruction. But even if

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68 Ibid., 54, 61.
69 Ibid., 54.
a certain latitude is allowed for the convenient comic trope of the long-lost family relation with a fortune to reveal, it hardly resolves the hypocrisy of a man who is more than happy condemning the artifice and “stratagems” of women while coolly carrying out his own personal masquerade. The paradox of Trueman’s role is of course of a piece with the larger ironizing work of the play, which serves up a satiric corrective of fashion that cannot fully stand apart from fashion’s orbit. The fundamentally compromised position of the play’s patriarch is especially significant because it invites the women in Mowatt’s play to present alternative, distinctly gendered social performances that circumvent the regulatory order he enforces. In the process, Fashion introduces an undercurrent that recognizes the potential of women’s comic sociality, registering a desire for its possibilities even as it toes the official line of the antitheatrical paradigm.

This undercurrent is at work in the major comic alazon of the play, Mrs. Tiffany. As the locus of the play’s display of fashionable folly, the role of Mrs. Tiffany requires a skilled comedian to perform the foolery of poorly executed French and the pseudo-sophisticated gestures of drawing-room sociality. Played well, Mrs. Tiffany is nothing if not ridiculous. But while the economy of Fashion seems to rely upon the inevitability of Mrs. Tiffany’s comic fall, Mowatt nevertheless hints at a history of astute social play behind this upwardly mobile character. Prudence, Mrs. Tiffany’s gossipy unmarried sister, holds the key to this backstory. In one of her many moments of indiscretion, Prudence alludes to their former life “making up flashy hats and caps” in Canal Street. Recalling her sister’s courtship with Mr. Tiffany, the merchant who supplied them with silks and ribbons, Prudence reminds the now greatly elevated Mrs. Tiffany of a time when she “always put on the finest bonnet in our shop to go to his, — and when you staid
so long smiling and chattering with him, I always told you that something would grow out of it — and didn’t it?”

Prudence’s wagging tongue lets slip the working class origins that Mrs. Tiffany would just as soon forget, revealing a more complicated portrait of an ambitious working woman than the frivolity of her drawing-room performances would otherwise suggest. Mowatt’s added ironic twist to the social posturing of a woman determined to lead the city’s “ee-light” as she puts it, certainly reflects the socio-economic flux of antebellum New York. It also registers what Wendy Gamber has called “the female economy” — a system of sexually divided labor that organized the custom fashion trades and significantly shaped women’s agency and mobility in an urban environment. Circulating between her own shop and Mr. Tiffany’s, Mrs. Tiffany traffics in more than silks and ribbons; she engages in a skillful social performance (made complete by an assist from the most attractive bonnet at hand) that deftly manages the

70 Ibid., 5.
71 Ibid., 3.
72 Wendy Gamber, The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). Gamber’s history of the millinery and dressmaking trades explores the agency and entrepreneurial independence of women working in the custom trades of the early fashion industry, complicating traditional narratives surrounding women’s labor in the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century cultural discourse often depicted women working in the fashion industry as victims of economic misfortune, vulnerable to exploitation. Fanny Fern, for example, dwelled extensively on the plight of working women in her columns, from the insults regularly flung at shop girls to the poor conditions for women manufacturing hoop-skirts. Meanwhile, the trope of the “distressed gentlewoman” reduced to seamstressing pervaded literary and cultural productions of the period. Yet as Gamber argues, the fashion industry also involved highly skilled custom trades that offered women “a variety of possibilities that included a good deal of misery and exploitation but also the prospect of female independence” (7). As a milliner, Mrs. Tiffany would have occupied one of the most prestigious and well-paid positions in the industry, for the makers of hats and bonnets were “designers as well as craftswomen, artists as well as artisans” (Gamber 12). Mrs. Tiffany’s antics may work to obscure the extent of her artisanal skills and business acumen, but her history indicates Mowatt’s marked refusal to simply erase the complex relations of women’s skilled labor for the purposes of her stage comedy. On the history of women’s labor in nineteenth-century New York, see also Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987). For contemporaneous literary and critical engagements on women’s labor, see Fern’s writings, in particular “Tyrants of the Shop,” New York Ledger, June 1, 1867 and “The Working-Girls of New York” in Folly as It Flies, (New York: Carleton, 1868), 219-229. See also Louisa May Alcott’s Work: A Story of Experience.
currency of her own person.\textsuperscript{73} Her artful play yields an exponential profit both in terms of financial gain and social status, making for a tale of social mobility as theatrical as it is prototypically “American.”

Mrs. Tiffany’s former life on the other side of the antebellum fashion industry in many ways works to cement the comedy of her upstart vulgarity, but her history nevertheless taps into an economy in which women’s self-determination might be negotiated out of the transactional play of social performance. Indeed, it’s significant that Mowatt’s comedy cannot help dwelling on the pleasures of Mrs. Tiffany’s unlikely (if only short-lived) triumphant ascendency, pleasures that manifest in the very material delights of her gilded drawing-room and sumptuous clothing. Those pleasures, moreover, register a gendered longing for a social field in which women’s labor might actually enable their play, play that is otherwise hemmed in by the pedagogy of the antitheatrical paradigm. That Fashion ultimately checks the possibilities Mrs. Tiffany’s figure invites does not diminish the play’s underlying acknowledgment of women’s claims to enjoyment.

Hence, for example, the heroine Gertrude’s opening bow to the comic sociality of the theater. When she first takes the stage in Act II, Gertrude is simply dressed, posing as a virtuous counterpoint to the garish Mrs. Tiffany. But if Gertrude plays the eiron to Mrs. Tiffany’s alazon, the manner of her address suggests that this attractively demure music teacher shares far more in common with her employer than her clothing might indicate.

\textsuperscript{73} As a peddler of fashion who dons her own wares for social gain, Mrs. Tiffany exposes the deeply rooted connections between fashionable costume, social performance, and the rise of the professional theater. For an early modern study of professional theater as an outgrowth of the clothing trade, see Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, \textit{Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory}, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 175-206.
Calmly cutting flowers in Mrs. Tiffany’s conservatory, Gertrude plays out a different version of the same social performance of courtship that secured Mrs. Tiffany her fashionable status. Though her tactics are perhaps different, Gertrude proves herself no less adept at negotiating her position, as her would-be suitor inquires whether she does not regret leaving her home in Geneva to work in “this frigid atmosphere of fashion.” Gertrude’s response is ebullient in its irony: “Do you think so? Can you suppose that I could possibly prefer a ramble in the woods to a promenade in Broadway? A wreath of scented wild flowers to a bouquet of these sickly exotics? The odor of new-mown hay to the heated air of this crowded conservatory?…But I see you think me totally destitute of taste?”74 The playfulness of Gertrude’s response here generates an irony that cuts both ways. On one level, her string of rhetorical questions reassures her rather cardboard suitor that though she may be called “destitute of taste” by the likes of Mrs. Tiffany, her values transcend the affectations of the fashionable society in which she moves. At the same time, however, this reliably boring adherence to an ideology of republican sincerity is complicated by the very same irony through which she delivers it. Gliding from a Broadway promenade to the “sickly exotics” she carries in hand to the oppressive air of “this crowded conservatory,” Gertrude’s deictic language indexes and implicitly addresses the fashionable New York audience to which she also performs, activating the comic sociality of the antebellum theater. As much winking homage as it is satiric critique, Gertrude’s address caters to New York fashion even when she ostensibly disavows it, cultivating an ironic mode of social pleasure in the space of theater that distantly echoes Irving’s philosopher of the pit. For Gertrude, however, the uptake of

74 Mowatt Ritchie, *Fashion* 20.
comic sociality is tied not so much to the dynamics of an agonistic theater, but to a fashionable one, as she elaborates upon a desire for greater agency in a social world in which women’s options are limited:

*Ger.* I have my *mania*, — as some wise person declares that all men have, — and mine is a love of independence! In Geneva, my wants were supplied by two kind old maiden ladies, upon whom I know not that I have any claim. I had abilities, and desired to use them. I came here at my own request; for here I am no longer *dependent!* *Voila tout*, as Mrs. Tiffany would say.75

Gertrude’s justification for orbiting the morally suspect theatrics of fashionable society is significantly grounded in her desire — or “*mania,*” as she calls it — for socioeconomic autonomy. In Mowatt’s world, such autonomy requires a certain investment in the play and display of fashion, a system of social performance from which women might negotiate their standing, and still more, take their pleasure. In a curious way, then, Gertrude’s flippant “*Voila tout*” signals her alignment with Mrs. Tiffany just as much as it cheerfully mocks her French affectations. By extension, her deliberate homage to the

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75 Ibid., 20.
pleasures of comic sociality functions as the sign of her “independence.” In a subtle twist, Mowatt crafts here a version of comic play that recognizes the interests, and most importantly, the pleasure of women aspiring to the security of bourgeois status — the very women to which the antebellum theater increasingly catered.

To be sure, Mowatt’s nod to the possible horizons of women’s enjoyment is tacit at best. Though Gertrude’s occasional wit gestures towards a comic social system invested in the free play of women, such flourishes in the play’s dialogue largely fly under the radar of the antitheatrical paradigm that propels the plot onwards. Just how independent Gertrude’s comic play is also remains an open question, but the fact that she manages to finagle a disciplinary pass from Trueman’s patriarchal enforcement of an essentially antitheatrical regime speaks to the narrow tactical success of her endeavors.

Figure 3. “Mrs. Mowatt as Beatrice,” Engraved from a daguerreotype by Paine of Islington. Steel engraving (London and New York: John Tallis, 1851). Courtesy of the Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.
Fashion thus stands at a transitional moment in both theater and comic practice in nineteenth-century America. Because its bourgeois comic sociality largely adheres to the antitheatrical paradigm deeply entrenched in antebellum culture, the play can be seen to mark the foreclosure of the political horizons of an earlier tradition of agonistic comic play in the theater. Even so, Mowatt injects a gendered desire into the comic sociality of Fashion, a desire for the pleasures of play that the antitheatrical paradigm never quite manages to neutralize, much less fulfill.

These momentary flashes of a comic pleasure that is largely contained are perhaps no more than an echo, a reminder of a horizon of enjoyment that was increasingly difficult to imagine, and which seemed equally incompatible with the liberalizing efforts of public women like Mowatt herself, who more often relied upon the arguments of the antitheatrical paradigm to broaden women’s access to the theater. The longing for a theatrical pleasure not yet realized was very real nonetheless. Certainly for Mowatt, the comic sociality of Fashion was not enough. A star lead famous for roles ranging from Juliet to Lady Teazle, Mowatt was often compelled to play her very own Gertrude, a role she looked down upon as little more than a “walking-lady character.” As she complained in her Autobiography some years later, “Could I have foreseen, at the time the play was written, that I should be induced to enter the profession, I would have been careful to create a character which I could imbody with pleasure.”76 Retrospective regrets such as this one illustrate the sea change in antebellum theatrical formations that Mowatt’s

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76 Mowatt Ritchie, Autobiography, 250. It’s of course notable that Mowatt did not feel compelled to write a more fulfilling role to suit her taste and talents in the wake of Fashion’s success. This was likely due in part to the economics of antebellum theater, which were most lucrative for managers and star actors and largely unprofitable for playwrights. Robert Montgomery Bird, who wrote highly successful vehicles for star actor Edwin Forrest, famously turned to novel writing for this very reason.
professional career traversed, making palpable the opportunities for pleasure that were sublated to the ascendency of a newly legitimized and stratified bourgeois theater. That wish to have done things differently, to have laid claim to social pleasures that were otherwise slipping away, and that were for so many never fully enjoyed, would continue to reverberate in antebellum popular culture, as the practices that assembled people in comic sociality increasingly advanced the bourgeois vistas of the antitheatrical paradigm.
Chapter Three

Minstrelsy and the Virtuoso

At the close of my second chapter, I emphasized the poignancy of Anna Cora Mowatt’s desire for unfulfilled pleasures of the stage, the wish that she had written a part for herself in her social comedy *Fashion* that would have been more fun to play. Her mixture of exasperation and regret points to the gap between the sociopolitical promise of comic pleasure in the antebellum playhouse and the conventions of stage comedy — the familiar patterns and practices of a comedic repertoire — that guided theatrical productions of public fun. Mowatt’s local adaptation of the comedy of manners, in other words, failed to make sufficient space for her own abilities (comic and otherwise) as a performer. In this sense, her frustrations index how her formal experimentation as a comedic playwright could not sufficiently broaden the narrow scope of her opportunities for play. Such frustrations are also suggestive of the incongruity, even tension, between the pleasures of the comic player’s live address (the enjoyment she at once gives and takes in the reflexive immediacy of comic gesture) and the machinations of comic form (the generic systems that emerge and solidify within a field of historical and cultural particularity).

Put in simpler terms, comic genres have a way of setting constraints on comic players, especially those players occupying marginalized positions in the public arena. For Mowatt, these constraints were rooted in the patriarchal paternalism undergirding both the conservative incrementalism of the antitheatrical paradigm and the formal
structures of nineteenth-century stage comedy. But the political limits of antebellum comic practice applied to much more than the challenges Mowatt faced. If, as I have argued, the comic mode operated as a crucial instrument in sustaining the parameters of an imperfectly democratizing social play, then its reflexive practices should not overshadow the inescapable fact that antebellum comedy was so often aggressively conservative in ideology and form, and outright politically regressive in its more populist expressions.

Comedy’s oppressions are nowhere plainer than in the performance innovations of the antebellum period, which crystallized an enduring genre of comic amusement: blackface minstrelsy. It would be difficult to overstate the cultural impact of minstrel play, as the wheeling turn of T. D. Rice’s lively dance snowballed into a multimedia entertainment industry, making the cultural phenomenon of “jumping Jim Crow” the most viral genre of nineteenth-century comedy. Indeed, blackface minstrelsy was an expansive, even irrepressible form of comic performance, one that spilled out of the commercial stage and seeped into virtually every corner of antebellum cultural production, from the street prose and print ephemera circulating in the wake of staged minstrel shows, to the songsters and jokesters that vivified family parlors, to the caricatures, souvenirs, and gingerbread Jim Crows that dotted the material cultures of everyday life. In the nineteenth century, blackface minstrelsy was more than a newly popular comic genre; it was the comic genre — the master-genre that helped to manufacture structures of racial feeling that were ultimately codified into Jim Crow law.

In this sense, minstrelsy’s outsized presence reflects the contradictions of a broadly proslavery popular culture at play under the governing paradigms of a fracturing
The ubiquity of blackface fun—indeed, its very permeation into U.S. practices of popular sovereignty and systems of collective governance—indicates the way in which comedy can supply the critical infrastructure for organizing and administering the social pleasures of the democratic state.\(^1\) The wide dissemination of such blackface pleasure presented very serious challenges for African-American subjects, since minstrelsy’s generic norms so effectively equated Black enjoyment with Black subjugation. As Saidiya Hartman has so compellingly shown, minstrelsy, among other “orchestrated amusements” of the slavocracy, manufactures lively and convivial displays of happy Black servitude, demonstrating “the critical role of diversion in securing the relations of bondage.”\(^3\) Those relations took hold both at the representational level of minstrel performance, with its demeaning caricatures of Black people, and at the material level, as blackface entertainment effectively pushed Black theater and performance.

\(^1\) I follow here Douglas A. Jones’s delineation of “the proslavery imagination” of this period, which extended beyond the domain of slaveholding states and shaped the ways in which white northerners (including antislavery activists) conceived the sociopolitical relations of democratic culture and the subordinated position of Black people within that culture. As Jones argues, the proslavery imagination helped northerners “to maintain and, over time, widen the gulf between black freedom and full inclusion.” Douglas A. Jones, Jr., The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 2.

\(^2\) We might think of the longer history of Jim Crow as a descriptive term that migrates from the domain of comic entertainment into juridical practices of the post-Reconstruction era. As Gene Jarrett argues, the Jim Crow era (what is typically defined by the segregationist legal codes that were put into practice from 1896 to 1954) “demands paradigms of literary study attuned to an expansive historiography” (Gene Andrew Jarrett, “What is Jim Crow?” PMLA 128, no. 2 [2013]: 388-390, 389). In this, he points to historian John David Smith’s delineation of Jim Crow segregation as a history that reaches back to the antebellum period and extends well beyond the mid-twentieth century to include both de facto forms of segregated public life and de jure segregation. As I see it, antebellum minstrel entertainments contributed powerfully to the de facto segregation and racial hierarchies of antebellum public life. Moreover, the longer historical arc of Jim Crow is suggestive of the intimacies between comedy and the law. For more on the long history of Jim Crow and its introduction into U.S. legal codes, see John David Smith, “Introduction,” When Did Southern Segregation Begin? (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 1-42. See also C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Rogers M. Smith, Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), especially 347-409.

culture to the margins of antebellum public life. Thus, while antebellum comic practice sustained agonistic publics as they exercised their sovereign right to pleasure, it constrained and excluded Black participation from antebellum democracy’s ludic enterprises, subjecting Black players to a fundamentally white supremacist formulation of national popular sovereignty.

In this chapter, I trace the cultural impact of minstrel comedy’s viral circulation by asking how Black players grappled with the genre’s growing dominance across transatlantic networks of popular entertainment. How did Black players contend with the racist structures of feeling that minstrel play continually reinscribed in its production of popular enjoyment? In posing this question, I hope to contribute to recent critical scholarship that moves beyond revisionist studies of blackface minstrelsy’s political complexities to consider the various ways Black public intellectuals, activists, and artists responded to the mass appeal of this racist form of entertainment and its ordering of social life. Tavia Nyong’o has argued that Black critical assessments of the minstrel show’s popularity were far more nuanced than has been generally supposed, prompting

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public figures like Ellen Craft, Mary Webb, and Frederick Douglass to develop their own performative displays of Black dignity in the public sphere. Attending to such performances of Black respectability highlights what I broadly identify as serious-minded political counters to blackface minstrelsy: activist tactics that meet minstrelsy on the playing field of popular entertainment and rebut its racist comedy with performances that stand as resolute repudiations of its denigrating laughter. While the politics of respectability largely presided over the public actions of mainstream antislavery activists, Black critical engagements with minstrelsy were not always serious affairs.

Consider, for instance, the repertoire of star actor Ira Aldridge. Now primarily remembered as the great Black tragedian of the nineteenth century, in his own day Aldridge was celebrated as much for his versatility as a comic actor as he was for his more serious roles. In fact, much of the perceived greatness of the famed “African Roscius” stemmed from his command of the full dramatic spectrum of a theatrical program; the power of his Othello was made all the more palpable to his audiences when followed by a comic turn as Mungo. Aldridge’s reprisals of popular blackface roles in comic staples like *The Padlock* (1768) and *Virginia Mummy* (1835) demonstrate the ways in which his command of the nineteenth-century stage — his very status as a star player — required mastery of the central comic genre of his time. It would be reductive, however, to simply assert that Aldridge was beholden to the intractable racism of a nineteenth-century comic repertoire. As Bernth Lindfors and others have argued,

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5 Nyong’o, 103-134. Nyong’o examines commentary from Douglass and other Black activists to explore how minstrelized performance informed an antislavery politics of respectability. In so doing, he works to develop “a more complex picture of the critique developed by black activists and abolitionism of minstrelsy, one based not simply on bourgeois disgust for profane and popular culture but also on experience on both sides of the commodity, an experience that supplies a powerful critique of bourgeois, market, and capitalist values” (115).
Aldridge mined the subversive possibilities of roles like Mungo, honing the double-speak of Black trickster characters so that his largely white audiences might simultaneously laugh at and laugh with them. The ambiguities of this multivalent production of comic pleasure index the complexities of Aldridge’s engagement with minstrelsy’s vexed comedies. At the same time, Aldridge’s minstrel play is suggestive of the political possibilities that emerge from displays of Black virtuosity. For if Aldridge’s facility with a blackface repertoire made his virtuosity legible to his audiences, his virtuoso performances insistently pressed against the generic boundaries of minstrel comedy.

In what follows, I delve into the political complexities of Black virtuosity as a locus of antebellum popular enjoyment by focusing on a star performer whose career became synonymous with minstrel comedy, virtuoso dancer William Henry Lane. One of the few successful African-American performers on the commercial stage before the Civil War, Lane drew on the competitive dance culture of working-class taprooms and dance halls in New York City’s Five Points district to stage widely publicized challenge dances that manipulated the racist parameters of blackface comedy. As “Master Juba,” the internationally acclaimed “King of All Dancers,” Lane crafted a public persona that projected a sovereign’s dominion over the comic terrain of minstrel performance. Given that the commercial infrastructure of antebellum minstrel entertainment deliberately excluded Black dancers from the largest and most lucrative stages, Lane’s canny rise to

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7 Aldridge was not the only Black performer to play with minstrel form in this ambivalently comic vein. Other notable contributors to this performance tradition were William Wells Brown, whose play, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858) incorporates minstrelized farce into its articulation of an emancipatory politics, and Henry “Box” Brown, whose engagements with minstrelsy and popular science I take up in the next chapter.
top billing over the course of the 1840s signals the exceptionalism of both his abilities and his successes.

But Lane’s ascent to minstrel stardom is more than simply a history of a singular performer gaining access to entertainment venues that were otherwise off limits. His displays of virtuosity projected figurations of a Black sovereign that complicated minstrel comedy’s circulation of a national popular sovereignty grounded in white supremacy. At once participating in and exceeding minstrelsy’s pleasure-making systems, Lane’s performances illustrate the ways in which the Black virtuoso could, in his very entanglement in the oppressive structures of antebellum entertainment, create provisional moments of political potential, where the experiential conditions of popular enjoyment might be contested, reoriented, or otherwise imagined. Yet Lane’s career also underscores the intractable difficulties of the Black virtuoso’s public reception in the midst of minstrelsy’s contagious proliferation across transatlantic networks of print and performance. While Lane’s comic play as a virtuoso dancer occasionally gestured to constellations of popular enjoyment that might overrule the “relations of bondage” that minstrel entertainment continually inscribed, his virtuosity was as much a vehicle for the public’s continued circulation of minstrel comedy as it was a ludic hijacking of the genre’s racist structures.

I begin this chapter by delineating those racist structures, showing how minstrelsy’s somatic scripts — from the highly iterable contortions of the Jim Crow dance to the circulation of participatory forms of print ephemera — framed their own contagious proliferation as the comic enactment of a national popular sovereignty. I then consider the ways in which Lane’s public circulation, which included not only his live appearances in
the dance halls and garden theaters of the northeastern U.S. and Britain, but also the
dissemination of his dancing figure across transatlantic print cultures, tested the
parameters of minstrel entertainment’s sovereign pleasures. From his early affiliation
with P. T. Barnum and his hoodwinking conquests of New York’s sporting culture, to his
growing fame as a champion dancer and master parodist, to his overwhelmingly
successful British tour as “Boz’s Juba” and subsequent fade from public view, the arc of
Lane’s career highlights the precarities of the Black virtuoso’s comic play. His virtuosic
command of minstrel form stands as an experimental intervention into the politics of
Black play in antebellum popular culture, presenting an early case study in the history of
African-American humorists’ ongoing negotiation of the comedy underpinning the racist
frameworks of U.S. democracy.

**Circulating Jim Crows and the Minstrel Sovereign**

The history of blackface minstrelsy is a history of contagious circulation. Rooted in
the innovations of nineteenth-century commercial theater, but with practices roving far
beyond the playhouse, minstrelsy proved an uncontrolled and seemingly uncontrollable
comic repertoire, its appeal rapidly extending from the white, largely male, working-class
audiences of its earliest performances to a more generalized bourgeois culture of fun and
amusement. But it began in the imitative movements and aping gestures of T. D. Rice’s
dancing body. In the late 1820s and early 1830s, Rice fashioned the inchoate, parodic
contortions that he called “jumping Jim Crow” into a signature dance that would define
far more than just his career. As his dance caught on in popularity, blackface comic
performance outgrew the scope of the entr’acte, coalescing into a sustained theatrical
genre. By the early 1840s, minstrelsy had solidified its own conventions of performance,
as minstrel troupes formulated the tripartite structure of what we now think of as the
classic minstrel show. Even as the minstrel show evolved on the antebellum stage,
audiences took up the wheeling turns of the Jim Crow dance, responding to Rice’s racial
mimicry with mimicry of their own, both in the playhouse and outside of it. While Rice’s
dance famously fed the agonistic play of cacophonous audiences like those at New
York’s Bowery Theatre, Jim Crow’s capering figure sprang up in extra-theatrical and
quotidian venues of social leisure — in the marketplace, the local saloon, and eventually
even in the domestic parlor.

Print culture facilitated this mimetic proliferation. In addition to the playbills and
print paraphernalia distributed within the orbit of commercial theater, minstrel humor
sprang out of newspapers and literary periodicals, overran comic almanacs, and
disseminated its scripts into the home with its masses of songsters and jokesters. On one
level, this print archive demonstrates how minstrelsy extended its reach beyond the
somatic immediacy of live performance, as the technologies and practices of antebellum
print circulation offered a kind of prosthesis to the comic repertoire that was then
crystallizing on the stage. But minstrelsy’s expansion into print was more than just an
adaptation of a comic performance genre by other complementary media. As Jim Crow
found seemingly boundless new iteration in print, the material gestures and idioms of
blackface performance were encoded into the textual scripts — the music scores, lyrics,
jokes, stump speeches, and comic dialogues — that found wide circulation. In other
words, these texts do not simply represent or record Jim Crow’s comic play; they induce

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re-enactment.

Attending critically to the textual artifacts that fueled minstrelsy’s multimedia spread thus requires a reconsideration of the enmeshments of print and performance, or what Diana Taylor has identified as the archive and the repertoire. Indeed, Robin Bernstein’s studies of racial innocence have delineated how the “scriptive things” of material culture implicitly address human actors, inviting people to take part in the “stylized bodily performances” of “everyday life.” Steeped as they are in the historical repertoire of blackface comedy, Bernstein’s objects (or rather, things) of study — play dolls, children’s alphabet books, domestic knickknacks, arcade expositions — exemplify the quotidian suffusion of minstrel play, as well as the organizing power of its generic logic. For Bernstein, scriptive things hail the individuals who encounter them, engaging in an Althusserian form of interpellation that demands “bodily action.” In Louis Althusser’s classic scenario, the police officer that calls out, “Hey, you there!” to an individual in the street models the way in which ideology “recruits” its subjects. Such acts of hailing provoke embodied forms of recognition (such as, for example, the act of turning around) and in so doing, turn individuals into subjects. Bernstein stresses the fact that

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10 Robin Bernstein, Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 73. Bernstein’s elaboration of “scriptive things” both extends and revises Diana Taylor’s critical approach to the study of the interactive relationship between the archive and the repertoire in the Americas. As Bernstein argues, “the heuristic of the scriptive thing explodes the very model of archive and repertoire as distinct-but-interactive, because the word script captures the moment when dramatic narrative and movement through space are in the act of becoming each other….Within each scriptive thing, archive and repertoire are one. Therefore, when scriptive things enter a repository, repertoires arrive with them. Within a brick-and-mortar archive, scriptive things archive the repertoire — partially and richly, and with a sense of openness and flux. To read things as scripts is to coax the archive into divulging the repertoire” (12-13).

11 Ibid., 77.

interpellation “occurs not only or even mainly through verbal demands followed by bodily actions, as in Althusser’s scenario, but through encounters in the material world: dances between people and things.” What Bernstein illuminates here are the kinetic energies that create cultural hegemony, pulling individuals into a field of sociopolitical relations through participatory engagements that “are neither conscious nor unconscious, neither wholly voluntaristic expression of intention nor compulsory, mechanical movement.” Minstrel comedy became culturally ubiquitous through these scriptive encounters, and in so doing, sustained a habitus that took for granted the violent subjugation of Black people in antebellum public life.

What interests me here though is how minstrelsy’s texts often reflected on their scriptive powers, deliberately casting the somatic conditions of their circulation as the foundation for popular sovereignty. Consider the now anthologized example of “The Life of Jim Crow,” a mock autobiography of the titular minstrel hero that typifies a category of print ephemera W. T. Lhamon terms “street prose.” Produced and circulated in the orbit of the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia as an accompaniment to T. D. Rice’s appearances on that stage in 1835 and 1837, this preposterous account of Jim Crow’s origins and rise to fame models the ways in which the technologies of print culture extended the comic play of the antebellum stage. As talismans marking the event of live comic performance, such textual artifacts circulated the iterable figure of Jim Crow’s freewheeling body beyond the playhouse’s realm of social immediacy. To call this print figuration of “jumping Jim Crow” a mediation of Rice’s live dance, however, does not fully capture the extent to which the materiality of the textual souvenir generates its own

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13 Bernstein, 77.
14 Ibid., 74.
embodied forms of reception. In the onslaught of his racially marked dialect and boundless malapropisms, Jim Crow’s minstrelized speech invites, even demands that its readers ventriloquize his voice so as to render his printed words more fully legible. In this sense, Jim Crow’s prose generates a kinetic dynamism that, like Bernstein’s scriptive things, intepellates its readers, marshaling their bodies as vessels through which his minstrel laughter might continue to echo.

In part, then, “The Life of Jim Crow” exemplifies the ways in which minstrelsy’s comic vernacular impels some degree of somatic reproduction from its readers, even from readers who would disavow its comic scripts. To read a minstrel joke book or one of the many “autobiographies” of Jim Crow is to become involved in its comic project at a visceral level, to feel the invitation to speak Jim Crow’s words aloud, to respond to the text’s call to play out its comic enterprise. What’s distinctive about minstrel print culture though is just how often it takes those scriptive energies as the subject of its representational play, creating moments of reflexivity that openly theorize comic hegemony as a process of bodily inscription.

In “The Life of Jim Crow,” this reflexivity develops out of the ambiguities of Jim Crow’s mythic origins, and in particular, the genesis of his song and dance. For while “The Life of Jim Crow” fashions a comic icon out of the tropes belonging to what is often called “natural genius,” the details of his effortless self-invention point to the scriptive powers of comic inspiration. As this mock autobiographical account relates it, the formative experience that germinated his signature comic act dates back to a hot summer day in the backwoods of Kentucky, where a spring of water suddenly spouts up before the eyes of a young and very thirsty Jim Crow. From this magical spring a fairy
appears and offers him a silver cup to drink from ("jis like de one de Bostonians gwan to present me wid nex time I jump dat way"), with the caveat that he never return, "or she would take my pretty voice from me." Jim Crow heeds the warning and drinks his fill, but this mystical water does more than quench his thirst; it causes a complete upheaval in his digestive tract:

Twitch, twitch, went de small gut: — waugh, waugh, went de big ones, ben jis as I got over a fence up come de intents of my tomach into de road: — guy, I to’it it war a gone case wid me, but when I look’d down it war a big roll of music dat I had heaved up. I looked at him, an all at once de tune pat as sugar on de end oh my tongue and I rhymed to it from dat dey to dis, for twar nothing more or less den de fashionable air ob your humble servant to command. Jim Crow.

In this evocative creation myth, Jim Crow originates what would swiftly become a culturally ubiquitous comic tune by way of bodily purgation, but a purgation that is itself a peculiar alchemy of textual production and somatic reflex. An absurd funhouse mirror of divine inspiration, Jim Crow’s tale is a drama of spasmodic guts and bathetic vomit that locates artistic production in the “intsents” of the stomach. With this winking malapropism, this fantasia of the artist’s creative act effectively elevates the churning contents of Jim Crow’s belly into the realm of artistic intentionality. If Jim Crow’s song and dance springs from the material stuff of his stomach, it is stuff with a will of its own. It is crucial to note too that it is not simply the act of drinking magic spring water that inspires (or at least spurs) Jim Crow’s stomach to manufacture his song and dance — that it is rather the biochemical reaction of the magic spring water as it makes it way down, and ultimately back up, his digestive tract. This reaction does more than simply propel

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16 Ibid., 390.
Jim Crow to his song and dance; it composes a musical score that immediately works itself upon Jim Crow’s body, such that its tune leaps, as Jim Crow exclaims, “on de end oh my tongue.” In short, the body creates the textual script that seizes upon the body for its instrument. Of course, this is also not quite the whole story, since, as Jim Crow relates it, the musical score is only the foundation for his ongoing improvisation, the text from which he continues to rhyme “from dat dey to dis.” If the musical score grabs hold of Jim Crow’s tongue, then, it is also a text subject to his own play — it is his “to command.”

It’s worth dwelling on Jim Crow’s “command” over his own minstrel script, since the fantastic origin tale underpinning his comic agency so thoroughly yokes his body to a project of boundless circulation. “The Life of Jim Crow” ultimately mystifies the propulsion of comic performance, as its explanatory power fails, or perhaps refuses, to clarify its hero’s command of his own comedy. Instead, it portrays Jim Crow as a comic icon whose “command” of his own performances resides in his continued, seemingly compulsive facility at reiterating endless variations of minstrelsy’s mythical urtext. In so doing, this piece of print paraphernalia takes Jim Crow’s body as a vehicle for figuring the actual fact of minstrelsy’s viral iterability. What minstrelsy’s street prose and print ephemera underscores, then, is how scriptive encounters between bodies and texts create a feedback loop where the somatic pleasures of comic liveness spawn the contagious spread of the printed word, which then spurs further (re)performances of minstrel comedy. In other words, antebellum minstrelsy openly plays with the scriptive technologies of its own genre-making, which is to say, the technologies of its cultural saturation. Such play took shape on the international circuits of minstrel stage performance as well as its commercial print culture, creating a web of social
entertainment that underwrote the politics of antebellum democratic culture.

What I want to suggest here is not just that the archive of minstrel play reveals the complex imbrications of body and text, of performance and print, but that such imbrications lay a comic groundwork for a distinctly antebellum formulation of popular sovereignty. For insofar as Jim Crow considers himself “your humble servant to command,” which is to say, a vessel of public enjoyment, his “command” of minstrelsy’s comic iterations is itself an enactment of popular rule. Such enactments of popular will, or the ongoing reproduction of minstrel performance to gratify popular demand, had a profound impact on the racial parameters of democratic culture in this period. Historians studying the intersections of race and class in the antebellum period have shown how minstrel entertainments reflected a Jacksonian political ideology of populist egalitarianism that advanced “the political, civil, and moral equality of white male citizens.”

As Alexander Saxton and others have demonstrated, the generic solidification of the minstrel show in the 1840s broadly aligned with the partisan politics of the Democratic Party, which developed a national platform of territorial expansion and equal opportunity that was defined by whiteness. Because minstrelsy appealed to a growing urban working class in the North while continually asserting a proslavery logic, the genre fostered political affiliation among white males across region, class, and ethnicity. In this sense, its blackface caricatures “propagandized metaphorically the alliance of urban working people with planter interest in the South.”

Minstrelsy’s comic scripts, in other

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18 Saxton, 165.
words, held together a political coalition that promoted a Jacksonian vision of an expansionist nation state in which democratic governance was organized by white supremacy. To partake in the public enjoyment of Jim Crow, whether through witnessing T. D. Rice’s capering figure on the stage or reading street prose like “The Life of Jim Crow,” was to experience “the growing popular sense of whiteness” that dominated antebellum cultural conceptions of democratization. The white supremacist formulation of popular sovereignty that minstrel entertainments disseminated demonstrates the ways in which comedy can set the boundaries of democratic public life, contributing even to its operations of law and order. Minstrel play that reflects on its own scriptive powers of circulation brings those contributions into view.

In fact, antebellum minstrel play could even occasionally transform blackface caricatures into representative figureheads for this racist popular sovereignty. These minstrel sovereigns, as I call them, were blackface characters who provisionally assumed positions of public authority in their fictive realms of play, speaking as and speaking for a white popular majority in pursuit of enjoyment. Take, for example, the minstrel play *Yankee Notes for English Circulation* (1842). This one-act comic skit offers one more signpost marking the international explosion of minstrelsy’s popularity in the early 1840s, and, even more than “The Life of Jim Crow,” quite self-consciously situates its own comic play within a transatlantic network of scriptive circulation and exchange. Written by Edward Stirling for T. D. Rice during his London tour, *Yankee Notes* was staged at the Adelphi Theatre in the winter of the same year that Charles Dickens published his *American Notes for General Circulation*, the travelogue of his widely

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19 Roediger, 97.
publicized tour of the United States. With its cheeky nod to Dickens’s recent contribution to the popular trend of British celebrity travel writing on U.S. culture, the title of this Rice vehicle does not in fact hold much relevance to the bulk of the play’s action, which follows Rice’s minstrel hero, the hotel waiter Hiccory Dick, as he contends with the various demands and schemes of an assortment of guests at a Saratoga hotel. Hiccory Dick’s pranks on his white guests broadly poke fun at the confused bumblings of a traveling leisure class, but his most memorable ploy creates something of a national spoof. In his efforts to thwart the predatory overtures of a white guest towards his paramour, Hiccory Dick concocts a scheme to protect his own libidinal interests — one that involves his dressing up in officer’s clothing. But when he faces imminent discovery and exposure by other would-be midnight elopers, he puts his faux-regimentals to other ends, peremptorily shoving over a life-size garden statue of George Washington and taking the General’s place. Posing as Washington’s statue, Hiccory Dick stands largely above the comic fray and surveys the various antics of his hotel patrons, occasionally startling them or adding to the general confusion with commentary (or perhaps a raspberry and a kick) from his authoritative perch.

It is only at the play’s end, however, that the joke of its title finds its punchline, effectively linking the play’s comic figurations of U.S. national sovereignty (Hiccory Dick as George Washington) to the practices of print circulation (the Dickensian “Notes” for the general public). These jests converge to fashion a comic denouement that turns itself easily towards the audience and into the closing plaudit. When the assortment of

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20 Dickens’s *American Notes* fits into a larger trend of British celebrity travel writing in the period that commented and critiqued U.S. culture, which included Fanny Kemble’s journals and Frances Trollope’s *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1835).
white players have discovered each others’ various forms of deception and foolishness, one character suggests they avoid future social embarrassment by never speaking of their evening’s imbroglio, lest they discover it reproduced as “Yankee Notes in print.”

Standing on his pedestal of Washingtonian authority, Rice’s Hicory Dick exclaims, “Dat you shall! Dere’s one up here look down dere. ‘Em print you all in de news.” Taking advantage of the general astonishment at his sudden and commanding appearance, Hicory offers the disciplinary resolution to the farce that has unfolded at his hotel:

*Omnes:* Dick! Hicory! [*astonished*]

*Hicory:* [*descending*]: No, Julicum Caesar, white trash! A Prince in ‘em own country, I’ll hab ma revenge on you now. Go now Grand Tower, make a book, and publish you all like Missee Trollope and Massa Boz an circulate da notes me self — dat is, if dey will pass current wid our kind friends, here. It remains wid you Ladies and Genlmen [*to audience*] — your wishes must decide whether de Yankee Notes shall or shall not be duly honored and whether generally circulated in dis country.  

What’s striking about Hicory’s “revenge” is the way in which it executes a form of social ridicule that is achieved, and even heightened by the promise of its general publication across transatlantic networks of print. But it is not the fact of print publicity alone, or even Hicory’s parroting of print celebrities like “Missee Trollope and Massa Boz” that makes the retribution of his comic unmasking so emphatic. Besides authoring and publishing his own exposure of Yankee folly, Hicory declares he will “circulate da notes me self,” as though the very dissemination of his printed word might solely rely upon the gesture of his outstretched hand, a fantastical scenario that would not only entail the wide circulation of Hicory’s intended tell-all, but also of his own, ever-gesticulating

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body. If Hiccory vows to circulate his “Yankee Notes,” in other words, he also vows to
circulate himself. Yet there is in fact a kind of logic to Hiccory’s yoking of textual and
bodily circulation, since his acknowledgment of the live audience before him effectively
tethers the wider distribution of “Yankee Notes” (and Hiccory himself) to the applause of
his London theater public. With an address that is at once sly and deferential, Hiccory
fastens his act of satiric exposure, as well as the promised proliferation of his own person,
to the mass of clapping hands at his immediate command. As an embodied practice of
appreciation and assent, the applause of Hiccory’s audience mimetically responds to his
turn of address, incorporating the live motility of his body “descending” from upon high,
along with the gestural elasticity of his capering figure as he jumps Jim Crow, into the
somatic experience of collectivity. These are the material conditions under which
“Yankee Notes” find circulation across transatlantic publics.

It should be stressed, moreover, that the imbrication of print and performance cultures
that give shape to Hiccory Dick’s closing plaudit also constitute what is essentially the
sovereign’s edict at the resolution of the comic play. For in his authoritative descent from
his magisterial plinth, Hiccory Dick assumes the vestments of General Washington — the

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22 Hiccory’s democratizing qualification of his authority (“dat is, if dey will pass current wid our kind friends, here”) is a winking acknowledgment of the audience that also puns on the conditions of antebellum monetary circulation, playfully suggesting that his “Yankee Notes” might also be a fraudulent form of currency. This was Dickens’s joke too when he titled his travelogue American Notes for General Circulation. As Meredith McGill has argued, Dickens’s title “condemn[s] the inevitable American piracy of his work by associating it with trade in the spurious currency of defaulting state and local banks.” (Meredith L. McGill, American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853 [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003], 118). The notion of fraudulent currency also overlapped easily with the racial counterfeit of blackface in the antebellum cultural imaginary. In his study of William Wells Brown’s manipulations of minstrel form, Paul Gilmore illustrates the parallel logic of Wells Brown’s experience as a “wildcat banker” issuing fraudulent bank notes and his performative (re)circulation of minstrelized caricature. Gilmore shows how Wells Brown draws on the convergences of counterfeit currencies in the antebellum cultural imaginary, “rendering blackness unreal even as he redefines it” (Paul Gilmore, The Genuine Article: Race, Mass Culture, and American Literary Manhood [Durham: Duke University Press, 2001] 65).
representative sovereign of the democratic republic — to pass judgment on the players before him and reconstitute the social order. His “Yankee Notes,” in short, are also the execution of comic law. Of course, Hiccory Dick’s disciplinary proclamation, which brings an end to the other players’ comic business, simultaneously extends the reach of his own circulation. In this sense, his vow to circulate his notes (and, by extension, himself) is not much of a resolution at all, but rather a perpetuation of his comic play. What is significant here though is the way in which such perpetuation gets yoked to the figuration of a decidedly national, and also decidedly popular, sovereignty. After all, the extension of Hiccory Dick’s comic law is itself an exercise in the politics of popular sovereignty, for his decree for further circulation claims legitimacy through his live address to the audience, effectively enacting the assent of an assembled public. The fact that Yankee Notes transforms its blackface buffo into a figure of sovereign authority is not simply a demonstration of minstrelsy’s carnivalizing inversions; it elevates the crucial role of comic practice in the crystallization of antebellum sociopolitical order. The comedy of this play’s resolution, in other words, is not so much that Hiccory Dick’s supplanting George Washington is so preposterous, but that it is so very apt.

Yankee Notes for Circulation’s figuration of this minstrel sovereign reminds us that comic play, and more specifically, antebellum comic play, does not operate at the margins of political sovereignty, or reside solely in the unofficial realms of unserious, popular life; it constitutes and reproduces itself at the symbolic center of the cultural order, and even at the core of the sovereign state. Put simply, comic practice does not necessarily undermine the integrity of the sovereign’s command, as many forms of serious-minded politics tend to presume. Rather, it is very often the case that the
sovereign laughs, extending culturally and politically sanctioned forms of comic pleasure. In this sense, comedy does more than play upon the law; it works itself into the law, marshaling popular pleasures to ensure the law’s power. This is in fact precisely what the enduring legacies of blackface minstrelsy underscore, presenting us with an unforgiving case study in how the comic racism of “jumping Jim Crow” literally writes itself into the institutional and legal codes of the postbellum state.

This is not to deny that comic play can also be made an instrument of political subversion, a trickster’s means of manipulating cultural institutions, and perhaps even a catalyst for reshaping the hegemonic order. As the career of William Henry Lane attests, efforts to commandeer the mantle of sovereign authority from blackface heroes like Hiccory Dick, to harness a white majoritarian rule to the profitable ends of the minoritarian subject, signal the transformative potentialities of comic play, as fresh enactments of established forms of popular entertainment repurpose and revise cultural systems of pleasure. It is nevertheless crucial to remember that revisionary forms of the minstrel sovereign do not in and of themselves liberate or otherwise extricate comic practice from the tyranny of popular fun’s majority rule. Sovereign laughter, as we shall see, has the uncanny ability to swallow its subjects whole.

**At Pete Williams’s Place: William Henry Lane, Charles Dickens, and Five Points**

**Dance Hall Culture**

The material figuration of minstrel sovereigns like Hiccory Dick marks an important consolidation of the institutional and generic structures of comic entertainment in the early nineteenth century, a consolidation that would have lasting ramifications for Black performers. Drawing on the comic technologies of caricature, ridicule, and seeming
incongruity, minstrelsy established a representational canon of Black inferiority that repeatedly inscribed white supremacy. In the process, the genre’s rise materially altered the landscape of U.S. commercial entertainment by effectively suppressing an already marginalized Black theater culture. New York City’s growth into an emergent national epicenter for theatrical entertainment, for example, fed off white working-class demand for minstrel acts while simultaneously dismantling the theatrical ventures of African American impresario William Brown, who offered an alternative vision of Black play within a more racially integrated theater culture. As Marvin McAllister has shown, Brown’s theater company faced repeated onslaughts from a range of white players, including rival managers, a bigoted press, and rowdy spectators. With the Black company’s Shakespearean repertoire and the theater’s integrated audiences, Brown’s entertainments sought to cater to “ladies and gentlemen of colour,” deliberately cultivating a vision of Black progress that swiftly became the target of white aggression.

Importantly, these white hostilities very often spilled out of the prevailing practices of early national comic play. From the satiric caricatures of literary print culture to the agonistic antics of disruptive white theater patrons, comic practice became a strategic means of diminishing Brown’s dramatic productions to little more than burlesques of white domination. When the rowdy play of “laughter-loving clerks” escalated to the

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23 Minstrel entertainments suppressed and supplanted not only Black commercial theater, but also other forms of Black festive culture, such as Pinkster and Negro Election Day celebrations. See Roediger, especially 95-114.


25 McAllister argues that rowdy white patrons saw Brown’s theater as the complementary “low” theatrical venue to Stephen Price’s “high” Park Theatre: “Demonstrative whites carried their desires and notions of blackness into Brown’s theatrical experiment and, in a sense, demanded that the company function as their unrestrained, lower-class, “minor” alternative to Price’s controlled middle-class, “major” theater….Brown’s white patrons routinely obliterated any notion of a fourth wall and behaved as full-
outright violent assault of the stage actors, newspaper editors and police authorities alike found fault not with the white rioters, but with Brown and his company. Comic modes of white aggression, in other words, found support in the institutions of the local press and local governance, enacting a white popular sovereignty that violently suppressed Black players. By the mid 1820s, Brown’s African Theatre had shuttered, the company disbanded, while former players James Hewlett and Ira Aldridge traveled to England and the West Indies in search of more hospitable audiences.26

Minstrelsy’s developing generic coherence in the late 1820s and 1830s was the logical extension of this suppression of Black theater culture. As white comedians like Charles Mathews, T. D. Rice, and a young Edwin Forrest developed blackface characters on their tours between the hinterlands and the metropoles of the Anglo-American world, the “black fun” of theatrical epicenters like New York became an overwhelmingly white enterprise, defined by the practices of blackface caricature that entertained the working-class audiences of large commercial theaters like Chatham’s and the Bowery. When the Virginia Minstrels eventually turned blackface performance into the codified genre of “the minstrel show” in early 1843, Black performers were largely excluded from the mainstream New York stage. While several Black actors left to tour British and continental theater circuits, Black performance continued to thrive in urban spaces outside the commercial theater, most notably in the interracial Five Points

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26 For more on career of James Hewlett, see Marvin McAllister, Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 50-72. For biographical studies of Aldridge, see Lindfors; Marshall and Stock.
African American musicians and dancers performed to mixed audiences in the taverns and cellar dance halls of Mulberry and Orange Streets. The most famous of these entertainment venues was run by Black entrepreneur Pete Williams. At Almack’s, or “Pete Williams’s Place,” a diverse clientele of local working-class patrons and white middle-class “sporting men” could dance, drink, and socialize while enjoying the virtuoso displays of the lead “juba dancer.” It was in this cultural space of heterogeneous play that William Henry Lane established his reputation as a skilled dancer and star performer.

Lane’s career as a dancer indicates the material and social limits of Black performers that attended the rise of blackface minstrelsy — a comic genre that effectively enforced a white supremacist vision of popular sovereignty. But Lane’s background also points to a subterranean counterculture of ludic pursuit that presented more racially integrated figurations of popular life, built around competitive performance practices that posited alternative formulations of sovereign pleasure. Dance halls like Pete Williams’s were certainly not utopian spaces of harmonious collectivity. They were, however, incubators for innovations in dance. In these venues, the practice of challenge dancing created an agonistic entertainment culture in which the distinction between the aspiring amateur and the professional dancer was less sharply defined. Skilled dancers who sought glory, prize

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27 For a history of the Five Points, see Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The 19th-Century New York City Neighborhood that Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World’s Most Notorious Slum* (New York: Plume, 2002).

money, or simply a bit of fun might emerge from the convivial multitude and display their talents. Indeed, part of the thrill of dance hall assemblies was their aura of virtuosic possibility, the promise they held of discovering the next star performer. Meanwhile, the contest between challenge dancers created a system for displaying technical skill and physical verve that turned dance into an exercise in dominance — a sportive conquest of the dance hall itself. Simply put, lead dancers captivated their audiences by outperforming them. In this sense, champion dancers were as much masters of their audiences as they were of their craft. And in fact, many challenge dances were decided by the audience rather than by judges, making the victor’s triumph an entertaining show of popular will.

The context of Lane’s early dancing career, then, was a form of cultural play that cultivated virtuoso figures of authority that were in fact quite distinct from the minstrel sovereigns of blackface comedy. This did not mean, however, that the agonistic sociality of Five Points dance halls was miraculously free from the grip of minstrelsy’s comic pleasures. The “sporting men” of New York’s white professional class may have enjoyed the “black fun” of carousing the night away at the socially and racially mixed entertainment venues of the Five Points, but they did not leave their comic sensibilities at the door when they visited Almack’s. Instead, minstrelized accounts of dance hall culture circulated in the flash press and sensationalized urban fiction, contributing to a more generalized comic practice of racial denigration. If the star dancers of Pete Williams’s dance hall and elsewhere developed alternative, more integrated expressions of popular

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29 According to Masten, “anyone could make a challenge at the end of a [dance] set, but well-known dancers waited for a purse to be raised before dancing theirs. Contests of skill, strength, speed, and endurance, accompanied by friendly wagers, were common forms of sociability and recreation among the working classes” (“Challenge Dancing in Antebellum America,” 612).
enjoyment, they were often recast and re-presented as reiterations of the minstrel sovereign.

Lane’s own career reflected the realities of minstrelsy’s wide circulation in significant ways. In fact, T. D. Rice’s Hiccory Dick was not the first minstrel hero to disseminate his authority by way of “Yankee Notes.” He also echoed a minstrelized sketch that Charles Dickens had put into circulation earlier that same year. One of the most striking and widely reprinted scenes from Dickens’s *American Notes for General Circulation* includes a richly complex depiction of one of Lane’s triumphant displays of virtuosity. There is no doubt that Lane’s performance was the highlight of Dickens’s evening tour of the Five Points — a tour he self-consciously took in order to survey the living conditions of New York’s racially mixed, urban working class. Of course, given Dickens’s celebrity, the tour was itself an orchestrated affair, with extra police security in tow and the New York flash press following his every movement. What Dickens portrays in *American Notes*, however, downplays his own outsized presence as a celebrity slummer and lingers instead on the squalid and lurid scenes he encounters. And while the majority of this section of *American Notes* emphasizes the degradation of New York’s working class, the dance hall offers up a display of lively and convivial entertainment. At the epicenter of this popular fun is “Juba.”

In what is easily the most famous depiction of Lane’s dancing, Dickens relays the festive spectacle of New York’s working-class dance culture through the generic prism of Jim Crow comedy, creating a minstrelized portrait that would define much of Lane’s career. But the ambiguities of this Dickensian sketch also capture displays of virtuosic command that complicate this particular iteration of the minstrel sovereign:
But the dance commences. Every gentleman sets as long as he likes to the opposite lady, and the opposite lady to him, and all are so long about it that the sport begins to languish, when suddenly the lively hero dashes in to the rescue. Instantly the fiddler grins, and goes at it tooth and nail; there is new energy in the tambourine; new laughter in the dancers; new smiles in the landlady; new confidence in the landlord; new brightness in the very candles. Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut: snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man’s fingers on the tambourine; dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs—all sorts of legs and no legs—what is this to him? And in what walk of life, or dance of life, does man ever get such stimulating applause as thunders about him, when, having danced his partner off her feet, and himself too, he finishes by leaping gloriously on the bar-counter, and calling for something to drink, with the chuckle of a million of counterfeit Jim Crows, in one inimitable sound!  

Dickens’s own conflation of dance hall culture and minstrel contagion turns the kinetic exuberance of Lane’s dance into a scene of vibrant bodily virtuosity that nevertheless raises unresolved questions about the conditions of Lane’s artistry. On one level, what Dickens recreates here is a festive, exhilarating scene of popular dance where the sound of Lane’s chuckle punctuates, even stamps an exclamation mark on, an electrifying display of the dancing body in motion. In part, this is a portrait of a laughing dancer whose extravagant flourishes of bodily freedom seem to exceed the very limits of his own physicality. Through the boundless elasticity of his steps, Lane flourishes limbs that appear to multiply and vanish all at once, as the very substance of his legs transmogrifies from wood to wire to spring. It is the breezy dexterity with which Lane manages his disjointed, ever-changing body (“what is this to him?”) that crowns the kinesthetic élan of his dance. This is a familiar trope of virtuosic dance, where the stylized execution of taxing, agile, and otherwise disciplined movement is deemed all the more impressive because it is made to look so easy. But the buoyancy of Lane’s figure, and the laugh that

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leaps forth from him, are equally suggestive of the dancer’s expression of corporeal mastery — an exultant assertion of the superlative body’s potency at the heart of the dance hall’s social fray. It is important to remember too that part of the glory of Lane’s laughter stems from the thunderous applause that he garners. Seizing his deserts from his perch atop the bar-counter, Lane stands as the apex of this scene of collective fun, holding sway over all within his purview. The triumphant tenor of his laugh is in this sense a mark of his skillful command: command of his body, command of his steps, command of rhythm and space, command of the hall’s dancing-spectating patrons. Such a laugh, in other words, is the laugh of a sovereign player enjoying the full extent of his domain.

But what happens when this dancing sovereign laughs? As Dickens tells it, the “inimitable sound” of Lane’s laughter emits “the chuckle of a million of counterfeit Jim Crows.” What is striking here is the way this “inimitable” laugh seems to contain a million imitations, a notion that complicates the dancer’s display of bodily autonomy. Is Dickens’s claim here that the somatic verve of this dancer outstrips all the paltry imitations of commercial blackface entertainment? Or does Dickens suggest that Lane’s laugh is the ultimate imitation? Does the laughter of “Juba,” in its comprising so many Jim Crow counterfeits, make conquest of minstrel play, or does this scene of triumph, with its amplifying chuckle, unleash Jim Crow’s endless iterations? Put another way, do the million Jim Crows that Dickens hears spilling forth from Lane’s laughing mouth signal the momentary overruling of minstrelsy’s comic logic, or is it rather the culmination of it — a signal instance of a genre’s viral overload?

This “simulacral dilemma,” as Eric Lott calls it, strikes at the underlying tension
between Lane’s bodily displays of a kind of virtuosic mastery, which crystallizes in his exceptional command of movement and space in the thick of dance hall counterculture, and the fundamentally racist formulations of popular sovereignty that proliferate in the wake of minstrel play.\footnote{Lott, 115.} For as Dickens conjoins, almost reflexively, Jim Crow comedy to this vibrant scene of popular life, he (mis)construes Lane’s virtuosity as a performance of the minstrel sovereign, which is to say, the figurative head of a white supremacist pleasure-making system. In this sense, Dickens’s account of Lane in American Notes achieves precisely what the joke of the closing plaudit in Rice’s Yankee Notes plays at: it disseminates the body of the minstrel sovereign through the technologies of print circulation. In so doing, Dickens’s “Juba” presents a comic figuration of democratic sovereignty that is at once constituted and proliferated in the crucible of print’s somatic circulation across transatlantic publics. Yet such a figuration also turns the virtuoso player into something of an empty vessel — a charismatic conduit for channeling public assent and popular fun. No wonder, then, that Lane’s dancing body is subsumed by the million Jim Crows of Dickens’s circulating Notes.

Ironically, the tension between virtuosic assertions of artistic authority and the public’s sense of command over the popular artist was a problem that Dickens himself partly understood, albeit only when it applied to himself. American Notes, after all, is tacitly framed as a critique of the cultural and institutional practices of U.S. literary culture, which systematically privileged wide public access to print over authorial rights. Meredith McGill has highlighted the satiric prickliness that is baked in to the title of Dickens’s instantly successful account of his American tour, which implicitly condemning
a U.S. culture of reprinting that facilitated the uncontrolled piracy of his works. As such, the critical jab behind *American Notes for General Circulation* signals the degree to which Dickens’s observational wit was guided by his frustrations with the U.S. literary marketplace, which remained stubbornly resistant to the passage of an international copyright law until late in the century. For McGill, the subtleties of this Dickensian joke effectively encapsulate his ongoing misunderstanding of the particular brand of democratic politics underpinning antebellum print culture — a politics that privileged the public’s demand for mass circulation over the intellectual property rights of authorship. But in fact, the circulation of Dickens’s minstrelized “Juba” sketch is suggestive of the ways in which his *American Notes* plays into the antebellum culture that he so misunderstands. For like Rice’s Hiccory Dick, we might think of Dickens’s “inimitable” Juba, with his laugh full of a million Jim Crows, as the comic embodiment of the culture of reprinting — an effigy of the uncontrolled iterability that so expressly links U.S. democratic sovereignty to the proliferation of a racist genre of popular entertainment. If Dickens’s treatment of Lane belies his own critical assessment of “general circulation” as a problem for artistic authority, then it also signals the much larger problem of antebellum democratic culture: the overbearing whiteness of its sovereign pleasures.

It’s worth dwelling on Dickens’s messy and thoroughly muddled critical engagements with the practices of circulation in U.S. democratic culture, since his own play with the minstrel sovereign at Lane’s expense is representative of the ways in which those practices continually reinscribed the material subjugation of Black play in antebellum public life. The unequal, patronizing relation Dickens holds to Lane also gestures to the

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different tactics Lane used to navigate the racist pleasures of antebellum entertainment culture. For insofar as *American Notes* offers up Dickens’s somewhat peevish complaint of the author’s loss of authority within the U.S. democratic model of circulation (which dispossesses the author of his sovereign rights over his intellectual property), he gives partial articulation to the way in which artists, performers, and players find themselves beholden to a logic of democratic circulation as it proliferates an imaginary of U.S. popular sovereignty. Dickens understood this logic as a loss of personal sovereignty over his own works, even as he happily perpetuated it by stamping his own iteration of Jim Crow comedy onto Lane’s dancing body. But if Dickens viewed this culture of circulation as mostly a thorn in his side, Lane took its conditions as the unavoidable parameters of his field of play — the necessary means for advancing his own comic figurations of virtuosic mastery within larger commercial systems of antebellum popular entertainment. Rather than deploy satiric critique to openly assault the systems and institutions that sought to marginalize and limit the scope of his virtuosic dance, Lane chose to infiltrate them using comic manipulations of his own. As we shall see, Lane’s comic play with the generic conditions of blackface comedy allowed him to break through some of the material and cultural barriers that excluded Black play and Black enjoyment from commercial entertainment’s figurations of popular sovereignty. But even as Lane tapped in to the instabilities of the minstrel sovereign, his exploits also reveal the limits of his comic interventions into toxic forms of popular enjoyment.

**Dancing Humbugs: Lane and Barnum**

Lane’s dancing career began in the Five Points dance halls, but he did not remain there long. What Dickens witnessed at Pete Williams’s Place was a popular dance hall
culture that lived at the margins of New York’s ecosystem of theater and performance. Yet his visit participated in a sporting culture that was also responsible for expropriating the dances that took shape in these subterranean, working-class spaces to larger and more lucrative commercial venues. Minstrel play imported the challenge dancing of the Five Points dance halls to the grander stages of Chatham’s and the Bowery; however, this large-scale monetization of a racially mixed popular dance culture deliberately held Black challengers back. Indeed, as April Masten and other cultural historians have noted, advertisements for many of the larger-stakes challenge dances pointedly excluded Black dancers from taking part.33 The singularity of Lane’s success as a Black performer on the antebellum minstrel stage, as much as it stands as a testament to his exceptional talents as a performer, is also proof of the institutional racial barriers that kept Black dancers from gaining the larger publics and profits of the commercial playhouses. The fact that Lane was able to widen the field of his circulation beyond his local celebrity at the Five Points dance halls marks him, as Stephen Johnson has put it, as “the exceptional normal.”34

What was it, then, that enabled Lane’s “exceptional” crossover at this historical moment? In part, it was a comic prank. Both retrospective accounts and contemporaneous print records point to P. T. Barnum’s ever-opportunistic hand, which purportedly nudged

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33 African American dancers did participate in amateur circles, however (Masten, “Challenge Dancing in Antebellum America,” 623). The largest venues and the highest stakes were almost exclusively white. As both Masten and Eric Lott have noted, the dancer John Diamond billed himself as the greatest white dancer and advertised his challenges to “any other white person,” thereby cutting off Black participation in many of his dancing enterprises (qtd. in Lott, 118). See Masten, “Challenge Dancing in Antebellum America,” 615-616; Lott, 116-118.

34 In his study of the textual artifacts surrounding the British career of “Boz’s Juba,” Johnson links the microhistorian's concept of “the exceptional normal,” in which the attributes of a historical artifact “appears unusual to the historian but not, apparently, to the subject-culture” to Lane’s exceptional position in an otherwise segregated entertainment industry — the exception that proves the rule (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, eds. Marlis Schweitzer and Marina Moskowitz [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009], 23-50, 25).
Lane onto the stage of New York’s Vauxhall Gardens in the early 1840s. Thomas Low Nichols’s 1864 recollections link Lane’s ascent to Barnum’s ongoing struggles to control his on-again, off-again apprentice, John Diamond. When the Irish-American blackface dancer realized he could make more money once free of Barnum’s managerial grip, he “danced away into the infinite distance.” As Nichols tells it, Barnum’s pressing need of a new star dancer sent him to the Five Points dance halls, where he discovered Lane, “a boy who could dance a better break-down than Master Diamond,” but who inconveniently happened to be “a genuine negro, and not a counterfeit one.” This posed a problem for Barnum, since “there was not an audience in America that would not have resented, in a very energetic fashion, the insult of being asked to look at the dancing of a real negro.” In the framework of Nichols’s anecdote, this predicament was yet one more opportunity for Barnum’s ingenuity to shine. Barnum was “equal to the occasion,” Nichols writes: “He greased the little ‘nigger’s’ face and rubbed it over with a new blacking of burnt cork, painted his thick lips with vermilion, put on a woolly wig over his tight curled locks, and brought him out as the champion nigger-dancer of the world. Had it been suspected that the seeming counterfeit was the genuine article, the New York Vauxhall would have blazed with indignation.”

Nichols’s contribution to what we might call the canon of Barnum lore presses on the many ironies of the racial logic that drove the popular appeal of blackface minstrel performance. Concealing Lane’s Blackness with blackface, Barnum manipulated a system of entertainment built on a foundation of racial denigration and exclusion that, in its privileging of “the seeming counterfeit” over “the genuine article,” rendered a form of

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“blackness” that was based in the artifices of white mimicry. Yet this dominating structure of counterfeit blackness, or white racial parody, vulnerable as it was to the slippages of imitation, could occasionally short circuit, creating brief windows of opportunity for Black dancer and exploitive impresario alike. For Lane, that opportunity required impersonating a white dancer pretending to be a Black dancer, an obligatory feat that encapsulates the far-reaching indignities of minstrelsy’s cultural expropriations. And indeed, as Eric Lott has influentially argued, the comic mask of blackface, with its logic of the “counterfeit,” presented “a means of exercising white control over explosive cultural forms as much as it was an avenue of racial derision.”

Certainly Barnum’s hoax was no less of an exercise in white control over Black performance. The entire enterprise, as the Nichols anecdote gamely admits, was grounded in Barnum’s characteristically ruthless exploitation of his stage talent. What interests me, however, is the way in which the impresario’s humbug overlays the blackface counterfeit here, transfiguring the generic conventions of blackface comedy with the duplicitous play of the hoax. After all, this minstrel counterfeit was more than simply a quick fix for a manager in a tight spot; it was yet another opportunity for Barnum to cultivate his own mythos of huckster celebrity. Importantly, that mythos was already under active construction in the print culture of the early 1840s, well before Nichols’s admiring hindsight or the many editions of Barnum’s autobiography. And it relied, moreover, on the public disclosures of the local flash press.

An exchange that took place over the course of a few issues of The Sunday Flash in the fall of 1841 illustrates this play of public disclosure. In a brief communication signed

36 Lott, 115.
under the name “Mammy Daddy,” a writer exposes the charade of the faux-Diamond dancer at the Vauxhall Gardens, denouncing the managers for having “procured a fellow to dance negro extravaganzas, who not possessing any personal merit, has wisely assumed the name of one who does, (we refer to the celebrated Master Diamond) and whom he resembles as the vilest paste does the purest jewel.” With a show of great indignation, the writer extrapolates from one sham dancer to the systemic corruption of an entire genre of entertainment, accusing the managers of “get[ting] up mock challenges” to spark popular interest in productions that “would otherwise be the most dull affair in the world.”

More than Nichols’s anecdotal recollections, this contemporaneous accusation makes plain the particularity of the alleged public deception; what this commentator objects to is the passing off of an inferior dancer for a local celebrity — a trespass that ultimately compounds into a total undermining of the very premise of challenge dancing. And indeed, Barnum’s and Lane’s subversion of the more generalized racial counterfeit of blackface works to magnify the incongruities of this core offense. This intensification of the humbug is more fully articulated in a followup notice in the very next edition of The Sunday Flash. On September 26, 1841, another brief letter to the editors (this time from a “Rapsay Darby”) takes up the “Vauxhall dancing humbug” again. Claiming to be “fully acquainted with all the particulars of the matter,” this writer promises “further insight into these dark transactions.” The sham Diamond, this writer reveals, “is no more or less than a veritable negro.” He is, in fact, “the same negro, too, who was brought out the last season under the name of ‘Rattler,’ by no less a person than the notorious Barnham, alias Mammy Daddy [pseud.], “Double Refined Humbug,” The Sunday Flash, Sept. 19, 1841.
‘Barnaby Diddleum,’ of Joyce Heth and Pictorial Bible notoriety.”38 The fact that there is “a veritable negro” underneath the blackface of this would-be Diamond is just the final flourish in this hoax’s comic exposure, which only reaches its dénouement when the engineering hand of the “notorious” P. T. Barnum is fully revealed.

What began as a pseudonymous complaint, then, veers into a print exchange that serves as a thinly veiled puffery of Barnum’s reputation. For while “Rapsay Darby” maintains an ostensibly disdainful attitude towards this blackface hoax, he does not doubt who is ultimately responsible for it. Indeed, in an apparently recuperative gesture, his account actively downplays Lane’s role in the affair, describing “a very fair dancer” named “Juba,” who, with a “harmless and inoffensive disposition,” seems genuinely unaware of “the meanness and audacity of the swindler to which he is at present a party.” More of a pawn in Barnum’s scheme, Lane is characterized here as little more than an innocuous teenage apprentice. In fact, as Barnum’s “protege,” even Lane’s “fair” talents as a dancer are not entirely his own, since the famous humbugger “is the very teacher to whom the boy is indebted for most of his difficult steps.”39 Lane’s role in this comic hoax is thus quite clearly subordinated to Barnum’s clever command of stagecraft, to the point that Lane’s dancing body seems little more than a felicitous prop in Barnum’s self-serving schemes. On one level, such print commentary simply assists Barnum’s self-promotion as a capitalist huckster at what was in fact a quite precarious point in his career.40 It is no accident, for instance, that this print exchange in The Sunday Flash refers

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38 Rapsay Darby [pseud.], “Vauxhall Humbug Again,” The Sunday Flash, Sept. 26, 1841.
39 Ibid.
40 In the aftermath of the Panic of 1837, Barnum struggled as an itinerant showman, bouncing back and forth from New York business ventures to roadshow theater. Diamond’s desertion on tour left Barnum in dire financial straits. By the time of Lane’s recruitment in 1841, Barnum had taken a job writing articles for the New York Atlas and was scrambling to establish himself on firmer financial footing. See Benjamin Reiss, The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum’s America (Cambridge, MA:
multiply to Barnum and his alias, “Barnaby Diddleum,” the exceptionally fitting pseudonym under which Barnum had published a fictionalized version of his own career (“The Adventures of an Adventurer”) only a few months prior. Situated within the ecosystem of the New York flash press, then, the disclosure of Lane’s Blackness served as a vehicle for advertising Barnum’s own literary output — output that was itself a promotion of his diddling persona.41

But there is surprising depth to this odd instance of antebellum product placement. If Lane’s earliest appearances in the press pose as a sly bit of extra publicity for “Barnaby Diddleum,” they also index a particularly Barnumesque manipulation of antebellum popular culture and its many iterations of the minstrel sovereign — one we should recognize as an important point of departure for Lane’s own virtuosic conquests in the commercial field of minstrel play. Barnum’s self-fashioning as a diddling huckster relies on the mechanics of the hoax to manufacture publics of his own command. A useful means of projecting mastery over a volatile landscape of popular entertainment, the hoax supplies a vehicle for asserting what is on one level an essentially Hobbesian logic of comic superiority; with its operations of deception and exposure, the hoax confers the pleasures of dominance, allowing the hoaxer (as well as any knowing bystanders) to indulge in the “sudden glory” that comes from ridiculing the foolishness of others.42 Barnum says as much in “The Adventures of an Adventurer,” when he recounts with relish the exploits of his fictionalized persona. Exulting over the far-reaching success of

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41 It is possible too that Barnum planted this hoaxing publicity himself.

his notorious Joice Heth hoax, a far more troubling exhibition of minstrelized fraudulence than his Diamond-Lane dance swap, Barnum’s Diddleum crowns himself “the king of Humbug,” self-indulgently proclaiming, “O, it is great, it is glorious — I chuckle now at the might of my sovereignty, the extent of my works, and laugh in ecstasy!” Such sovereign laughter is literally printed on the page, marking the culmination of Diddleum’s victory over his public:

I have triumphed over all — I have marched a conqueror from city to city. The enlightened, the ignorant, the lawyer, the student, the divine — young, old, virtuos, vicious — the good, the bad, and the indifferent, and over and above all, the immaculate men who sit in judgment upon the world, the oracles of the press — the organs of the people, have been gulled by Barnaby Diddleum. Like the immortal Caesar I can say of the places I visited — Veni vidi vici — ha! ha! ha!43

In this amazing self-panegyric, Barnum’s Diddleum casts himself as a conquering sovereign, subjugating all those he encounters to his pleasure. Establishing his might with what James W. Cook has called the arts of deception, this laughing overlord places special emphasis on his manipulation of the press, or “the organs of the people.”44 And indeed, Diddleum’s demonstrated command over the press is central to his fantastical projection of sovereignty. For Diddleum’s show of sovereignty isn’t solely a function of his capacity to gull even the most discerning of critics. More than his ascent to the role of universal puppet master, Diddleum grounds his performance of sovereignty in his comic exultations, which reveal his trickster exploits through the emphatic stamp of his printed “ha! ha! ha!” The conquests of this self-styled dictator, in other words, are constituted in


the disclosure of comic pleasure, a disclosure that is conducted here through the
circulation of print. There is too a scriptive dynamism to Diddleum’s “ha!,” which
transmits the comic pleasures of his fanciful conquest into the bodies of his sporting
publics, inviting his readers to take vicarious part in the fabrication of a Caesar-like
sovereign of popular entertainment — a sovereign whose very ability to claim supremacy
stems from his subordination and exploitation of Black performers.

The fact that Diddleum’s triumphant laughter overwrites early figurations of Lane’s
dancing body in the New York flash press encapsulates the thorniness of the pleasures
that took hold in the racist play of antebellum minstrel entertainment. Barnum’s
manipulation of Lane’s figure exemplifies the ways in which his comic exploits
participated in the antebellum entertainment industry’s structural marginalization,
subjection, and expropriation of Black performance. Yet his hoaxing insertion of Lane’s
dancing body into a field of minstrel play — the comic appearance and comic disclosure
of a faux-Diamond — raises the specter of a still more powerful figure of comic
(mis)rule: a sovereign of the minstrel sovereign. Rather than dismiss Barnum’s sovereign
fantasia out of hand, we might consider how the antics of comic disclosure present
opportunities to rejigger the conditions of sovereign pleasure, playing on existing
structures of popular entertainment to assert new figureheads of social enjoyment. While
Barnum and New York’s flash press clearly subordinate Lane’s talents so as to cast the
diddling impresario in this sovereign role, Lane would continue to play in this comic vein
long after his early association with Barnum, developing dance acts that drew on the
tactics of comic disclosure to propel his virtuoso persona to new heights of commercial
stardom, and to still greater displays of authority.
The “King of All Dancers”

At the close of 1842, the same moment that Rice was playing the minstrel sovereign of Yankee Notes to Londoners, Lane’s representation in the New York flash press substantially altered. No longer a faux-Diamond, or a seemingly ignorant apprentice caught up in one of Barnum’s hoaxes, Lane was now cast as a potential rival to Diamond, a Black dancer from the Five Points cellars with more verve in his steps than any of the white dancers performing on the commercial stage. When a writer for The Whip and Satirist dropped into Almacks during an evening tour of the Five Points (“à la Boz”), it was the arrival of “young Juba” that left the greatest impression: “we never saw such dancing before….Talk about your Diamonds, why they are no comparison to the dancing we witnessed there.”

Lane soon found a way to capitalize on this flash reporting. Within a month, the same paper announced a challenge dance with the headline, “Excitement among the Sporting community — Match between John Diamond and Juba.”

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With the promise of large stakes and “an unparalleled display,” the proposed competition gave Lane entry to a commercial arena that was by this point predicated on the exclusion of Black performers. Yet the challenge dance allowed Lane to do more than simply gain access to stages that were otherwise off limits to him; it was the means through which he projected a mastery over the entire field of minstrel entertainment. Lane and Diamond would stage a handful of competitions in the mid-1840s, almost all of which Lane would win. Lane used these victories to style his stage persona, “Master Juba,” as a virtuoso champion of the commercial minstrel stage. As his local fame extended beyond the Five Points to large popular New York stages like the Bowery, Lane began to perform with various minstrel troupes, moving his dance from staged contest to the minstrel show proper. By 1845, Lane was headlining for multiple companies, extending his field of play with tours up the New England coast.47

Playbills like the one seen in Figure 4 placed “The Wonder of the World JUBA” at the literal center of their hyperbolic promotional content, describing him in an almost exclusively superlative fashion: “Acknowledged to be the Greatest Dancer in the World. Having danced with John Diamond at the Chatham Theatre for $500, and at the Bowery Ampitheatre for the same amount, and established himself as the KING OF ALL DANCERS!!”48 Figured as a supreme monarch, Lane developed star performances that explicitly linked his superior execution of jigs, reels, and the hornpipe to a rhetoric of

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47 For a history of Lane’s career, see James W. Cook, “Master Juba, The King of All Dancers! A Story of Stardom and Struggle from the Dawn of the Transatlantic Culture Industry,” *Discourses in Dance* 3, no. 2 (2006): 7-20. Cook notes that Lane’s choice to tour in the North, rather than follow the southern or western circuits that minstrel performers typically took, “was itself a product of segregation — a circuit somewhat peripheral to the antebellum show trade’s most prominent and profitable venues” (13).
sovereign rule that was rooted in exuberant conquest. Like Diddleum’s extravagant invocation of a triumphant Caesar, Lane routed his performance of sovereignty through a narrative conceit of hostile takeover, as he vanquished Diamond and claimed his glory. And like Diddleum, Lane’s sovereign persona asserted dominance and authority through acts of comic disclosure.

In fact, parody underpins the very manner in which Lane displayed his virtuosity, and, by extension, his unique show of sovereignty. As “Master Juba,” Lane built up a reputation and a repertoire for himself that tied his virtuosity as a dancer to an imitative agility — his ability to not only dance superbly, but to comically impersonate other dancers in the process. Consider, for instance, a playbill for the Ethiopian Minstrels from the mid-40s that gave “Master Juba,” the “Greatest Dancer in the World,” top billing (see...
Figure 5). In a program that features several of the pieces that Juba typically performed on tour, including his “Statue Dance,” it is his so-called “Imitation Dance” that takes pride of place as the show’s grand finale. Following the “Hurrah for Hard Times,” the playbill announces, the show will “conclude with the IMITATION DANCE, by Mast. JUBA, in which he will give correct Imitation Dances of all the principal Ethiopian Dancers in the United States. After which he will give an imitation of himself — and then you will see the vast difference between those that have heretofore attempted dancing and this WONDERFUL YOUNG MAN.”

Beginning with the star dancer “Mr. Richard Pelham,” one of the original members of the Virginia Minstrels troupe, the playbill ticks through a list of blackface celebrities that Lane will mimic and outperform with verve, before landing on the seventh and penultimate figure, “Mast. John Diamond,” his foremost rival. We might imagine this sequence of parodic dances as a kind of miniaturized survey of the minstrel field, one that turns the distinctive movements of star players into a catalogue of gestural caricatures. And like all good parody, Lane’s comic imitations effectively expose the mechanics of the original, revealing the form of minstrel dance as form, turning the dancer into a mechanical object of reproduction. In this sense, Lane’s parody highlights what Henri Bergson would call “the mechanical encrusted on the living,” but the mechanics here amount to more than the stylistic ticks of any given minstrel dancer; they amount to an entire genre of comic performance.

Parody, in short, is the vehicle through which Lane establishes his supremacy over his rivals, and by

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extension, minstrel performance more broadly.

But what does it mean to make a parody of minstrelsy? After all, blackface performance is itself already a violent form of racial parody, and minstrel players regularly indulged in their own versions of comic reflexivity, with winking allusions to the outrageous artifice of blackface — the passing of the racial counterfeit for “the genuine article.” Lane’s impersonations overlay these generic conventions of the form, transfiguring minstrel play with comic gestures that do not so much seek to dismantle or undo blackface entertainment as they strive to outdo and overrule its comic enterprise. While this project of comic mastery participates in the degrading humor of blackface, reproducing racist logics even as it seeks to project new sovereign pleasures, Lane’s “Imitation Dance” nevertheless presents a striking inversion of Barnum’s hoax. Instead of shamming his audiences as a faux-Diamond, Lane reveals his rivals for the shams they are: blackface entertainers who have only “heretofore attempted dancing.” In so doing, he refashions a Barnumesque humbug to project his own version of comic conquest, one that is firmly rooted in the ludic pleasure of his own superior dance.

This does not make Lane’s comic performances of virtuosity uncomplicated assertions of authority, nor does it disarm minstrel entertainment of its toxic white supremacy. As scholars of parody have shown, parody preserves even as it transforms its objects of comic imitation, reinscribing their aesthetic and social norms in the very act of mocking critique. This structural ambivalence underpins the political difficulties of

51 For instance, in the play Virginia Mummy (1835), which I take up in the following chapter, the racial constructedness of blackface is highlighted when a character observes that an ostensibly black body smells strongly of “shoe blacking” (T. D. Rice, Virginia Mummy in Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture, ed. W. T. Lhamon, Jr. [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003] 159-177, 172). For literary studies of minstrelsy’s prioritization of “the seeming counterfeit,” see Lott; Gilmore.

52 Studies of parody have explored the complex relations between parodic works and the subjects they
Lane’s impersonations, which remain thoroughly entangled in the racist structures of minstrel entertainment. Yet the ambivalences of Lane’s parodic dance also gesture to a performance of virtuosity that might outstrip the repertoire of the minstrel stage. After all, Lane’s catalogue of impersonations doesn’t end with Diamond. The apotheosis of Lane’s “Imitation Dance,” as this playbill construes it, is the final flourish of his performance, when he presents “an imitation of himself.” In fact, it is only with this capstone of self-imitation that the “vast difference” between the virtuoso dancer and his amateur rivals might come fully into view.

What is especially striking about this puckish turn of phrase is the way it situates Lane both inside and outside the hierarchies of minstrel dance. Dancing as “an imitation of himself,” Lane performs the signature steps and kinetic charisma that make up the characteristic hallmarks of Juba’s brand, but he does so at a step removed. This self-parody ironizes his public persona as a celebrity dancer, and in so doing, expands the very scope of his virtuosity. By framing his own stage persona as citation, Lane’s movements mark the distance between the generic system of minstrel dance and the range of possibilities for virtuosic movement, carving out a space of potentiality — the promise of the exceptional dancer’s movements to extend beyond the standard imitations of minstrel play. Thus, while Lane’s parodic dance demonstrates his mastery over the parody, showing how parody effectively resituates its objects of comic imitation within spatial and temporal fields. Margaret Rose helpfully unspools the etymology of parody, noting that *para* can mean “against” or “in opposition to,” as well as “beside” or “near to.” As such “parody, unlike forms of satire or burlesque which do not make their target a significant part of themselves, is ambivalently dependent upon the object of its criticism for its own reception” (Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 51). Building on Rose’s insights, Carolyn Williams has argued that parody has “a complex temporal dynamic” that is “powerfully modernizing,…In taking up its models, parody implicitly leaves them behind, or rather (to put the same point more actively), casts them back into the past, treating them as outmoded relics compared with itself” (Carolyn Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody*, [New York: Columbia University Press, 2011] 7, 9).
minstrel field, it also implicitly gestures to the possibility for new forms of movement, dance, and play that take shape beyond the conditions of minstrel practice.

Of course, if Lane hints at the possibility that his virtuosic dancing might also exist outside the clever play of jaunty pastiche, he does so, rather paradoxically, through a spiraling cascade of minstrel imitation. In actual reality, Lane’s “Imitation Dance” only further solidified his standing in the minstrel entertainment industry. After performing the dance on his regional tour, he returned to New York in 1846 to join Charley White’s Serenaders, one of the most prominent minstrel companies of the period. Lane brought his parodic showmanship to White’s Melodeon theater, where he performed alongside minstrel star Dan Emmett in “Going For the Cup,” a play (naturally, about a challenge dance) that White developed specifically to showcase Lane’s talents. Over the next two years, Lane’s celebrity mushroomed to the point that reviews of “Juba” found wider circulation in mainstream newspapers like the New York Herald. And in 1848, he sailed to England with Pell’s Serenaders, where his famed virtuosity exploded across the British press. What this history demonstrates, then, is the extent to which Lane’s comic play succeeded in positing a virtuoso status that effectively gamed an antebellum system of entertainment while remaining thoroughly embedded in its cultural reproduction.

There is nevertheless a fragility to Lane’s celebrity, a recurring sense of instability that continues to register even at the pinnacle of his fame. Much of that ongoing instability stemmed from the slipperiness of virtuosity itself, which posited relations of social power and social pleasure that were not necessarily antithetical to the contagious circulation of the minstrel sovereign. If Lane succeeded in styling himself as a kind of

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53 See Cook, “Master Juba, the King of All Dancers!” 14-15.
comic virtuoso, in other words, this did not ensure his absolute command over the proliferation of minstrel comedy.

Tracking Lane’s print reception during his British tour in 1848 — the ostensible height of his powers — shows some of the complexities of his virtuosic displays of mastery. As audiences flocked to see the star performer of Pell’s Serenaders, critical enthusiasm for Lane’s dancing reached new discursive heights, transforming his public image into something more than a champion dancer. Pointing again and again to the astonishing dynamism of his steps and the ineffable exceptionality of his frenetic movements, the press invoked a rhetoric of virtuosity commonly associated with the more serious-minded, highbrow entertainments of the nineteenth-century concert hall. In this sense, Lane’s ascendance on the popular minstrel stage mirrored the rise of virtuosi in more bourgeois art forms of the period, from classical music (Paganini, Liszt), to ballet (Elssler, Taglioni), to opera (Lind). These internationally celebrated figures of artistic and technical brilliance encapsulated, in various ways, the charismatic singularity that came to define a cultural imaginary of the Romantic artist-hero. “Master Juba” offered one more iteration to this discursive topos of virtuosity, one that charted out the experiential transcendence to be had in the realms of the comic low, with the ebullient play of the consummate minstrel clown.

One London critic’s witness to Lane’s run at the Vauxhall Gardens in the summer of 1848 models what was a fairly widespread understanding of his virtuosity of movement. His steps, the Sunday Times writes, “are original, novel, peculiar, curious, wonder-exciting, marvellous; toes and heels, ankles and calves, knees and thighs, elbows and wrists, nay even his eyes and the lobes of his ears, and the wool on his caput all dance; it
is a sort of wild saltatorial revel, at which every member of the human frame exerts itself for the universal delectation.” Building a catalogue of disjointed somatic exuberance, this critic reconstructs Juba’s dance as something that is seemingly greater than the sum of each of its moving parts, as a jumbled succession of bodily limbs, edges, and joints crescendo into a dazzling display of totalizing dynamism, in which “every member of the human frame” springs from the page in riotous profusion. In the effort to translate the sheer vitality of the dance event, this commentator repeatedly returns to a rhetoric of the incomparable, the superlative, and the indescribable: “Perrot and Leon are mere lay figures placed in juxtaposition with Juba….What poet may describe his Plantation Dance — what verse rehearse his verve — what rhythmic numbers sing his movements? No; neither Homer nor Catnach would do Juba justice — Juba must be seen, Juba must be heard. Juba’s self is Juba’s parallel.”

There is, of course, a mocking extravagance of rhetoric that tilts this critical panegyric into the realm of burlesque. Lane manages to make amateurs out of professionals, yet the comparison this critic draws here between his capering figure and ballet’s renowned dancer-choreographers also works to cast “Juba” as the comically low double to the leading practitioners of an increasingly technically disciplined dance form. This does not, however, make Lane the unequivocal butt of the joke. Rather, it is the very discursive frameworks for aesthetic reception that Lane’s comic dance seems to defy. Beyond the reach of the highest poets (even Homer!) and eluding the hack writers of Catnach’s popular penny press, Lane exceeds all manner of recording, whether it be high or low. Such effusions repeatedly insist upon the ephemerality of his dance, suggesting

54 “Ethiopian Serenaders,” *Sunday Times*, June 25, 1848.
55 Ibid.
that any attempt at reproducing Lane’s distinctive motility would be a fool’s errand, a cheapening of his unique aura. At the same time, the auratic singularity of Lane’s virtuosity coheres in the extravagant mimetic proliferation of his figure in print, a fact that asserts itself in the gathering momentum of this critic’s enthusiastic repetition of Lane’s stage name, as the emphatic closing lines of this press review follow an accelerating sentence rhythm punctuated by a multiplying number of Jubas. Indeed, the twinned “Juba’s” put forth in the final sentence of this critic’s review hint at the viral replication of figurative “parallel” selves, even as they declare the live dancer’s utter incomparability.

Taking stock of Lane’s performances through the lens of reviews like this one raises questions about the nature of virtuosity more broadly, and in particular, the mystified status of the virtuoso in relation to his many publics, which range from the audiences of live performance to the abstracted publics forged in the reportage of print. For though the half-facetious claim that “Juba’s self is Juba’s parallel” participates in what Judith Hamera calls “the singular hero-story of virtuosity,” it simultaneously flags the mimetic propulsion of public reception — the way in which virtuosity is itself a condition of the viral replication and proliferation of Lane’s figure in public discourse.56 In other words, the critical exaltation that cements Lane’s singularity involves an almost compulsive, apparently involuntary will to reproduce his movements.

Public intellectual Ralph Waldo Emerson noted as much in his lecture version of

“The Poet,” when he considered the spectator’s relation to the virtuoso. Dwelling on the responsiveness of Paganini’s audiences to the sounds he brought forth from his instrument, Emerson remarks that “In every feat of genius the beholder feels his latent and slumbering powers vindicated….what is the origin of our enjoyment but an appraisal of our own power, — that the range of human articulation reaches higher and lower than we had yet found, and every hearer goes away to copy or appropriate to himself as far as he can the new art?”

The spellbinding experience of witnessing the virtuoso’s artistic feats is something more than simply being held in the thrall of an extraordinary performance. The thrill of pleasure that the spectator feels is here characterized as a kind of personal vindication that engenders a mimetic responsiveness in the beholder, a responsiveness that Emerson suggests is proprietary in nature. To perceive virtuosity is to copy it, and in so doing, to incorporate its articulations into the self. In the process, the spectator’s mimetic impulses feed what is essentially her egotistic comprehension of the human instrument. These practices of mimetic appropriation in fact lend greater complexity and nuance to the monarchical logic that typically attends cultural discourses of virtuosity, which manifested in the critical praise for such widely different figures as the “artist-king” Paganini and Master Juba, “King of All Dancers.”

For while the stamp of virtuosity posits a performer in total command of the performance event, the


sociopolitical relations between the virtuoso and his publics are far from unilateral. What Emerson ultimately makes clear is the extent to which the mythos of the virtuoso’s totalizing dominion stems from the fact of the spectating public’s sovereignty.

In fact, Emerson’s description of the virtuosic dancer (“some incomparable Taglioni or Bayadere”) emphasizes above all the careful balance and proportionality of her display of mastery — the way in which she frames her artistic excellence with a humility of address. For Emerson, the public rejoice[s] in the grace of movement in wavelike form and action, in the fun of the coquetries, in the beautiful erectness of the body and the freedom and determination of her carriage, and in the perfect sympathy with the house, the mixture of deference and conscious superiority which puts her in perfect spirits and equality to her part. When the fair creature curtsies, her sweet and slow and prolonged Salam which descends and still descends until she seems to have found new depths of grace and condescension, earns well the profusion of bouquets and flowers which are hurled on the stage. But what is her charm for the spectators other than this, that she dances for them, or they dance in her feet, not being, — fault of some defect in their forms or education, — able to dance themselves? We must be expressed.  

More than simply her display of technical and physical skill (“the grace of movement”), more even than her expression of bodily command (“the freedom and determination of her carriage”), Emerson’s virtuoso establishes a communion with her audience by performing a unique “mixture of deference and conscious superiority.” Indeed, it is striking that Emerson dwells on the dancer’s extended bow to her public, tracing the “prolonged Salam” of her curtsy as her body “descends and still descends” into a gesture of submission that “earns well” the audience’s praise and adoration. If the virtuoso stands as a model for a sovereign ruler, it is only because she seems to offer herself so completely to her public. Far from an absolute monarch, the virtuoso figures forth a

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50 Emerson, 350-351.
strikingly popular sovereignty, one in which the public lays claim to the artist’s movements as an expression of themselves. The virtuoso is, in short, a scriptive body with which the public plays.

There is too an imperial dimension to the popular enjoyment of this scene of virtuosic apotheosis. It is telling that Emerson invokes a somewhat amorphous figure of “some incomparable Taglioni or Bayadère,” turning his focus away from his initial example of Paganini to linger on the image of a hazily exoticized female dancer. Implicit in such a turn are the raced and gendered structures of feeling that underpin the experiential conditions of the virtuoso’s artistry. Coded as a feminized Other, the virtuoso stands as a vessel for the mimetic projections and appropriations that generate the public’s sovereign pleasures, which proliferate both in the performance event and beyond it. If the virtuoso’s displays of mastery create provisional and experiential forms of popular sovereignty in the social collectives she assembles, the gratification of her audiences, which is to say, their heightened sense of entitlement, reenacts the dominating structures of race and empire that frame public belonging.

Emerson’s encapsulation of virtuosity’s collective imperative — “We must be expressed” — strikes at the underlying tensions of Lane’s virtuoso persona. A tactical assertion of a Black sovereign authority in a field of commercial entertainment that was otherwise devoted to Black exclusion and denigration, Lane’s evolving reputation as the “King of All Dancers” remained grounded in a system of public reception and

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60 Marie Taglioni starred in the 1831 ballet “La Bayadère” (distinct from the Marius Petipa ballet that is still regularly performed today), in which she performed the title role of an Indian temple dancer. What Emerson describes here, in other words, is another kind of racialized, orientalist performance, in which an Italian dancer embodies the movements of the virtuosic Other, and in so doing, establishes her own virtuosity.
appropriation that cast his displays of dominance as the expression of a distinctly white popular conquest. Because the public “We” that found expression in Lane’s performances was an almost exclusively white collectivity, in other words, his virtuosic play was persistently taken up and reproduced as the culminating triumph of the minstrel sovereign.

The Black Virtuoso and the Archives of Minstrel Entertainment

These difficulties persisted throughout Lane’s career, underpinning both the height of his celebrity and his precipitous decline. In closing, I want to consider two print artifacts from Lane’s late career: one documenting the height of his virtuoso celebrity, the other his imminent fall out of circulation. As we shall see, these mirroring records of Lane’s ephemeral dancing demonstrate the enduring purchase of the minstrel sovereign across the circuits of transatlantic print culture and underscore the structural precarities of Lane’s comic play.

The first is a large piece of silk, approximately 18 by 24 inches, produced in the summer of 1848, at the pinnacle of Lane’s international fame (see Figure 6). A souvenir from London’s Vauxhall Gardens, the silk presents a collection of print reviews for the leading production of the season, or, as the silk’s headline proclaims, the “Opinions of the London Press on the Performances of Mr. G. W. Pell’s SERENADERS, Including BOZ’S JUBA, T. F. BRIGGS, The greatest Banjo Player in the World, J. H. EVERTON, J. W. VALINTINE, and M. C. LUDLOW, lately arrived from America.”61 With typeface

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that selectively emphasizes the minstrel troupe’s name (Serenaders) and its star performer (Boz’s Juba) in bold, hollow, block letters, the silk’s header makes “Juba” the unequivocal centerpiece of this freshly imported American entertainment. Below the headline are four densely packed columns of text, filled to the brim with excerpts from an array of press outlets — the Sunday Times, the Weekly Dispatch, the Observer, the Era, even a mention from the Deutsche Londoner Zeitung. While these extracts pay an occasional passing homage to Pell’s dexterous handling of the bones, it is Juba that overwhelmingly dominates. In what is essentially a novelty newspaper sheet, “Boz’s Juba” appears in a seemingly endless stream of print reiterations.

At once a record of Lane’s dancing and a record of his proliferation in print, the Vauxhall Silk documents a history of reception in which the press, like the audience of Emerson’s imagined Bayadère, danced in Lane’s feet. In so doing, the Silk shows how the virtuoso dancer and the minstrel sovereign so easily converged in the imitative appropriations of the press. It is worth stressing, for example, that it is “Boz’s Juba” that is the central object of the Silk’s archive. Dickens’s American Notes features prominently in the Silk’s collection of reviews, and is even quoted at length by different London reviewers. Indeed, the Silk’s accumulation of reviews reveals a citational practice that made Dickens something of a literary touchstone for critical aficionados. Invoking “Boz” and American Notes time and again, critics took Dickens’s portrayal of Lane as the urtext from which to model and further elaborate the dancer’s exceptionalism in print. That Lane’s stage persona became so firmly attached to his brief cameo in American Notes

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62 For another critical reading of this cultural object, see Johnson, “Testimonials in Silk.”
63 As Stephen Johnson puts it, “the Dickens quotation stimulated what was, in effect if not in intent, a creative writing contest among critics, multiplying the number of descriptions that the troupe might appropriate as endorsements” (“Testimonials in Silk,” 36).
underscores just how dependent his virtuoso celebrity was upon the conditions of print circulation. What the Vauxhall Silk presents to us, then, is the predicament of

Figure 6. “Royal Vauxhall Gardens: opinions of the London press on the performances of Mr. G. W. Pell’s Serenaders, including Boz’s Juba, T.F. Briggs, the greatest banjo player in the world, J.H. Everton, J.W. Valentine, and M.C. Ludlow, lately arrived from America,” Silk Broadside (Lambeth: W.J. Dailey, 1848). Courtesy of Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library.
becoming “Boz’s Juba” — the virtuoso dancer caught in the possessive thrall of antebellum print culture.

We might imagine too how the popular life of the Vauxhall Silk participated in the cultural phenomenon that was “Juba.” Entering into circulation at the performance venue itself, the Silk offered spectators a print field of discursive play that readily paired with, and even immediately overlaid the live performance of Lane’s dance. Peripheral to the actual performance event yet proliferating second-hand renditions of Lane’s singular figure within his orbit, the Silk mediates audience reception by offering spectators a curated catalogue of public reiteration. A piece of ephemera that materially shaped the experience of Lane’s virtuosity at the Vauxhall Gardens, the Silk was also an item of cultural memorabilia: a memento marking not just Lane’s appearances at Vauxhall but also the public enthusiasm that attends a blockbuster hit — the sociality of a summer fad. Posing as a new collection of “notes” for general (re)circulation, such a memento undoubtedly made its own material impact at the Vauxhall Gardens and beyond. As Lane bowed to his audiences, the Vauxhall Silk fluttered and fanned in patrons’ hands, quite literally enacting another version of Hiccory Dick’s closing plaudit: the appeal to circulate himself as “Yankee Notes.” The Vauxhall Silk, in short, turns Lane into the minstrel sovereign.

Consider, by contrast, a review printed in The Era two summers later, when Lane appeared in Manchester. Quite unlike the Vauxhall Silk’s archive of effusive praise, this 1850 review serves up a warning to the star dancer. Observing that Juba is “jumping very fast at the Colosseum,” The Era ominously notes that “too fast is worse than too slow,”
advising the dancer “to be wise in time. It is easier to jump down than to jump up.”

More of a thinly veiled threat than a genuine critique, this notice clearly aims to check the “King of All Dancers” with an injunction that amounts to nothing less than commanding a Black virtuoso to “know his place.” While this review makes plain the extent to which Lane’s ludic figurations of virtuosic mastery were always beholden to the pleasure of his white audiences, it also raises more questions than it answers. What had changed since Lane’s triumph at the Vauxhall Gardens in 1848, and what did it mean that his dancing had become “too fast”? What did spectators expect to see when Lane took the stage in Manchester, and what was it that he presented to them instead?

Cultural historians such as Stephen Johnson and James W. Cook have illuminated the ways in which this review obliquely registers the growing conflict between Lane’s assertions of professional autonomy and the entertainment industry in which he performed. It is significant that this review was published just a few months after Lane broke away from Pell’s Serenaders to embark on a solo tour of Britain. Performing as a free agent (and free of white management of his profits), Lane’s dancing undoubtedly took on a different aspect, altering once again the conditions of his comic play. Certainly his steps towards greater independence reverberated in the industry. As Cook has suggested, not only did Lane’s departure anger Richard Pelham, the manager of Pell’s Serenaders, his solo performances in Manchester may also have been the target of

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racialized resentment from the city’s stage workers. “Too fast” for minstrelsy’s show business, Lane may have challenged too directly the institutional structures of popular entertainment that had previously tolerated, and even happily incorporated, his comic manipulations. We might extend these historical speculations to the aesthetics of comic reception, asking what *The Era*’s stricture to “be wise in time” reveals about Lane’s shifting relationship to the comic genre of blackface minstrelsy. Did Lane’s solo appearances defy, either implicitly or explicitly, the canned comedy of the minstrel show, the mass circulation of its bodily scripts? Dancing outside the generic apparatus of the minstrel show, perhaps Lane offered his spectators displays of virtuosic movement that were no longer legible as blackface comedy — displays that may have hearkened back to his early days in the dance halls of the Five Points. Or, perhaps his dancing had ventured into new experimental terrain, pushing towards new steps, new forms of bodily movement that his “Imitation Dance” had implicitly gestured towards, but not yet expressed. What is clear, however, is that by the fall of 1850, Lane’s dancing was no longer in sync with his public. His rhythm was off kilter; his comic timing didn’t land.

Lane’s virtuoso persona swiftly faded from a wider public view after 1850. As his dancing figure receded from the minstrel scripts that continued to circulate across transatlantic networks of performance and print, the challenge of contesting the racist parameters of antebellum comedy’s sovereign pleasures endured. Performing as as virtuoso dancer, Lane’s comic play pushed against the exclusionary boundaries of the

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65 According to Cook, “In the weeks leading up to Lane’s arrival, Manchester newspapers reported that the city’s stage workers were growing increasingly angry about low salaries, poor job security, and a growing influx of ‘foreign celebrities.’ This, in turn, seems to have provoked Britain’s leading show business periodical, *The Era*, to draw a kind of line in the sand.” (“Master Juba, The King of All Dancers!,” 17-18)
definitive comic genre of his day. Yet his career also demonstrates the constraints of the
comic player’s displays of virtuosic authority — the extent to which his comic motility
remains tethered to the publics who so responsively dance in his feet. Lane’s ascent to
international celebrity, while temporarily expanding the material scope of his play, could
never sufficiently contest the conditions of his public reception, much less reconfigure
the white patronage, audience formations, and press reportage that so insistently grafted
the minstrel sovereign onto his dancing body. As long as Lane’s minstrel play remained
bound to the overwhelming white hegemony of antebellum commercial entertainment,
with its ongoing marginalization and denigration of Black performers and Black patrons,
his play on and play within a racist comic genre could only gesture towards, without ever
fully expressing, a form of popular enjoyment that might challenge the white supremacy
of antebellum public life. But if the trajectory of his career illustrates the enduring
difficulties of reconfiguring the racist comedies that guided antebellum democratic
culture, and which continue to underpin U.S. democratic culture today, his earliest
dancing days point in another direction. Dancing with mixed-raced audiences in the
cellars and saloons of the Five Points, Lane contributed to an interracial entertainment
culture, where players like entrepreneur Pete Williams managed to cultivate spaces of
popular play that could imagine and figure forth forms of Black enjoyment that existed
beyond “the relations of bondage.” Though never entirely free from the infiltrations of
minstrel comedy, such spaces, and the ludic publics they assembled, remind us of other
forms of convivial sociality that continued to be imagined, even felt in the material
relations of the dance. Lane’s virtuosic figure offers us a scriptive archive that includes
those other forms of sociality, which took root in the experiential pleasures of the dancing
body, and which persisted in the face of minstrel comedy’s cultural hegemony.
Chapter Four

Funny Mummies: Comic Unravelings of the Antebellum Carnivalesque

One of the most popular minstrel plays of the antebellum period has considerable fun with a mummy. In T. D. Rice’s *Virginia Mummy* (1835), the dashing Captain Rifle plots to reunite with his beloved Lucy by distracting her guardian, the quack scientist Dr. Galen, with an object he greatly desires. Galen seeks an ancient Egyptian mummy upon which to test his new life elixir, so Rifle searches for any spare body that might pass for one. Enter Ginger Blue, the blackface minstrel hero who finds himself literally wrapped up in a mummy scheme when Rifle employs him to play dead. Posing as the mummy’s Egyptian owner, Rifle presents Galen with a painted and boxed-up Ginger Blue, who quickly takes center stage as Rifle maneuvers to romance Lucy in the wings. The farce that ensues revolves around the sustained misrecognition — by Galen, his attendants, his house servants — of Ginger Blue’s vibrant “black” body for a mummified corpse. From the painter who would capture antiquity’s likeness, to the medical assistant hoping to chisel off a toe for a souvenir, to the maid who cannot resist sticking her finger in an ancient Egyptian’s mouth, every white person in Galen’s household wants a piece of this blackface mummy. In this sense, the play’s comic business is predicated on the easy fungibility of the mummified curio for the minstrelized body, both grotesque figures of

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¹ First performed in Mobile, Alabama, on April 22, 1835, at a benefit performance for Noah Ludlow, *Virginia Mummy* was performed repeatedly throughout the antebellum period. Many other actors and minstrel troupes appropriated Rice’s mummy farce, including the Christy Minstrels and the famed Ira Aldridge. See W. T. Lhamon, Jr., “Introduction,” to *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1-92, especially 46-52.
blackness that overlapped in the antebellum popular imagination.

What does this minstrel mummy farce tell us about the practices of grotesque bodily display in the antebellum period? And how does a figure like Ginger Blue engage the contested parameters of sociopolitical belonging in a democratizing popular culture? On one level, Ginger Blue’s comic play capitalizes on the cultural phenomenon of antebellum mummymania. As the premise of *Virginia Mummy* so richly suggests, mummies were objects of intense public fascination in the early nineteenth century. Drawing large crowds to museums and lecture halls on both sides of the Atlantic, mummy displays linked the burgeoning fields of Egyptology and ethnography to the freak shows and pseudo-scientific exhibitions of popular museum culture. Mummymania stemmed from a renewed Western interest in ancient Egypt, spurred by Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt (1798) and the discovery of the Rosetta Stone (1799). Colonial conquest supported new scientific and archaeological research, paving the way for a steady stream of plundered artifacts to flow into Western Europe and eventually the United States. Transatlantic fascination with Egyptology and the study of hieroglyphics percolated through antebellum culture, appearing in extensive print reviews of Champollion’s work, influencing transcendental philosophy, prompting revivalist architecture and interior design, and even inspiring Joseph Smith’s “translation” of Mormon scripture.² Imported mummies took center stage in this cultural phenomenon,
first posing as models of anatomy for physicians before becoming fixtures of the antebellum museum. Famed scientists such as Thomas Pettigrew and Augustus Granville conducted mummy unwrappings and dissections to great effect in London in the 1820s and 1830s. In the ensuing decades, popular Egyptologist George R. Gliddon staged his own elaborate mummy unrollings in the United States. Accounts of these public exhibitions were reprinted and well-circulated across the U.S. press. Meanwhile, museum proprietors such as Rubens Peale, John Scudder, and later P. T. Barnum acquired mummies for their own collections. In addition to becoming important features of the museums’ general exhibitions, these mummies were unwrapped and examined on different occasions, creating special expositions to which a more select public could purchase tickets. Over time, the odd mumified import to the United States became a major popular draw. What had early in the century served as anatomy demonstrations for smaller audiences of primarily medical students soon morphed into larger-scale sensations, as the staged “unrolling” of Egyptian mummies became a recurring feature of the antebellum museum and lecture circuit.

As a minstrel farce, then, *Virginia Mummy* deploys the grotesque contortions of its blackface hero to comically engage with another, cognate form of grotesque bodily display that was then percolating through antebellum popular culture. And in fact, the overlay of minstrel and mummy grotesquerie onto Ginger Blue’s body registers a deeper racial logic underlying much of the cultural discourse surrounding mummies. Public personas like Gliddon and Barnum took advantage of the mummy’s grotesque allure to promote their own lectures and exhibitions, many of which popularized racist theories of

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polygenesis and advanced, implicitly and at times explicitly, a proslavery ideology. *Virginia Mummy* even nods to the racial politics underpinning antebellum mummy science through the figure of Galen, whose mummy obsession stems from a deep-seated conviction in the superiority of the ancient Egyptian race over the “degenerated” amalgamations of modern society. Galen’s quixotic project to reawaken a putatively long since departed Egyptian and record his wondrous history parodies a scientific discourse that anxiously insisted upon the whiteness of a celebrated ancient civilization. Of course, the joke of *Virginia Mummy* is that Ginger Blue makes a mockery of Galen’s presumptions, overturning the doctor’s scientific ambitions with his freewheeling capers as a grotesque blackface mummy. Biting and kicking the proprietary hands of unsuspecting white bystanders, this mummy snatches food, whiskey, and fun at every turn, disrupting the cultural hierarchies of Galen’s drawing room. In the process, Ginger Blue’s performance displays an awareness of the power of his body as reified cultural object. By the play’s end, when an enraged and thoroughly gulled Galen vows to shoot his “live mummy,” Ginger Blue exclaims, “What? After bowing before me, as King Solomon did before de She nigga?” Ginger Blue’s slyness here capitalizes on Galen’s earlier pretentious enjoyment of his supposedly silent mummy (ironically, a mummy he believes can be made to speak his language). His punchline effectively punctures Galen’s absurd quest for scientific grandiosity by marshaling a racial logic of “blackness” as grotesque. But this comic inversion extends to a larger “white” cultural heritage upon which Galen’s grandiosity is founded, at once mocking an antebellum cultural fantasy of

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4 Ibid., 177.
ancient Egypt as racially pure while also reasserting “black” authority within that fantasy. The pleasure of such a joke insists upon the fundamental baseness of Ginger Blue’s body, only to reassert its commanding presence within the cultural order, thereby unsettling the very logic upon which the cultural order relies.

The comic operations of *Virginia Mummy* recall the social practices of the carnivalesque: a generic category of festive comic performance broadly characterized by its temporary upheaval of official culture through the exhilarating contortions of the grotesque body. Stemming from what Mikhail Bakhtin has called a tradition of “folk carnival humor,” Ginger Blue’s antics enact a form of topsy-turvy governance that encourages the audience’s delight at Galen’s unwitting “bow” before his “Virginia mummy.” But the popular fun to be had from such mummy grotesquerie is far more vexed than anything Bakhtin described, given that the carnivalizing operations of Ginger Blue’s painted body at once overturn cultural authority and reinscribe the racial hierarchies that guide the pleasures of the minstrel show. If the chaos caused by a blackface mummy gave pleasure to lowbrow and middlebrow audiences, it was as much at the expense of Black people as it was of authority figures like Galen. Tavia Nyong’o has observed that the reversals of carnivalesque performance take on new meaning when situated against the backdrop of antebellum democracy, which “professed an equality of condition rather than inherited, hierarchal status.” The conflicts of this political system require, Nyong’o argues, that we “account for how the carnivalesque might participate in the imagined liberties of a democratic national culture, operating itself as a mode of governmentality.”

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5 Tavia Nyong’o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 104.)
exemplary form of antebellum carnivalesque performance, minstrelsy capably manufactures popular pleasure on a mass scale in ways that effectively sustain an exclusionary, race-based form of public belonging. As an enduring icon of the minstrel stage, then, Ginger Blue demonstrates how the comic fun of the carnivalesque gets so thoroughly wrapped up in a performance genre that Eric Lott calls “one of our earliest culture industries.” Yet the multiple, ambivalent, even conflicting pleasures generated by Ginger Blue’s overdetermined body equally suggest that the carnivalesque’s sublation to the coalescing hegemony of mass entertainment is far more uncertain than we might initially presume.

In this chapter, I interrogate the complexities of antebellum carnivalesque performance and its politics, asking how and to what extent the carnivalesque takes part in the disciplinary forces of democratic popular culture. To do so, I turn to a largely forgotten archive of mummy play, investigating how comic mummy figures like Ginger Blue configure and reconfigure the parameters of public assembly and the somatic conditions of collective enjoyment. For while much of antebellum mummymania supported the racial and ethnographic systems taking shape in popular scientific discourse, comically “live” mummies like Ginger Blue tapped into the carnivalizing energies of the grotesque body in ways that destabilized and disrupted those hierarchies of cultural authority. This was no simple political opposition of the unserious against the serious, however. As I aim to show, serious-minded lecturers and would-be impresarios like Egyptologist George Gliddon sought to harness the participatory dynamism of the carnivalesque to the mummy spectacles they orchestrated for antebellum publics. And

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while more deliberately comic performances of the rampant mummy exercised a politics of populist pleasure, their disorderly, topsy-turvy fun was implicated in the commoditization of antebellum performance culture, in which mass forms of entertainment sold ideologies of race, gender, and bodily normativity to what were presumed to be (and very often were) compliant publics.

But the joke of the live mummy activated a form of comic play that critically engaged the conditions of popular enjoyment in the age of Barnum, revealing how the pleasures of the grotesque body often exceeded the parameters of spectatorship established by new entertainment genres like blackface minstrelsy and the freak show. Sophisticated comedies of mummification and public spectatorship, including one featured in Robert Montgomery Bird’s novel *Sheppard Lee* (1836), tease out these surplus pleasures to craft comic denouements of the mummy run amok. In the process, they delve into the allure of the mummy’s grotesque body, as it cultivates participatory forms of spectatorship that outstrip and even overrule the commanding reach of the mummy curator and impresario. As I shall demonstrate, those carnivalizing dynamics played out not only in the theoretical engagements of comic literary culture, but in mummymania’s actual historical record. Bringing the insights of antebellum mummy play to bear on accounts of far more serious-minded mummy lectures, I explore the political implications of Gliddon’s famously (and hilariously) botched mummy unwrapping at the Boston Tremont Temple in the summer of 1850. I show how Gliddon’s comic accident not only undercuts the racist pleasure systems of his polygenist lecture-spectacle, but actually unveils the surplus pleasure that marks the grotesque body’s autonomy within an arena of public enjoyment. Such moments of comic unraveling, I argue, provide political openings for imagining
alternative formulations of popular enjoyment at the scene of grotesque bodily display. I conclude by positing the abolitionist career of freedom seeker Henry “Box” Brown as one such alternative. With public performances that prominently featured the postal box that delivered him to freedom, Brown presents an unorthodox figuration of the revived mummy, one that exuberantly flouts the parameters of Gliddon’s grotesquerie. His evolving repertoire of multimedia lectures and carnivalesque processions reclaims the pleasures of the grotesque for the resurrected body, reorganizing popular enjoyment around an antislavery politics.

**Carnivalizing Bodies: Sheppard Lee’s Mummy**

What happened when audiences laughed at a capering mummy? The antics of funny mummies like Ginger Blue raise thorny questions about the politics of popular enjoyment in the early nineteenth century. To laugh at Ginger Blue’s lark about Galen’s drawing room is to enter into a temporary collectivity drawn together by the exhilarating rule of the debased body over figures of bourgeois authority. But to laugh in these circumstances is also to surrender one’s body to the racist pleasure-making systems of an explosive form of mass entertainment, blackface minstrelsy. Ginger Blue illustrates how the liberatory transgressions of carnivalesque performance come to regulate the boundaries of sociopolitical inclusion even as they rock the boat, manufacturing “black” pleasure for white audiences through the marginalization of Black people. The ambivalences of such popular laughter have long preoccupied scholars of blackface minstrelsy, and in particular scholars of early minstrelsy, who have found this mixture of insurgent populism and racial toxicity to be an irreconcilable hallmark of the genre — a contested hotbed of radical political potential and foreclosure. Because critical scholarship on early
minstrelsy has often characterized the historical trajectory of the minstrel show as moving from the politically volatile, underclass fringes to the mainstream, bourgeois center of nineteenth-century culture, early minstrel plays like *Virginia Mummy* are often privileged for their comparatively transgressive and potentially subversive stagings of comic “blackness.”

Tavia Nyong’o has observed that critical efforts to recover early minstrelsy’s subversive edge arise largely out of anti-essentialist and anti-capitalist critiques, which are generally invested in the potential of popular forms to operate as correctives to the sanctimonious order of official culture. At stake in such arguments is “the place of enjoyment in history, particularly popular and convivial forms of enjoyment that resist the censoriousness of bourgeois culture, which are deliberately offensive and crude.”

And yet, as Douglas A. Jones has argued, the “polyvalent” pleasures of early minstrelsy’s enactments of “antiauthoritarian and crafty black characters” did not so much seek to forge social or political alliances with actual African-Americans, but to

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7 Historians of blackface minstrelsy have traditionally organized the genre’s formal development and cultural impact into more or less distinct phases. See, for example, Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). Toll’s indispensable study of the minstrel show in nineteenth-century America charts the development of this almost instantaneously popular genre as it emerges from a protean, folkloric traditions and establishes its own formulaic patterns and theatrical conventions, including its classic tripartite performance structure. Eric Lott’s influential study of antebellum minstrelsy and the white working class characterizes the history of the minstrel show’s solidification into a standardized, widely disseminated form of show business in terms of decline and political foreclosure. As Lott puts it, “minstrelsy formed one major part of urban popular culture, settling into a rather lifeless, and enormously profitable, institutionalization in the late 1850s” (Lott, 73). In a similar vein, W. T. Lhamon, Jr.’s survey of T. D. Rice’s career delineates a trajectory that moves from exuberant turbulence to static paralysis, as the potential volatility of Rice’s material became increasingly fixed within “the inertia of social misreadings” of mainstream consumer culture (Lhamon, “Introduction,” 31).

8 Nyong’o 113-14. For critical approaches to early blackface minstrelsy that explore its subversive political potential, see Lott; Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Lhamon, “Introduction.” For his own part, Nyong’o seeks to nuance and complicate early minstrelsy’s relation to a popular or working-class culture by focusing on the ambivalences of antebellum Black commentary on the performance genre. Nyong’o demonstrates how Black reception of minstrelsy’s racial grotesquerie informed Black self-presentation and the growing counter-discourse of respectability. See Nyong’o, 103-134.
further the “distinctive race- and class-based ends” of white working-class men. If early minstrelsy has subversive impulses, they are always framed within a discourse of “white slavery” or white “blackness” that excludes Black people.⁹

I want to suggest that these debates register the larger political problematics of carnivalesque performance, not just within the particular generic conditions of blackface minstrelsy, but across the broader panoply of antebellum grotesquerie. In fact, the question of the relative radicalism of such transgressive forms of popular enjoyment has long preoccupied critical discourse on carnival and the carnivalesque. Bakhtin famously found carnival’s ritualized assertion of popular laughter at the expense of “official” culture to be a vital source of social regeneration. By temporarily overturning the everyday hierarchies of high and low, carnival makes a liberatory politics available to all those who partake in its collective play.¹⁰ According to this now classic formulation, carnival presents a utopian vision of a radical “folk laughter,” one in which the social inversions of festive play yield a popular plenitude that is available to all. While Bakhtin’s account remains definitive to scholarship on carnival and the carnivalesque, his valorization of a folk-based politics has also met a good deal of critical skepticism. For a number of literary and cultural critics, the nostalgic glow that backlights Bakhtin’s celebration of medieval folk culture makes for a seductive history of popular transgression that actually obscures the structures of political authority that sanction carnival’s festive play. Terry Eagleton, for example, notes that carnival is “a licensed

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¹⁰ Participation by “the people” is in fact crucial to Bakhtin’s idealist politics. “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people,” he writes. The people “live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (Mikhail Bakhtin, _Rabelais and His World_, trans. Helene Iswolsky [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984], 7).
affair,” while Umberto Eco similarly argues that carnival “can exist only as an authorized transgression.” In addition to this “failure to do away with the official dominant culture,” Peter Stallybrass and Allon White flag the “uncritical populism” that often accompanies critical characterizations of carnival as counter-hegemonic: “carnival often violently abuses and demonizes weaker, not stronger, social groups — women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who ‘don’t belong’ — in a process of displaced abjection.” Such reminders point to the relative limits of carnival’s revolutionary potential, making clear that its social subversions are in fact “only play,” and play deemed permissible by those in power.

In the process, these more skeptical qualifications have contributed to what seems to be an inevitable discursive binary, which has at times threatened to devolve critical engagements with carnival into an irresolvable debate over its essentially subversive or conservative status. But as we have seen with the agonistic audiences of the early national playhouse, socially sanctioned, “quasi-legitimate” forms of play can in fact hold substantial political value in their very status as “only play.” Under particular historical circumstances, the boundaries of play — social behavior that often establishes its unserious, “just for fun” relations via the demarcation of spatial and durational limits — actually enable, rather than simply contain, the politics of popular rule. Moreover, as Stallybrass and White have argued, “the politics of carnival cannot be resolved outside of a close historical examination of particular conjunctures: there is no a priori revolutionary

vector to carnival and transgression.”¹³ The social practices of carnival and carnivalesque performance, in other words, can serve a range of political functions, from potentially fomenting popular revolution to simply providing a venue for the populace to “blow off” steam, but the sociopolitical dynamism of such play is always historically contingent.

Historical context is indeed crucial to understanding the popular pleasures of carnivalesque performance, and not simply because the medieval folk traditions that so fascinated Bakhtin reflected and responded to sociopolitical formations that were worlds apart from the emergent democratic mass culture of the antebellum United States. The modernizing forces at work across nineteenth-century U.S. culture inevitably alter how a popular or “folk” culture is manufactured and consumed, shifting the parameters of popular enjoyment, and more specifically comic pleasure, in significant ways. In a period when figures like P. T. Barnum and E. P. Christy were building entertainment empires that reached audiences on something approaching a mass scale, comic and semi-serious performance genres like the minstrel show and the freak show developed formulaic patterns of popular enjoyment that were grounded in the staged encounter with grotesque bodily difference. Any effort to reckon with the politics of antebellum carnivalesque performance is to reckon with its participation in this history of popular entertainment, a history that has often been understood as part of the broader emergence of modernity’s culture industries. In other words, carnivalesque performance finds itself increasingly enmeshed in the machinations of the culture industry, and what Bakhtin identified as its essentially comic festivities find new, if by no means improved, expression in the dissemination of mass entertainment. It is perhaps for this reason that critical

¹³ Ibid., 16.
engagements with the politics of carnivalesque performance in the age of modernity
generally take a decidedly bleaker view. Eco provides a wonderfully withering
illustration of this line of critique: “today’s mass media, undoubtedly instruments of
social control…are based mainly upon the funny, the ludicrous, that is, upon a continuous
carnivalization of life. To support the universe of business, there is no business like show
business.”14 Carnivalesque performance, in other words, has become the anesthetic for
popular culture, and to enjoy its comic fun is to become complicit in the systemic
disenfranchisements of late stage capitalism.

Of course, the late twentieth-century mass media that troubled Eco is related to but
decidedly distinct from the genres of mass entertainment that took shape in the age of
Barnum. Far from total standardization, antebellum popular entertainment had not yet
fully ossified into the mass dissemination of rote forms of amusement, and carnivalizing
gures like Ginger Blue found widespread appeal against the backdrop of a much more
uncertain and experimental world of pleasure-making. It is precisely in this liminal
moment of historical transition that popular entertainment creates its own political
apertures — spaces of critical reflexivity in which the very conditions of collective
spectatorship and amusement might be probed. Antebellum constructions of the funny,
the ludicrous, and the unserious were in fact central agents in this interstitial play, even as
they helped establish the exclusionary boundaries of democratic public belonging.
Instead of simply extending a largely presentist critique of a more generalized modernity
and its failings, or situating antebellum iterations of carnivalesque performance within a
longer trajectory of what Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai have recently described as the

14 Eco, 4.
growing “demand for permanent carnival” in public life,\textsuperscript{15} I want to return to the somatic conditions of the carnivalesque as they were experienced in the antebellum exhibition hall. The grotesque bodies at the center of such performances played with the very structures of popular enjoyment, creating multiple avenues for social pleasure that did not always fit neatly into the governing rubrics of mass entertainment. Attending to the dynamism of the grotesque body allows us to retrace some of those wayward pleasures, providing us with a more nuanced portrait of the carnivalesque’s entanglements in the antebellum period’s nascent culture industries.

For comic practitioners of the period, antebellum mummymania offered a canvas for charting the complex phenomenology of grotesque exhibition as it developed into a wide-ranging form of popular entertainment. Dramatist-turned-novelist Robert Montgomery Bird, for example, recognized that a funny mummy could critically engage and even disrupt the theatrical spectacles staged by the ambitious impresarios who were then angling to cultivate something on the scale of a mass audience. In \textit{Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself} (1836), Bird develops a mummy schtick in print that coincides with Ginger Blue’s earliest capers on the minstrel stage. It’s one of the many ludicrous moments in Bird’s novel: an embalmed body that has been put on public display suddenly comes back to life, astonishing audience and curator alike. Like the minstrel hero Ginger Blue, this vibrantly live mummy wreaks havoc on his immediate surroundings, turning a respectable public exhibition into a pandemonium that is as absurd as it is violent. And as

\textsuperscript{15} Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, “Comedy Has Issues,” \textit{Critical Inquiry} 43, no. 2 (2017): 233-249, 236. Berlant and Ngai engage with this critical line of thought by drawing upon Arpad Szakolczai’s study of the “comedification” of the public sphere, which links the historical formation of the modern public sphere to a genealogy of theater in Europe that was generically comic. See also Szakolczai’s \textit{Comedy and the Public Sphere: The Rebirth of Theatre as Comedy and the Genealogy of the Modern Public Arena} (New York: Routledge, 2013).
with *Virginia Mummy*, this comic chaos overturns the established proprietary relations between the spectating public and the grotesque body. The result is a satiric rendering of an itinerant mummy show that develops a sustained critique of the stupefied publics of democratic mass culture. But Bird does more than diagnose the vacuous, politically docile collectives gathered before the commercialized body. *Sheppard Lee* delves into the carnivalizing energies of grotesque bodily display, interrogating the political instabilities of spectatorship in the age of Barnum. As we shall see, the novel’s mummy fun explores the extent to which the carnivalesque can be made into a regulatory instrument of social control, and also the ways in which it can’t.

*Sheppard Lee* is already a novel that is deeply preoccupied by the power of the body in all its fleshy grossness. A weird picaresque that roves through antebellum culture by way of metempsychosis, Bird’s novel chronicles the bizarre adventures of its titular character, who discovers upon his accidental death that his spirit has the capacity to take up residence in any dead body it happens upon. Leapfrogging from the body of gouty landowner to fashionable fop, from scheming miser to gullible philanthropist, from “contented” slave to dyspeptic hypochondriac, Lee provides the reader with a firsthand account of the initial pleasures and unexpected pitfalls of inhabiting another’s body, serving up an idiosyncratic comedy of manners that effectively surveys a sizable chunk of an antebellum social field. With each transmigration, Bird’s foolish protagonist slides carelessly into the habitual movements of his host body, blithely forgetful of his former selves. As such, Sheppard Lee’s bodily predicaments intervene in what Christopher Looby has called “the politics of bodies in the antebellum era,” meditating on the fleshy materiality of identity as it gets refracted through the turbulent social relations of
Jacksonian democracy.¹⁶ Sheppard Lee’s insistence upon the corporeal gives lie to the civic abstraction that generally accompanied the dominant political ideology of republicanism, as Looby well notes, but it reveals still more: the allure of the grotesque body as an organizing principle of antebellum public formations. Beyond the winking vagaries of Lee’s persistently unfixed identity, the novel moves nimbly from scenes of grave robbing to public lynching, from the anatomical spectacle of medical experiment to the Barnumesque display of well-preserved and thoroughly commodified human remains. As Bird has it, antebellum publics assemble again and again at the site of the degraded and degrading body, forging collective pleasure out of encounters with the grotesque.

Sheppard Lee’s casual attendance at a mummy show is therefore part of a much larger panoply of weird body comedy, but it stands out nonetheless. In fact, this mummy exhibition holds a special place in Bird’s catalogue of grotesquerie because it serves as the linchpin for the novel’s plot and its ultimate resolution. It also has much to tell us about the phenomenology of spectatorship in antebellum performances of the grotesque. Towards the end of the novel’s penultimate book, in which Sheppard Lee inhabits the body of a hypochondriac, Lee attends a public mummy exhibition that anticipates George Gliddon’s lecture tours and famous mummy unwrappings. In a show that is equal parts popular science and commercial hucksterism, a German quack doctor (appropriately named Feuerteufel) promotes his business of mummification to an assembled audience, of which Sheppard Lee is a member. Though Feuerteufel declares in heavily accented English that he is “no mountepank and showmans, put a man of de science,” it’s quite clear that he is giving his audience a good show: to be a “man of science” is to be a

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master of grotesque bodily display.\textsuperscript{17}

But what does mastery of the grotesque body entail? And to what extent does such mastery actually harness the mummy’s potential as a carnivalizing social agent? Insofar as Feuertefel pitches his exhibition as a serious-minded demonstration of his mummy science, it is difficult to see how his use of the grotesque body intentionally activates anything resembling the carnivalesque. Indeed, his mummy show stages precisely the sort of scientific spectacle that a carnivalesque character like Ginger Blue would happily upend. Critical efforts to chart the characteristics of divergent genres of grotesque performance sharpen this apparent opposition between the spectacle of a displayed curio and the comic capers of a live mummy. It’s worth remembering, for example, how Tavia Nyong’o asserts the distinctiveness of the carnivalesque by stressing its participatory qualities. For Nyong’o, carnival’s participatory practices are what set it apart from theatricality, which typically provides a more clearly delimited framework for spectatorship.\textsuperscript{18} This formal distinction carries a political edge to it, as Susan Stewart has suggested in her own account of the grotesque. For Stewart, the grotesque body of carnival cultivates a “reciprocal gaze” that she calls “democratic.” Contrast this to spectacle, which insists upon distancing the grotesque body. As Stewart puts it, “There is no question that there is a gap between the object and its viewer. The spectacle functions to avoid contamination: ‘Stand back, ladies and gentlemen, what you are about to see will shock and amaze you.’”\textsuperscript{19} Grotesque spectacle thus establishes an aesthetic distance that


\textsuperscript{18} Nyong’o, 108.

is inherently exclusionary, as it cultivates a spectatorial partition that also facilitates a sense of experiential mastery over the grotesque body. Such aesthetics negate the more “democratic” reciprocity that the participatory dynamics of the carnivalesque has the potential to instill, where the grotesque Other looks back, enfolding spectators into its roving, free-wheeling festivities.

While we should be wary of Stewart’s too-easy alignment of the carnivalesque with the “democratic” — a hazily positive descriptive that she awards to one side of her grotesque binary without much elaboration — the critical differentiation between spectacle (or more generally, theatricality) and the carnivalesque helpfully illuminates how genres of performance structure the parameters of spectatorship. What concerns Stewart are the ways in which spectacular presentations of the grotesque body tap into the disciplinary powers of the gaze. This is precisely how the operations of the freak show have been traditionally understood. The freak show engineers spectacle out of somatic difference, inviting spectators to gaze and gape at staged eccentricity. As such, it serves as a central technology for inscribing the parameters of the naturalized or “normal” body in antebellum culture, effectively delineating bodily variations as deviance. In this sense, the delights of the freak show discipline the bodies that experience them, as the very act of looking reifies a specific structure of feeling that asserts what are still familiar and longstanding systems of race, gender, sexuality, and ableism. Besides making freaks, the freak show also constructs, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson has argued, “the self-governed, iterable subject of democracy.” According to Thomson, the freak show “make[s] the physical particularity of the freak into a hyper visible text against which the viewer’s indistinguishable body fades into a seemingly neutral, tractable, and
invulnerable instrument of the autonomous will, suitable to the uniform abstract citizenry democracy institutes.” In other words, the freak show dematerializes the spectator even as it insists upon the distorted physicality of the displayed freak. Spectators assembled at the site of freakish amusements are rendered uniform and abstract under the operations of aesthetic distance that the freak show’s grotesque spectacle sets into motion.

What is striking in this critical overview is the way different conceptions of “democracy” and the “democratic” materialize on both sides of the grotesque binary that Stewart sets forth, whether it be in the participatory inclusiveness of the carnivalesque or in the “self-governed,” “abstract citizenry” that the freak show’s grotesque spectacles call forth. The fact that scholars seem to find democracy wherever they look speaks both to the figurative power of grotesque performance as a locus for the democratic imaginary as well as the diversity of democratic political models it can enact. It also threatens to blur the boundaries of Stewart’s categorical partitions of grotesque performance. And as we have seen in the playhouse and other spaces of public assembly, spectacular bodily displays very often thrived on the participatory dynamism of antebellum audience formations. Critical scholarship that draws too sharp a distinction between the carnivalesque and other forms of theatrical spectacle risks missing the extent to which early American performance culture moved fluidly between these two poles, often blending together their divergent aesthetics and the democratic political models they invoked.

Bird’s Feuerteufel is no exception. If we apply Stewart’s binary to the ludicrous scene

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of Feuerteufel’s exhibition, we might be tempted to call his mummy show a grotesque spectacle. And this is partly true. Feuerteufel relies upon the corporeal presence of his mummy to attract his public and cement his status as a “man of science.” His theatrics thus seek to capitalize on the public spectacle of the mummy’s body. Yet Feuerteufel and his mummy also belie the conditions of aesthetic distance that Thomson and others have so often pointed to as the generic hallmarks of the freak show. Feuerteufel may be putting on a kind of freak show, but his object isn’t to fashion an “abstract citizenry” — quite the opposite. He wants to create a citizenry of mummies. Feuerteufel’s display of embalmed curios is not meant to simply titillate his audience; it’s an earnest promotion of his grotesque art as the future technology of a democratic body public preserved in perpetuity. Mummification, it turns out, is not a curiosity of ancient history, but a newly discovered science to be embraced by present-day Americans. As he elaborates in his lecture, Feuerteufel has developed a three-tiered system of mummification to better suit the needs and desires of his would-be customers. Those wishing to be embalmed at death may choose to be preserved as “shtone,” as “plaster-Paree,” or as “flesh vat is never corrupt.”  

At the highest price point, the stone mummy, according to Feuerteufel, will replace marble statues as a vastly superior alternative for public memorials (“How mosh petter dat dan de imitation!” he exclaims). As such, they are reserved “only for de great, great men - de shenerals of war, de preshidents, and de mens in Congress vat makes de pig speech.” Bracketing Bird’s rather too gleeful exploitation of the doctor’s overwrought accent for the moment, it’s notable that Feuerteufel markets his most expensive mummies not simply as the most refined option available to the wealthy

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21 Bird, 403.
22 Ibid., 403.
classes, but as public works contributing to a national mythos. Mummification in its most elevated form quite literally transforms statesmen into enduring props of the democratic republic. This, combined with Feuerteufel’s second tier of plaster mummies, which caters to lesser great men such as governors and newspaper editors, effectively sells bodily preservation as a means of affirming and reinforcing antebellum institutions of democratic governance.²³

It is the third, lowest grade of mummification, however, that is at once Feuerteufel’s most potentially lucrative line of business and the culmination of Bird’s comic treatment of the grotesque body as a site of public fascination and commodified spectacle. This “flesh and blood mummee” is made for members of the general public, and as such, poses as the most affordable option in Feuerteufel’s mummy catalogue. “Dis is de sheep plan,” as Feuerteufel baldly puts it, ready in three days and costing “no more dan de price of de funeral.”²⁴ A mummy for the people, this cheapest model is also the most lifelike, and takes center stage as the only complete human specimen in Feuerteufel’s exhibit.

There are many absurdities in Feuerteufel’s bizarre sales pitch, not least of which is his stated plan to first introduce his “sheep” form of mummification to the city of New Orleans (mummification, he asserts, will improve public health in a swampy region full of rotting corpses). But I want to focus on Feuerteufel’s direct appeal to his immediate audience, and ultimately by extension, the general public. Peddling his flesh and blood mummies to what he hopes will one day soon be a national mass public, Feuerteufel’s scientific innovation allows Bird to conduct a pointed satire on the publics buying into the expanding commercial entertainment industries of Jacksonian democracy. By

²³ Ibid., 403.
²⁴ Ibid., 404.
prioritizing an affordable option for the masses, Feuerteufel promotes a business model that is also a stark assessment of the general public: the “sheep mummee,” as Feuerteufel says, is “de plan for de men in zheneral, vich do always love to pe sheep.”

Bird’s playful punning at the expense of Feuerteufel’s foreignness here casts “men in general,” the crucial agents of democratic sovereignty, as cheap sheep — easily bought and easily sold. And if the subjects that make up the general populace are nothing more than a herd guided by the logic of market capitalism, they affirm their status as “sheep” by taking in the spectacle of the grotesque body.

On one level, Bird’s love of a good pun clearly has a satiric edge. This is word play that diagnoses the spectacle of the grotesque as an instrument of commercial hegemony in antebellum culture, providing a trenchant critique of capitalist hucksterism as a primary organizer of democratic public formations. But this particular version of the freak show, where the freakish body takes the form of a mummy, and the delineation of the abnormal is one of flesh preserved in perpetuity, also inverts the conventions of spectatorship that we tend to expect out of this performance genre. Rather than construct a boundary between mummy and audience, Feuerteufel insists upon their conflation. The essential gesture of his performance is not one that establishes distance (“Stand back, ladies and gentlemen, what you are about to see will shock and amaze you…”) but one that collapses it (“You too can be a mummy!”). And it’s this zany recognition of the grotesque body’s powers of attraction that Feuerteufel ultimately hopes to take to the bank.

According to this commercial fantasy, “sheep people” would literally pay to become

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25 Ibid., 404.
the grotesque bodies they take such pleasure in viewing. This transformation promises to preserve democratic public formations in an ossified stasis, and in so doing, perpetuate a democratic political imaginary, where “great, great men,” “leetle great men,” and “sheep” people all alike commit their bodies to the mummy treatment. Rather than establish an abstracted citizenry at the site of bodily difference, this freak show seeks to forge democratic collectivity out of a shared desire to partake of and become the grotesque national body. As such, Feuerteufel’s absurd business model acknowledges something fundamental about the nature of the grotesque encounter, something that exceeds the distancing operations of theatrical spectacle more generally. If the staging of the grotesque body establishes difference, it also activates aspirational pleasure at the site of difference. To look at the grotesque body is both a gesture of containment and an admission of contamination. It is to take in the petrified body of the unnaturally silent mummy and in so doing, become a mummy. It is to participate in the project of collective mummification. In other words, the grotesque carnivalizes all those who encounter it. Even within the freak show format of Feuerteufel’s theatrical spectacle, the participatory energies of the carnivalesque continue to operate, precisely because the grotesque body stands there for all to see.

What then, does this satiric diversion tell us about the antebellum commercial entertainment industries and their technologies of performance? It shows us that as a form of theatrical spectacle, the mummy exhibition doesn’t so much contain or distance the carnivalizing potential of the grotesque body. Instead, it marshals the participatory energies of the carnivalesque to captivate its audience, enfolding its spectators into its own system of commercialized governance. This social engineering generates a
democratic imaginary out of the somatic encounter with the grotesque body, uniting antebellum publics according to the logic of “sheep” mummification.

However, it would be a mistake to say that the carnivalesque, according to Bird’s satire, is purely the instrument of a fledgling antebellum culture industry. It’s worth remembering, after all, that the carnivalesque is ultimately a form of comic play: this is a funny mummy. It’s funny not because Feuerteufel is putting on a comic show, but because the carnivalizing operations of his grotesque exhibition exceed the parameters of his lecture. Feuerteufel assumes that his “sheep mummee” is a dead one, one that remains fixed and under his control. But of course, a mummy is never totally lifeless, even when the fixed stillness of its fragile yet enduring body reminds spectators of their inevitable mortality. Mummies are physical remainders of life that once was, but they also pose as potential vessels of resurrection. As such, they figure forth a cultural imaginary of reanimation — to encounter one is to entertain the possibility that a prone body might spring into motion once again, that a silent mouth might erupt into speech. This is in fact what Feuerteufel’s mummy does, making for a physical punchline that literalizes the somatic exchange of the carnivalesque. At the close of his lecture, Feuerteufel dramatically lifts a curtain to reveal his “sheep” mummy, which stands encased in a large glass cabinet. As the assembled audience lets out a murmur of admiration at the lifelike body with “a set unnatural stare,” Sheppard Lee narrates his own visceral amazement at the body displayed inside the glass case: “heavens and earth! what were my feelings, what was my astonishment, when I beheld in that lifeless mummy my own lost body! … the body of Sheppard Lee the Jerseyman!”

26 Ibid., 405-6.
of mummification only to rediscover himself in the body of the grotesque Other — a body that comes back to life in this very moment of comic self-recognition. Describing the carnivalizing tableau as “The sight of my body thus restored to me,” Lee finds resolution to his bodily wanderings in an accidental encounter that is as ludicrous as it is felicitous. This happy restoration disrupts the grotesque spectacle of Feuerteufel’s exhibition, along with the carefully manicured mummified citizenry that it envisions. Breaking the proscenium of Feuerteufel’s show, Lee rushes forward to reclaim his body, shattering the glass case that contains it, taking hold of his mummified hand, and completing a metempsychotic leap for the final time.

In the chaos of this comic resolution, which involves a public shocked and angered by an apparently fraudulent display, an even more astonished Feuerteufel exclaiming “I have empalm him too well!,” and a mummified but very much alive Sheppard Lee running frantically back home to his farm in New Jersey, Bird exploits with relish the underlying instabilities of carnivalesque performance. In the process, he offers a nuanced theorization of the carnivalesque’s entanglement in antebellum commercial entertainment, one that resists settling comfortably into the transgressive/conservative binarism that has traditionally characterized critical discourse on carnival and the carnivalesque. For even as Bird’s novel portrays how a Barnumesque impresario of antebellum popular science draws upon the somatic experience of grotesque display to make “sheep” mummies of his public, the social chaos of this comic ending suggests that the participatory dynamics of such a carnivalesque performance can move in wayward directions, take unexpected turns, and perhaps even make escape to New Jersey. In this sense, Sheppard Lee’s mummy overturns the disciplinarity of the freak show, releasing
the body from the paralysis of mass entertainment culture. In other words, if the
carnivalesque can be instrumentalized, it cannot be fully contained or otherwise
assimilated to the project of grotesque exhibition, which is to say, Feuerteufel’s
mummified America. This is so because the mummy is in fact never really dead. The
comic play of a “sheep mummee” that comes back to life posits the fantastic reality of a
grotesque vitality that exceeds the operations of commercial mass culture and in so doing,
recovers alternative forms of bodily autonomy and enjoyment.

It should be remembered, however, that the economy of Bird’s comic novel routes the
runaway pleasures of bodily autonomy through its male slaveholding protagonist.27 Bird
also pointedly subjects Black claims to such bodily autonomy to sustained ridicule, using
one of the novel’s metempsychotic episodes to make a minstrelized farce out of a slave
revolt.28 If Sheppard Lee’s bodily restoration scrambles Feuerteufel’s system of
mummified democracy, this does not make Bird’s novel a politically radical social
comedy. Rather, the revival of Sheppard Lee’s mummified body supplies the resolution
to what Edgar Allan Poe, in his review of the novel, criticized as the underlying
conservatism of Bird’s comic conceit: “The sole object here in the various
metempsychoses seems to be…the enforcement of the very doubtful moral that every

27 Bird turns to the conventions of minstrel humor to make a joke of Lee’s status as a slaveholder. At
the outset of the novel, Bird gives an account of his “negro-man” Jim Jumble, an “old fellow” that he had
inherited from his father. Lee considers setting Jim free, but quickly discovers that Jim is adamantly
opposed: “he burst into a passion, sore he would not be free, and told me flatly I was his master, and I
should take care of him: and the absurd old fool ended by declaring, if I made him a free man he
would have the law of me, ’he would by ge-hosh!’” (20).

28 For critical readings of the slave revolt episode and Bird’s treatment of race in the novel, see Looby,
“Introduction”; Justine S. Murison, “Hypochondria and Racial Interiority in Robert Montgomery Bird’s
Interpretation of Media: Sheppard Lee and Jacksonian Paperwork,” History of the Present 3, no. 1 (2013):
29-56; Matthew Rebhorn, “Ontological Drift: Medical Discourse and Racial Embodiment in Robert
Montgomery Bird’s Sheppard Lee.” ESQ 61, no 2 (2015): 262-296; Benjamin J. Doty, “Satire, Minstrelsy,
and Embodiment in ‘Sheppard Lee.’” Early American Literature 51, no. 1 (2016): 131-156; Ittai Orr,
person should remain contented with his own.” Bird’s version of the live mummy joke actually facilitates the novel’s ultimate return to the social status quo, which is to say, the proslavery hegemony of antebellum popular culture. Sheppard Lee’s mummy thus fosters the ambivalent and displaced abjections of popular laughter in much the same way that Ginger Blue’s minstrel mummy does. My goal in charting the carnivalizing chaos of such mummy fun is not to disentangle its comic pleasures from the race-based, proslavery logic pervading commercial entertainments of the period, but to show how the somatic excesses of antebellum grotesquerie could occasionally unravel the governing structures of enjoyment in which they were produced. These snags in the fabric of popular culture were actual as well as figurative, for the carnivalizing operations of antebellum mummy play even manifested outside the fictional productions of literary print culture and the popular stage. In fact, the pleasures of this particular genre of carnivalesque performance extended beyond the purview of comic novels and minstrel farces. The antics of a Ginger Blue, and the extravagant absurdism of Sheppard Lee’s reanimated mummy, however fanciful or preposterous they may appear, actually illuminate the underlying instabilities that defined the historical realities of antebellum grotesquerie, even presaging the comic slippages of mummy lectures as they crested in popularity in the 1850s. As a hermeneutic tool, then, such comic play offers new approaches to the cultural history of the grotesque. And as we shall see, the comic play of reanimated mummies lends fresh insight into the contested racial politics of antebellum mummymania.

Gliddon’s “Egyptian Priestess”: Race, Popular Science, and the Antebellum Mummy Show

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Feuerteufel’s quixotic vision of a mummified America develops a commercial fantasy of a stupefied mass public — a national collective rendered homogenized and docile at the sight of the grotesque body. His public engineering project aims to assimilate the participatory exchange between the spectator and the grotesque Other, which is the hallmark of the carnivalesque, to the operations of a growing antebellum entertainment industry. Such strategic attempts to mobilize the carnivalesque were more than just Bird’s comic fabulation; Feuerteufel’s approach to the carnivalizing body was shared by actual impresarios of mummified grotesquerie like P. T. Barnum and George Gliddon. For the showmen profiting from antebellum mummymania, the display of the mummified body presented an opportunity to standardize, delimit, and ultimately preside over the national democratic body. More often than not, the mummy exhibition administered distinctly racialized forms of popular amusement, delineating the contours of an exclusionary public whiteness that ultimately supported a proslavery politics.

The popular scientist and showman George R. Gliddon, for example, developed mummy lectures that overtly sought to firmly demarcate the racial boundaries of “civilized” society. A former U.S. vice-consul in Cairo, Gliddon immigrated to the United States in 1842 and built a second career giving lectures on Egyptian archaeology across much of the country. He became perhaps the most successful and well-known Egyptologist in the country, staging innovative exhibitions that invited audiences to survey, and even experience mastery over ancient Egyptian culture. Gliddon developed a
compelling lecture style while touring the U.S. in the 1840s, which, combined with the publication of his *Otia Aegyptiaca: Discourse on Egyptian Archaeology and Hieroglyphical Discoveries* (1849), made him one of the most recognizable names in the
Edgar Allan Poe’s 1845 “Some Words with a Mummy,” for instance, made comic hay out of Gliddon’s reputation, featuring him as the expert hieroglyphic translator in a literary sketch about a group of bumbling scientists conversing with a reanimated mummy. As Egyptomania crested in the 1840s, Gliddon had clearly staked out a prominent position for himself as an authority on the subject. Over time, he incorporated new forms of visual spectacle into his public performances. At the close of 1849, he acquired and imported several new artifacts and attractions from England, including “four unopened human mummies” and the transparent Panorama of the Nile, a more than eight-hundred-foot-long canvas of painted tableaux. With this fresh material, Gliddon created a multimedia exhibition, in which he proposed to publicly examine “two highest class Egyptian mummies” (see Figure 7). He would unwrap his first specimen in Boston.

Gliddon was certainly not the first to publicly unwrap ancient mummies that came into his possession. But the lectures he gave in Boston in the summer of 1850 resulted in what was easily the most notorious mummy unwrapping of the period. What happened in the lead-up to and fallout of this widely publicized occasion tells us a great deal about the dynamics of antebellum mummymania — the carnivalesque phenomenology of the mummified body, the ideological slipperiness of its grotesque appeal, and its impact upon

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30 For more on Gliddon’s career, see Trafton, 41-84; Wolfe and Singerman, 132-172; Branson.
31 George R. Gliddon, Hand-book to the American Panorama of the Nile (London: James Madden, 1849), 25. Gliddon’s exhibitions also included a number of additional artifacts and specimens, including mummified crania and animals, mummy sarcophagi, and a wooden model of a pyramid. This diverse visual spectacle was accompanied by “Egyptian, Arabian, Turkish, Greek, and other Oriental Music” (“Gliddon’s Egyptian Collection and Transparent Panorama of the Nile, with Oral Descriptions.” The Literary World, Nov. 24, 1849). His Hand-book could be purchased for 25 cents at the exhibition. See also Wolfe and Singerman; Branson.
32 Gliddon proposed and performed two unwrappings, one in Boston and a second in Philadelphia. As we shall see, the events of the Boston unwrapping were far more memorable, and far more widely publicized.
antebellum publics. I will return to the surprising circumstances that made this event so memorable, but for now I want to focus on the ways in which Gliddon staged the mummy’s body and its spectacular unveiling to promote his particular brand of popular science. For though Gliddon’s Panorama was certainly the centerpiece of his exhibition, the prospect of unraveling a mummy became the driving selling point as he prepared for his Boston show. Gliddon circulated his Proposal in the local press, advertising his plan to unwrap one of his mummies over the course of a special three-day lecture series at the Tremont Temple during the first week of June, 1850. Based on his reading of the hieroglyphics on the outer sarcophagus, Gliddon determined the mummy to be the “Daughter of the High Priest of Thebes…who lived between B.C. 1200 and B.C. 1500 — say about the time of Moses, or above 3.200 years ago.”

The promise of revealing the body of this “highest class” Egyptian mummy was so attractive that Gliddon could solicit subscriptions in advance; those willing and able to pay five dollars were guaranteed prime seating over the course of the lecture series. This savvy bit of commercial promotion turned the occasion into a major social event, and the local press widely publicized the unwrapping of an “Egyptian priestess.”

As the Hartford Daily Courant reported with much anticipation just before the unwrapping, “All the wealth, fashion, beauty, science and literature of Boston, Cambridge and Roxbury, will be represented at these interesting meetings.” Gliddon even recruited a coterie of the town’s renowned

33 Gliddon, Proposal (Boston: s.n., 1850).
34 The press swiftly took liberties with dignitary labels when referring to Gliddon’s mummy. The presumed daughter of a “High Priest” became herself a “virgin priestess” or still more, a “Theban princess.” See, for example, “That Mummy.” Scientific American, June 22, 1850; “General Intelligence. The Mummy.” Christian Register, June 15, 1850, 3; TIMON (Donald Grant Mitchell), “A Boost for Bostonians.” The Lorgnette: Or, Studies of the Town, vol. II (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1850), 95-106.
35 Hartford Daily Courant, May 29, 1850, qtd. in Wolfe and Singerman, 147.
scientists, including the much-respected Harvard Professor Louis Agassiz, to oversee the operation and contribute their own commentary and expertise. In this manner, Gliddon orchestrated a scientific extravaganza that seemed to encompass the entirety of Boston’s intelligentsia. At the center of it all was a mummy.

What becomes clear in all the publicity leading up to this three-day unwrapping, then, is just how central the somatic magnetism of the mummy was to the success of Gliddon’s exhibition. For all of Gliddon’s skill as a public speaker, it was ultimately his exotic bodily prop that made his lecture series the event of the summer, transforming the mysteries of bodily preservation into a locus for the audience’s fascination and entertainment. For Gliddon and his largely bourgeois audience, these mummy delights did not appear to register as unseemly or vulgar in any way, despite the macabre undertones of the enterprise. Rather, the carefully choreographed unwrapping of the mummy’s body held instructional value as well as titillation. Each stage of the mummy’s disassembly — from the body’s removal from the sarcophagus, to the methodical unraveling of bandages, to the examination of the amulets and papyrus scrolls hidden in the layers of linen, to the inspection of the body’s skin and hair — offered material for his lecture, providing him with enticing objects that his expertise could further elucidate. This was an exhibitionist striptease in the service of scientific learning, making for a presentation that was guided as much by the visual and visceral experience of the grotesque body unveiled as it was by the historical and scientific content of the lecture itself. Gliddon’s mummy unwrapping was in this sense nothing less than a dressing-up of the freak show, for he managed to elevate the middle- to lowbrow pleasures of a grotesque striptease to complement and even flatter the “large and intelligent audience”
of Boston’s intellectual elite.\textsuperscript{36} This feat did not go unnoticed: the \textit{Courant} wryly noted that “Barnum is undone in his own province, and unless he can get up another Joyce Heth, may as well succumb.”\textsuperscript{37}

It’s striking that this commentator draws such an explicit line between Gliddon’s mummy and Joice Heth, an enslaved woman from Kentucky who P. T. Barnum infamously exhibited as the 161-year-old nursemaid to George Washington. The 1835-6 exhibition of Heth, which launched Barnum’s career as an internationally famous impresario, effectively laid the groundwork for the freak show as a recognizable performance genre, even as the substance of Barnum’s hoax conjoined a racialized national mythos to the practices of scientific exhibition.\textsuperscript{38} The notion that Gliddon might in some way outdo Barnum’s most notorious humbug indicates the extent to which his popular science drew upon a repertoire of grotesque display first developed by an iconic player in the emergent culture industries of the antebellum period. And in the clear fixation on a prone, ossified body, along with Gliddon’s methodical program for dissection, this mummy-centric lecture series echoes Heth’s gruesome final performance

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36}“Opening of the Mummy.”\textit{Boston Evening Transcript}, June 3 1850, 2.
\item \textsuperscript{37}\textit{Hartford Daily Courant}, May 29, 1850, qtd. in Wolfe and Singerman, 147. See also Branson.
\item \textsuperscript{38}Barnum’s exploitive exhibitions of Heth made her an object of popular fascination and intense speculation. In a performance tour across the Northeast, Barnum displayed Heth in carefully curated shows that provided a recited history of her remarkable life, inviting spectators to marvel at her person and take in the physical markings of her supposedly extraordinary dotage. A more informal patter between Heth and the show’s managers followed the lecture, when Heth would respond to questions put to her by her handlers and members of the audience. Heth typically concluded the show by singing a selection of hymns, some of which she was presumed to have sung to the father of the nation in his childhood. Scholarship on Joice Heth and P. T. Barnum has focused on how these performances mediated conceptions of race, freedom, and slavery in a national democratic culture, exploring the ways in which Barnum’s staging of Heth “theatricalized a fantastical coalescence of living history and tranquil black captivity” (Jones, 88). Uri McMillan has shown how Heth’s performances embodied an “archetypal black nursemaid,” evoking what she terms “mammy memory,” an antebellum structure of racial feeling that constructed national memory out of Black maternal servitude (Uri McMillan, \textit{Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance} [New York: New York University Press, 2015], 26). For more on Joice Heth, see McMillan, 23-64; Jones, 88-95; Benjamin Reiss, \textit{The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum’s America} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); James W. Cook, \textit{The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1-29.
\end{itemize}
in ways that are difficult to ignore.\textsuperscript{39}

In truth, the resonances between Heth and Gliddon’s Egyptian “princess” went still deeper, precisely because public fascination with the mummy’s body was so inextricably entangled in antebellum conceptions of race. Consider, for instance, the fact that accounts of Heth’s performances often described her “striking resemblance to an Egyptian mummy.”\textsuperscript{40} Such comparisons sought in part to emphasize the supposed magnitude of Heth’s extreme age, likening her withered appearance and partially paralyzed body to mummified remains.\textsuperscript{41} Linking Heth’s body to the figure of the mummy also evoked some measure of historical grandeur, raising the mythos of Washington’s origins — and by extension, the republic’s — to heights reminiscent of an ancient civilization. But these characterizations activated more than just temporal and national-historical associations; Heth’s alleged likeness to a mummy contributed to a racial discourse that was as epistemologically unstable as it was culturally entrenched.

The racial status of ancient Egyptians was in fact an unresolved question in the antebellum period, one that generated an ongoing and contested debate. For antebellum audiences, mummies regularly evoked a racialized blackness, since many of the

\textsuperscript{39} Barnum found ways to profit from the public display of Heth’s body even after her death in 1836. In a slyly disingenuous bid to prove, one way or another, the veracity of Heth’s age, Barnum commissioned the anatomist Dr. David L. Rogers to conduct a public dissection of Heth’s heart. The publicity generated from this disturbing and ghoulish stunt continued to serve as fodder for Barnum’s self-promotion throughout his career, as he gave various and contradictory accounts of his first real “success” in his autobiographies and more fictionalized writing.

\textsuperscript{40} P. “A Wonder Indeed.” \textit{Baptist Advocate}, Sept., 1835, 214, emphasis in original. See also, for example, “JOICE HETH, AGED 161.” \textit{The Family Magazine; or, Monthly Abstract of General Knowledge}, (May, 1836), 156; “Peep at the Fair.” \textit{Commercial Advertiser}, Oct. 19, 1835, 2. A review of Barnum’s 1855 \textit{Autobiography} even recalled Gliddon’s mummy unwrapping when describing Heth: “So far as looks were concerned, she might have passed for twin-sister to Gliddon’s mummy” (Rev. T. M. Eddy, “Barnum: A Martyr!” \textit{The Ladies Repository; A Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Art and Religion}, March 1855, 170-175, 172).

\textsuperscript{41} At the time of Barnum’s first staging of Heth at Niblo’s Garden in New York in 1835, Heth was paralyzed in her left arm and in both legs (it was supposed that she had previously suffered from a stroke).
mummies that were dissected and displayed publicly did in fact present skin that was black in appearance. This was the natural result of the bitumen that ancient Egyptians often applied to the cadaver’s skin during the embalming process. This chemical blackening featured prominently in both the staged display of the mummy and the “scientific” discourse surrounding it. Public lectures and print essays on the art of mummification elaborated even further on the process, dwelling extensively on the mummy’s blackened skin. A public viewing of a mummy was thus very often a somatic encounter with a manufactured grotesque “blackness” — blackness that was curatorially demarcated as an external application (the effect of something “put on” the mummy’s body) while remaining unmistakably essential to the aesthetics of the exhibition.

These perceptual dynamics are of course not unique to the exhibition of Egyptian mummies in this period. Antebellum performance culture had already forged a bodily repertoire of “blacking up” by way of blackface minstrelsy, which provided the urtext for constructing blackness as a grotesque form of comic debasement. For audiences already familiar with the well-established conventions of the minstrel show, the bitumen that blackened the skin of mummified bodies readily mirrored the burnt cork mask donned by the blackface minstrel performer. This is precisely what made the basic conceit of *Virginia Mummy* so singularly apt; the blackface mummy who, as one of the play’s white characters exclaims, smells suspiciously of “shoe blackening” highlights the racialized blackness already implicitly at work in so many antebellum exhibitions of the mummified body. T. D. Rice’s extended gag of a live mummy that reeks of the minstrel player’s shoe polish indicates the ways in which antebellum mummies readily performed yet another iteration of blackface for the publics that viewed them, contributing to the broader
cultural construction of racial hierarchies.

Gliddon’s mummy unwrapping thus tapped into an antebellum repertoire of racial blackness to curate a somatic public experience that would ultimately advance the proslavery ideology of an emerging body of race science. In fact, Egyptology provided important ballast for scientists and scholars associated with what Stephen Jay Gould and others have identified as the American school of ethnology, a field of since debunked research that profoundly shaped the inimical trajectory of nineteenth-century scientific racism.42 Samuel George Morton, the eminent craniologist at the vanguard of this school of thought, amassed a skull collection that included a large number of ancient Egyptian specimens. The measurements Morton took of these skulls figured prominently in his research on the origin of races. Morton is most often remembered for his infamous 1839 *Crania Americana*, which laid out a racial hierarchy that deemed Caucasians to be intellectually and physiologically superior to all other races, while determining those of African descent to be the most inferior. What is less remembered is the publication that followed this infamous work, Morton’s *Crania Aegyptiaca* (1844). As Scott Trafton has argued, “American ethnology was founded on this relationship between *Aegyptiaca* and *Americana*, between Egypt as a site of racialized theorization and America as its

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investigational counterpart.” Based on his skull measurements, Morton believed he could establish proof that ancient Egyptians were in fact Caucasian. It was an important point for Morton because it seemed to lend further credence to the theory of polygenesis, an increasingly influential scientific concept that Morton doggedly promoted over the course of his career. Polygenists held the belief that there were multiple and separate origins of the races, breaking with creationist theories that were rooted in monogenesis and theories that sought to account for human difference by way of climate. This effectively established racial difference as one of species rather than kind, a classificatory shift that offered ample justification for the institution of slavery. By establishing the unequivocal whiteness of ancient Egyptians — a people who built a powerful slaveholding society — Morton and other polygenists could shore up proslavery arguments that would assert the race-based, chattel slavery of the antebellum United States as not only biologically natural, but indicative of the nation’s advancement.

As one of Morton’s disciples, George Gliddon subscribed whole-heartedly to polygenesis. With his colleague, the doctor, anthropologist, and slaveholder Josiah Clark Nott, Gliddon built on Morton’s research to publish *Types of Mankind; or, Ethnological Researches, Based upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and upon their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History* (1854). Drawing on the studies of craniology, phrenology, and comparative anatomy, as well as Egyptology, the work stands, along with Morton’s *Crania Americana*, as one of the central pillars of nineteenth-century racist science. But Gliddon used his platform as a public lecturer to advance his polygenist approach to the study of race and ancient Egypt

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43 Trafton, 17.
well before his collaboration with Nott. At the close of one his lectures at the Tremont Temple in 1850, Gliddon offered “some moral reflections,” which involved, according to one commentator, “a comparison of the people of whom the specimens here exhibited were remains, with ourselves and our ancestors, showing that they were, like us, of the Caucasian family.” For the spectators gathered at the Tremont Temple, Gliddon’s mummy was thus paradoxically black and white; it was an overdetermined signifier of antebellum racial grotesquerie that validated, at least according to Gliddon, the structures of white supremacy baked into antebellum democracy. Importantly, Gliddon transmitted his racist ideology through the participatory gestures of his public address, as he encouraged his audience to see the mummy as white, “like us.” By inviting his audience to identify with the blackened, mummified corpse placed before them, Gliddon thus does more than simply contribute to the broader policing of racial boundaries in antebellum democracy. He interpellates his audience into a white mummy majority, creating a network of affiliation that incorporates spectators into the very practices of mummification. If Gliddon does his utmost to whiten his mummy, then, he also strives to mummify his white public.

44 Gliddon’s *Otia Aegyptiaca* (1849), which includes his lecture material from the 1840s, gives us a good idea of the rhetorical flair with which Gliddon asserted the racial whiteness of ancient Egyptians: “In this man’s skull, one which, after 3,000 years of time, so perfect is his embalmment, would be recognized by us as an old acquaintance had we known him in his life-time, we behold one of ourselves — a Caucasian, a pure white-man; notwithstanding the bitumen which has blackened the skin. The same with this female head, a girl of fifteen, whose hair, reddened though it be by embalmment, is soft and silky still. How surprised would both of these individuals be, could we recall them to life, to learn that we moderns have actually speculated in learned works, whether their countrymen were *Africans* or even Negroes...Could a people gifted with such facial angles, elevation of forehead, smooth hair and aristocratic noses as these, fail to be great men and great women? Was it in nature, or are anatomical laws so false, that a people with such physiognomical and osteological characteristics — a people whose nightly deed are still erect in stone, and who are renowned beyond all others in sacred and profane history for their *wisdom* — should not possess a development of head and volume of brain commensurate with the grandeur of their works?” See Gliddon, *Otia Aegyptiaca: Discourses on Egyptian Archaeology and Hieroglyphical Discoveries* (London: J. Madden, 1849), 77.

There are undeniable, albeit almost certainly unintended, echoes of Feuerteufel in Gliddon’s lecture hall, where spectatorship has once again become its own kind of mummification. But the cultural battlegrounds are rendered in much starker terms here than in Bird’s comic mummy play, for Gliddon’s efforts to enfold his audience into an imagined community of mummified whiteness demonstrate how grotesque bodily display comes to coerce public assent to racist political constellations through the very participatory dynamics of spectatorship. In this ostensibly more serious iteration of the mummy show, Gliddon aims to preside over a homogenizing form of spellbound spectatorship, in which mummy grotesquerie marks out the racial boundaries of public belonging. Yet the oscillation between blackness and whiteness that shaped the phenomenology of Gliddon’s mummified display suggests that the very act of looking at the grotesque body simultaneously established and destabilized those inscriptions of racial difference. Those instabilities, which fissured in the public’s gaze upon a mummy “like us,” signal the carnivalizing properties of the grotesque body, which is to say, its underlying comic potential.

Gliddon’s performance of scientific gravitas fails to recognize or account for this comic potential, but it erupts from the mummy’s body nonetheless. For it turns out that there is more to this mummy than meets Gliddon’s reputedly discerning eye. In an account of Gliddon’s third and final lecture, the Boston *Evening Transcript* details the discovery of an inconvenient truth: “A revelation, which excited no little surprise and amusement was now made. The mummy was not the body of a priestess, but of a man. The fact was very satisfactorily established by the medical gentlemen who had examined
it." The surprise of this gender reveal is practically brimming with carnivalesque reversals, which animate the understated amusement of the *Evening Transcript*’s deadpan reportage. With a “satisfactorily established” phallus, this mummy upends Gliddon’s scholarly expertise, exposing his poor grasp of hieroglyphics. Unveiling this unexpected sexual organ not only makes Gliddon appear foolish, but also subverts the gendered logic of his scientific striptease, effectively rupturing the bourgeois audience’s consumption of what was supposedly a “respectable” display of grotesquerie. Comic profanity, in other words, has erupted out of the mummy’s carnivalizing body.

What are we to make of this moment of grotesque surplus? If Gliddon marshals the carnivalizing dynamics of the freak show to transmit his polygenist science to a broader audience, his embarrassment provides a delicious illustration of how unwieldy carnivalesque performance can be. Given the “surprise and amusement” of those assembled in the lecture hall, it seems clear that Gliddon’s audience appreciated the comic disjunction between the promised priestess and the inescapable anatomy of the mummy set before them. But in this moment of heightened instability, Gliddon quickly sought to redirect the public’s mirth by cracking a joke of his own:

Mr. Gliddon remarked that mistakes would occur in the best regulated families, but in this case he was very certain that the mistake occurred 3000 years ago at Thebes, and was not in his reading of the hieroglyphical inscription. He explained how naturally, in an establishment, where hundreds of bodies were undergoing the process of embalment, the ticket might have got slipped, and a mummified man found himself in the coffin intended for a priestess. His explanation was so ingenious and satisfactory that the audience received it with a burst of applause.47

The joke, Gliddon insists, isn’t on him, but on the ancient Thebans, whose system of mummification fell prey to a comedy of errors. It’s richly telling that Gliddon essentially

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46 “Mr. Gliddon’s Last Lecture.” *Boston Evening Transcript*, Jun 7 1850, 2.
47 Ibid.
displaces the exclusionary categorizations of his own polygenist science, which seeks to strictly demarcate which bodies belong to the “best regulated families,” onto the burial practices of ancient Thebans. Gliddon’s quip allows him to save face, but it also forces him to admit the fun to be had in the occasional “slipped ticket,” a mistake that might exchange the figure of a priestess for the blackened body of a “low-class” mummy — in short, a Ginger Blue.

Gliddon’s convoluted tale of mistaken identity may have helped him to weasel his way out of the audience’s immediate ridicule, and in fact earned him a congratulatory “burst of applause,” but his dubious explanation hardly reinforced the supposed purity of Egyptian mummies and their ancient civilization. Nor did his reasoning fully pass muster in the press. As the Christian Register delicately put it in their coverage of the incident, “With all possible respect for the learned gentleman’s erudition, we must be excused for holding our faith in these matters, after the recent disappointment, in a somewhat easy and non-committal attitude….A precise explanation of the facts would probably be about as difficult a matter as a complete analysis of the various motives that drew together the immense and highly entertained assembly in the Tremont Temple unrolling.”48 The ironic editorialization here deftly carves out a new position from which to enjoy Gliddon’s mummy and its surprise phallus, one that highlights its distance from Gliddon’s light jests and the live audience so quick to enjoy them. The Christian Register was not alone in this approach; the mummy mishap quickly became comic fodder across the national press. Doggerel verse circulated in papers across the country, even as far as California, portraying Gliddon’s mistake as an exemplary instance of Barnumesque humbug. The

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Daily Columbus Enquirer, for instance, printed a “Profane epigram” commemorating the incident:

When Gliddon from the mummy case  
The wrappings did untwine  
No priestess was revealed, but la!  
The manly form divine.  
Ah! said a wit, who’d paid to see  
A priestess there unrolled,  
“He keeps his word, this surely is  
A dam-sel, for I’m sold.”

Terrible puns like the one above demonstrate the ways in which print humor embraced humbug culture, fostering a capacious form of ironized ridicule that included even the wits that laughed at Gliddon’s mistake. In fact, much of the print commentary did not merely make fun of Gliddon, but also relished the ways this public lecture seemed to so successfully reveal the gullibility of bourgeois Bostonians. Writing out of New York, essayist and wit Donald Grant Mitchell called the event one of Boston’s “periodic fevers,” during which the traditionally moralistic town fell under the romantic spell of a “Theban princess.” In all the excitement, “Boston prudery forgot its blushes in the presence of so old and august a belle, and came prepared to witness the unclothing of the high-priestess, without a veil.” Mitchell’s sardonic portrayal of an unveiled Boston underscores the ways in which Gliddon’s unwrapping exposes more than just a mummy’s body; it effectively unravels the town’s would-be show of “learned” respectability, inviting a comic humiliation that Mitchell and so many others saw as too good to pass up: “Day after day, the enlightened assemblage gazed upon the rapidly diminishing

49 Daily Columbus Enquirer, 29 October 1850, qtd. in Wolfe and Singerman, 159. For a sampling of some of the comic verse circulating in the wake of the Boston mummy unwrapping, see Wolfe and Singerman, 153-63.

envelopes, occasionally forgetting their dignity in an operatic bravura, and only
restraining a shower of bouquets upon both lecturer and princess, when it was discovered
that the mummy was a man! Dr. Bigelow blushed, and Professor Agassiz put his hands in
his pockets.”  

The Black press went still further in its fun, tackling the racist science undergirding
Gliddon’s mummy show. A short notice in Frederick Douglass’s paper *The North Star*
wrly reported the “wonderful fuss over a mummy in Boston” without ever mentioning
Gliddon by name. Instead, this particularly acerbic account dwelled on the polygenist
discourse he promoted, taking special care to note that “one important point” of the
lectures was to prove that the Thebans were not in any way Black, since the faintest
suggestion of racial impurity would make the mummy unrolling a rather embarrassing
social enterprise: “Oh! no. It would be bad taste enough to be paying respect to the corpse
of a nigger, if it be royal. We were assured therefore, by the learned doctors, that the
Thebans were not Africans, but a nobler race….Although this did not quite agree with
Heroditus, and their contemporary historians, nevertheless the learned were sure it must
be so.”  

Gleefully satirizing the “learned scientists” who craft racial categories for their
own professional convenience while simply ignoring any historical evidence that might
complicate or even contradict those categories, *The North Star* editorial sums up the
outcome of the unwrapping in a voice that practically brims with schadenfreude: “Well,
the poor old mummy was at length stripped of its swaddling clothes, and disemboweled,
and furnished evidence of little else than that it was a veritable ‘he nigger’ after all. A

51 Ibid., 100-101.
humbling relic enough of Theban royalty, learning and renown.” Such comic commentary across a broad swath of the national press shows the range of fun to be had with Gliddon’s mummy — at the expense of Gliddon’s expertise, the Boston public’s affected intellectualism, and the racist ideology guiding the lecture more generally.

At the core of all this discursive fun is the inescapable fact of the mummy’s phallus. An anatomical surprise that turns Gliddon’s lecture into an act of indecent exposure, the phallus is the unexpected addition — the supplement — that prompts “surprise and amusement” in the lecture hall. As such, its obscene appearance triggers a cascade of carnivalesque reversals, overturning Gliddon’s striptease of a feminized body and undercutting his performance of scholarly mastery. Even more crucially, the phallus interrupts the monological framework of Gliddon’s lecture, introducing multiple new ways of taking pleasure in the event of the mummy’s unveiling. The heterogeneity of public enjoyment erupts out of the live audience’s phallic encounter and proliferates in the variety of print commentary that follows on its heels, yielding an exemplary instance of the “dialogical laughter” that Mary Russo has described as a central feature of modern stagings of the carnivalesque. That laughter, which shatters the spectacle of Gliddon’s display and provokes diverse forms of public enjoyment, bubbles up from the body of the mummy itself, for the phallus does not simply instigate a comedy of public discourse. It marks the mummy’s own bodily relation to enjoyment. This is not just because Gliddon has inadvertently showcased the all too conspicuous male organ of sexual pleasure; this mummy is flashing more than just a penis. As Alenka Zupančič reminds us, Lacanian

53 Ibid.
psychoanalysis casts the phallus as the signifier of castration — the cut that severs “the supposedly immediate link between the subject (or the body) and enjoyment, yet a cut that comes in the form of an additional ‘appendix enjoyment.’”55 This “structural coincidence of a lack and of a surplus” constitutes the phallus as the privileged signifier of the condition of human enjoyment, which for Zupančič, is in part what makes the phallus such an unflagging presence in the long tradition of Western comedy.56 What’s crucial to the particulars of Gliddon’s comic mishap, however, is the way the unexpected phallus appends enjoyment to the mummy itself, revealing the attached surplus of a body that was presumed only to bring pleasure to its audience, not to have any of its own. In this sense, the phallus actually confers a subject status on the grotesque body that would otherwise remain an object of spectacle. Put simply, this mummy is not simply the object of enjoyment. This mummy has enjoyment.

Gliddon’s botched mummy unwrapping presents us with a delicious moment of topsy turvy fun, in which the esteemed scientist takes a turn as the fool, the grotesque body reveals the fact of its own enjoyment, and the public rediscover the dialogical laughter of discursive play. I want to stress however that it is not simply because Gliddon is brought so comically low in this moment that this scene of antebellum grotesquerie turns into a carnivalizing event. Nor is it the purely because his mistake opens up new and divergent forms of playful public discourse. It is the mummy’s enjoyment that makes

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56 Zupančič, 192. Zupančič notes that there is “a strong phallic reference at the heart of comedy,” pointing to traditions of phallic display in Ancient Greek performance that Aristotle linked to the origins of comedy: “Phallic songs were sung during rituals honoring Dionysus. In these rituals the participants would march in procession, carrying a phallus of huge proportions made of animal skins, and singing obscene songs, full of ambiguous innuendo. This theory of the origins of comedy is widely accepted, and strongly corroborated by (documented) conventions of the staging of comedies in the early days: the actors often wore costumes to which big leather phalluses were attached, sometimes additionally highlighted by being painted, for example, in red” (213).
these other comic pleasures possible. The fact is a significant one to the political possibilities of the carnivalesque, for the assertion of the grotesque figure’s bodily enjoyment stakes out the claims of the marginalized Other, creating a display of autonomy in the face of spectacular objectification. It is precisely for this reason that Gliddon’s mummy specimen comes figuratively alive in this moment, partaking in the fun of reanimation with the likes of Sheppard Lee and Ginger Blue. Those earlier funny mummies sprang unexpectedly to life, but as Gliddon’s mummy ultimately suggests, the vibrancy and political potency of these scenes of playful reanimation are most powerful when the grotesque body makes insurgent claims to pleasure that scramble the guiding parameters of public amusement.

**Towards a Politics of Phallic Display: Henry “Box” Brown’s Emancipatory Play**

What new forms of public enjoyment might be forged in the reversals of carnivalesque performance? Gliddon’s mummy mishap opens up a political aperture, providing an instance of popular spectacle gone awry that, in the spontaneous flash of comic accident, illuminates bodily pleasures obscured by the apparatus of antebellum commercial entertainment. But antebellum impresarios of the carnivalesque did not always happen upon those pleasures by accident. Even as Gliddon was presenting his *Panorama of the Nile* and selling advanced subscription tickets to his mummy unwrapping, Boston was host to another public lecturer central to antebellum figurations of the reanimated body: the notorious Henry “Box” Brown. Already famous for his daring escape from slavery, which he accomplished by packing himself into a postal box and mailing himself from Richmond to Philadelphia, Brown appeared in Boston in April 1850 with a new Panorama exhibition, *Mirror of Slavery*. His performances chart out
new forms of popular entertainment at the scene of bodily resurrection, deliberately
tapping into the pleasures of the carnivalesque to develop his own unique brand of
antislavery politics.

The debut of Mirror of Slavery marked an important juncture in Brown’s
development as a performer and antislavery activist. Brown was already a celebrity of the
abolitionist movement. After his escape from slavery in the spring of 1849, Brown
quickly became an icon of the abolitionist stage. Accounts of his daring and extraordinary
escape spread swiftly across the press, and within a month of his reaching a tenuous
freedom in the North, Brown had made his first public appearance at an American Anti-
Slavery society meeting in Boston, where he took the stage to sing his “Hymn of
Thanksgiving” — the song he had sung when he first rose from his box in Philadelphia.
Over the course of the summer, he quickly established his reputation as a dynamic
abolitionist lecturer, gradually accumulating a multimedia repertoire to support his public
persona. Songsheets with his “Hymn” and an illustration of his famous box circulated at
his lectures, and by the fall of 1849, Brown was promoting the first edition of his
published narrative, an account of his life written by the white abolitionist and printer
Charles Stearns. Brown used some of the profits from his book to produce his panorama
exhibition, which opened at Boston’s Washingtonian Hall on April 11, 1850. Spectators
could purchase tickets to look upon a succession of painted scenes representing the
horrors of slavery and the struggle for freedom, as they unfolded along a reportedly
50,000 foot long canvas.57 This visual spectacle was accompanied by the descriptive

57 Reported in advertisements as 50,000 feet long; Advertisements declared (hyperbolically) Brown’s
Panorama to be 50,000 feet long. According to Jeffrey Ruggles, the canvas was roughly eight to ten feet
high, and consisted of forty-nine different scenes. See Jeffrey Ruggles, The Unboxing of Henry Brown
(Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2003), 93.
patter of the narrator’s lecture, as well as various musical interludes. Over time, Brown’s increasing command of his Panorama exhibition not only solidified his career as an innovative showman, but also enabled him to assert his growing autonomy from his white amanuensis and white sponsorship.\textsuperscript{58} Gliddon’s \textit{Panorama of the Nile} had already been on display a full week when Brown’s \textit{Mirror of Slavery} opened. For a brief period, Bostonians could choose between the two, before Brown took his panorama on tour.


across New England. These early exhibitions in the U.S. were short-lived, however, as Brown faced assault and threat of kidnapping, a threat that was exacerbated by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in September 1850. By October of that year Brown was on a ship bound for England, where he would continue to lecture and perform for over two decades.

Figure 9. Engraving of the Box in which Henry Box Brown Escaped from Slavery in Richmond, VA. Song, sung by Mr. Brown on being removed from the box. Broadside (Boston: Laing’s Steam Press, 1850). Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Printed Ephemera Collection.
In the weeks in which Brown’s exhibition coincided with Gliddon’s, a richly suggestive portrait of antebellum popular culture emerges, one in which two charismatic showmen present opposing performances of race, history, and bodily alterity. In one, the popular scientist proposes to exhume the grotesque, extraordinary body with the fullest belief that its alterity will, following the convoluted logic of a polygenist Egyptology, confirm a white supremacist world order. In the other, a freedom seeker situates his own fantastic tale of physical interment, transport, and improbable resurrection within the broader historical and geographical scope of slavery’s spectacular violence. This ideological conflict played out in their dueling panoramas, which presented contrasting scenes of Black life in Egypt. While Gliddon guided his audiences through scenes of ethnographic pastoralism such as “A NUBIAN WEAVER, his primitive Loom and simple Apparatus” and “NUBIAN VILLAGE, Manners and Customs: lady in full dress,” Brown’s Panorama interspersed a series of paintings that roughly followed the outline of Charles C. Green’s antislavery poetic work, The Nubian Slave. The narrative scenes of Green’s illustrated poem, which depicted the tragedy of a Nubian family captured by slavers, shipped to the United States, separated at the point of sale, and thwarted in their attempted escape, provided Brown with a preliminary framework for his

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59 Gliddon, Hand-book to the American Panorama of the Nile (London: James Madden, 1849), 7-8. Gliddon quite explicitly linked such pastoralism and other depictions of Blacks in ancient Egypt to the plantation nostalgia of blackface minstrelsy. In one of his earlier lectures in the 1840s, for example, he presented an image of “Negroes dancing in the streets of Thebes” as evidence of minstrelized “black” jollity throughout history, suggesting that “‘de Nigger’ rejoined anciently, as he does now, and that to the music ‘ob de Banjo’ he ‘Wheel about and turn about / And jump Jim Crow.’” (“Mr. Gliddon’s Fourth Lecture.” Boston Daily Evening Transcript, Nov. 4, 1843, 2. See also Ruggles, 77-80 for an analysis of Green’s narrative poem and Brown’s Panorama as a response to Gliddon’s brand of Egyptology.

60 Although no known copy of Brown’s Panorama survives, scholars conjecture that the engravings in Green’s work served as a source for several of the forty-nine scenes that made up Brown’s Panorama. See Ruggles, 94-104; Daphne A. Brooks, Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 84-94.
abolitionist Panorama that was circum-Atlantic in scope. Brown extended the visual breadth of his Panorama beyond the narrative arc of Green’s tragic poem by introducing an array of other scenes of enslavement and escape, including an illustration of his own famous unboxing. The result was a visual experience that moved fluidly between depictions of topographical scenery (such as “Beautiful Lake and Mountain Scenery in Africa,” “Gorgeous Scenery of the West India Islands,” “View of the Lake of the Dismal Swamp”), images of slavery’s iconic horrors (“Interior of a Slave Ship,” “March of Chain Gang,” “Modes of Confinement and Punishment,” to name a few), and illustrations of the struggle for freedom (including “Nubians, escaping by Night,” “Ellen Crafts, Escaping,” “West India Emancipation”).

Beyond the visual content of the Panorama itself, Brown’s live performances overturned the racist logic that guided Gliddon’s lectures and so many other kinds of antebellum popular entertainments in new and surprising ways. As he toured Mirror of Slavery in New England and later England, Brown assumed greater authority over the exhibition by taking over the role of chief narrator in the performance. In the process, he built up a repertoire that playfully engaged the racist tropes of antebellum popular culture. Some of these ludic reappropriations had roots in his earliest performances on the abolitionist lecture circuit, when he introduced a new song that circulated on songsheets during his public appearances at antislavery meetings. In addition to his “Hymn of

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61 Daphne Brooks has compellingly argued that the Panorama’s interspersed arrangement of divergent images of slavery and escape produces a form of narrative movement that “repeatedly stalls and disrupts” (89). In this way, Brown “dismantles the progressive temporality” that was typical of nineteenth-century panoramic form: “The illusion of movement, which is embedded in the genre, comes undone in the exhibition. The Mirror punctures the quietude of the spectator’s gaze by insisting on a return to the problem of slavery” (Brooks, 89-91).


Thanksgiving,” Brown composed lyrics for “Escape from Slavery of Henry Box Brown,” a song that narrativized his journey to freedom set to the Stephen Foster minstrel tune, “Uncle Ned.” Instead of a song that told the tale of an elderly enslaved man laying down “de shubble and de hoe” at the end of his life, Brown’s lyrics describe how he “laid down the shovel and the hoe, / Down in the box he did go, / No more Slave work for Henry Box Brown, / In the box by Express he did go.” Brown later incorporated the tune into his Panorama lectures and included it in an appendix to his substantially revised 1851 Narrative. What’s telling here is how Brown signifies on the popular repertoire of blackface minstrelsy, for it suggests the extent to which his growing creative autonomy as an abolitionist performer was not only affiliated with antebellum structures of comic practice, but was actually established through carnivalesque inversions of those structures.

Even as Brown’s lyrics transformed minstrel tunes into celebrations of freedom, they also presented a vehicle through which to critically engage the polygenist discourses propagated by Gliddon and others. Indeed, Britt Rusert has shown how Brown extended his playful transformation of “Uncle Ned” to effectively satirize polygenetic theories of race. Spinning his reappropriation of “the shovel and the hoe” into a parodic speech recounting “the slave-holders’ version of the creation of the human race,” Brown incorporated a new comic act, which evoked the mock lectures and stump speeches of the

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65 Rusert, 143-145.
66 Brown, 91-91. Brown included the lyrics to his revised version of “Uncle Ned” and his parody of polygenist discourse in the substantially revised 1851 British edition of his Narrative. These additions exemplify the ways in which Brown’s “public performances are built into the narrative” of the 1851 version, as John Ernest has noted (“Introduction” 27). Britt Rusert has extended this line of thought a step further, calling the 1851 edition an “archive of performance” that provides “a robust record of the songs, stories, and panoramas that structured [Brown’s] spectacular shows” (143).
minstrel show’s olio, into the narrative patter of his Panorama performances. For Rusert, Brown’s satiric engagements with polygenetic theory exemplify the ways in which his “artful appropriations of popular science” recast scientific practice as a vehicle for liberation: “Rather than dismissing science as an always ideological, racist formation, Brown understood popular science to be an assemblage of different fields and practices that could be dismantled, reassembled, and redirected toward the performance (art) of emancipation.”67 While Rusert rightly notes the satiric aspect of Brown’s performances of popular science, it’s worth dwelling on the unseriousness of his critical interventions, for the comic play woven into his abolitionist lectures does more than simply undermine the would-be seriousness of polygenist scientists like Gliddon. In his assumption of Gliddon’s role as the lecturer-impresario, Brown draws upon the bodily play of carnivalesque performance, which works to elevate the low even as it lowers what is high. Against the backdrop of an unrolling panorama — a panorama that included a visual depiction of his own unboxing — Brown’s live performances enact an alternative figuration of grotesque entombment, one in which the exhumed and newly liberated body does not just transgress established law or overturn the racial hierarchies of official culture, but actively creates new social relations organized under the banner of abolition. As a radical reconfiguration of the antebellum mummy, Brown is very much alive, and he speaks.

Still more, he has fun. Consider the extraordinary festivities of one Brown’s performances while touring northern England in the spring of 1851. In advance of his arrival in Leeds, the local press widely advertised an elaborate multimedia event that

67 Rusert, 132.
might best be described as a one-man abolitionist carnival. The announcement in the

*Leeds Mercury* outlined Brown’s much anticipated performance:

GREAT ATTRACTION CAUSED in ENGLAND by Mr. HENRY BOX
BROWN, a fugitive slave, that has made his escape from Richmond, in Virginia,
to Philadelphia, a distance of 350 miles, locked up in a box, 3 feet 1 inch long, 2
feet wide, and 2 feet 6 inches high, will leave Brandford for Leeds, on *Thursday
next, May Twenty-second*, at six o’clock P.M., accompanied by a band of music,
packed up in the identical box, arriving in Leeds at half-past six, then forming a
procession through the town to the Music-Hall, Albion-street, where Mr. Brown
will be released from the box before the audience, and then will give the
particulars of his escape from slavery, also the song of his escape. He will then
show the great Panorama of American Slavery, which has been exhibiting in this
country to thousands, and patronized by the Nobility and Clergy.68

Armed with his “identical box” and a marching band, Brown’s festive reenactment is
certainly a publicity stunt, but it is no mere spectacle. This is a celebration in which a
local collective takes part in an emancipatory procession, a public parade in which the
body marked by antebellum constructions of the racial grotesque reveals a vibrant
autonomy that rejuvenates the practices of popular enjoyment. With the pomp and
circumstance of his choreographed self-display, Brown reconfigures the parameters of
public entertainment, generating festive social pleasure at the staged unveiling of his
liberated body. And quite unlike Gliddon’s embarrassing exposure of the grotesque
phallus, Brown’s unveiling is no comic accident, but rather a carefully orchestrated
performance of bodily autonomy — an autonomy, moreover, that underscores Brown’s
own pleasure as the organizing principle of popular enjoyment in the public space. The
extreme physical demands of this grotesque reenactment notwithstanding, Brown’s

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carnivalesque procession is less concerned with making the trauma of slavery present than it is in disclosing the surplus pleasure of the resurrected body.

What I want to suggest here is that Brown ultimately grounds his carnivalesque performance of self-emancipation in the same phallic display that manifested momentarily at the scene of Gliddon’s botched mummy unwrapping. With each playful flourish and show of extravagance, Brown appends pleasure to his public persona, developing an antislavery politics that emphatically declares the persistence of his own bodily enjoyment. Attending to Brown’s pleasure-fueled displays helps us to recover an unserious political tradition in antislavery activism that has been historically marginalized by the politics of respectability. This more serious-minded approach to furthering the antislavery cause found articulation in the political tactics of activist leaders like Frederick Douglass, whose use of popular media such as photography, newspapers, and public oratory persistently promoted images of Black dignity and Black progress to a broad range of antebellum publics. What Brown promotes, however, is the fact of Black enjoyment. In this sense, he draws on the technologies of popular entertainment to chart out an emancipatory politics that ultimately diverges from the mainstream abolitionist movement. And in fact, the excesses of Brown’s theatrical showmanship only grew more elaborate and fantastical over the course of his career, pushing him still further apart from his abolitionist contemporaries. After his personal break with his friend and business partner James C. A. Smith in 1851, Brown continued to tour across England with his

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Panorama, but at an increasing remove from the abolitionist establishment. In later years, he took to “presenting himself in the streets in the character of an African King, richly dressed, and accompanied by a footman.” To his colleagues and partners in the antislavery movement, Brown’s decadent turn appeared garish and unseemly, and even counterproductive. William Wells Brown encapsulated this more broadly felt uneasiness in a letter to Wendell Phillips, calling Brown “a very foolish fellow.” Wells Brown’s criticism fixated on the gaudiness of Brown’s appearance: “he had a gold ring on nearly every finger on each hand, and more gold and brass round his neck than would take to hang the bigest Alderman in London. And as to ruffles about the shirts, he had enough to supply any old maid with cap stuff, for half a century. He had on a green dress coat and white hat, and his whole appearance was that of a well dressed monkey.” Certainly no stranger to theatricality himself, Wells Brown nevertheless found Brown’s ornamental surplus cringeworthy. The flamboyance of his carnivalesque persona, coupled with the public controversy over his business and family affairs, eventually pushed Brown to the fringes of the abolitionist movement, to the point even that his later performances, which delved into the terrain of magic and mesmerism, seemed to abandon the politics of the antislavery movement altogether.

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70 Brown orchestrated his escape with the help of his friend James C. A. Smith, a free Black who owned a cake shop in Richmond. He later developed his Panorama with Smith as his business partner, but a financial dispute between the two men caused Brown to dissolve the partnership in the summer of 1851, effectively cutting Smith out of any proprietary rights to the Panorama. The rift between them was personal as well as financial; Smith wrote in letters from England to American abolitionists that he openly disapproved of Brown’s failure to prioritize the recovery of his wife and children, who were still enslaved in Virginia. See Ruggles, 132-137.

71 “MERTHYR LOCAL INTELLIGENCE.” The Cardiff Times, Mar. 11, 1864, 6.

72 William Wells Brown to Wendell Phillips, 1 Sept. 1852, qtd. in Ruggles, 145.

73 In truth, Wells Brown was prone to his own performative displays of pleasurable excess. His critique of Brown may have been spurred more by a competitive sense of rivalry for audiences than by any firmly held conviction in a serious-minded politics. For a study of Wells Brown’s pleasure-based aesthetics, see Geoffrey Sanborn, Plagiarama!: William Wells Brown and the Aesthetic of Attractions (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
Wells Brown’s distaste for his fellow performer on the lecture circuit is ultimately about more than just the extravagances of Brown’s costume. Wells Brown suggests that Brown’s brand of carnivalesque performance is a frivolous enterprise, conducted by way of a crass promotionalism that ultimately shares more in common with the Barnumesque amusements of expanding mass entertainment industries than it does with an antislavery politics. This line of critique has continued to resonate well beyond the circles of the antebellum abolitionist movement. As Daphne Brooks, Britt Rusert and others have noted, scholarship on the arc of Brown’s career has often found it difficult to square what contemporaries like Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass saw as Brown’s shameless self-promotion with the collective uplift typically associated with the politics of antislavery. Generous readers of Brown’s later career view his shift from the standard format of the abolitionist lecture into the realm of mesmerism, “electro-biology,” and the magic show as indicative of the radical fugitivity of Brown’s freedom quest — his refusal to be “boxed in” by the material circumstances of his time or contained by the expectations of his social milieu. This capacious approach to what Daphne Brooks has called Brown’s “escape artistry” has done much to recuperate what at first blush appears as Brown’s gradual relinquishment of the political in exchange for the more profitable amusements of the nineteenth-century’s emergent culture industries. We should be wary, however, of critical recoveries of Brown’s performance aesthetics that take his unserious

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74 As Brooks puts it, “Brown’s brash and spectacular public acts may have indeed proved too excessive, too performative, too ‘glam’ to register as legible acts of social and political resistance to slavery” (130). Martha J. Cutter has more recently described Brown’s later career as both politically innovative and compromising. Brown “challenged the notion of enslaved subjectivity as flat or stereotypical,” she writes, “but may have also turned his own story into entertainment for a public entranced by spectacle and freakery” (Cutter, *The Illustrated Slave: Empathy, Graphic Narrative, and the Visual Culture of the Transatlantic Abolition Movement, 1800-1852* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017], 213). See also Rusert, 142-143.

75 Brooks, 11.
engagements with popular science too seriously. Such an approach risks smoothing over his substantial differences from many of the major players in nineteenth-century Black activism and obscures the ways in which Brown’s performances nuance political histories of antislavery and antiracist practice. By situating Brown’s repertoire within a larger antebellum panoply of grotesque bodily display, I seek to foreground the ways in which Brown’s theatrical showmanship, his carnivalizing displays of enjoyment — in short, his unseriousness — articulate a liberatory politics that is no less crucial to the project of democratic inclusion than the serious politics of human dignity.

To recognize the liberatory politics that Brown enacted over the course of his career is also to recover alternative political configurations of the antebellum carnivalesque. When we understand Brown’s carnivalizing acts as in dialogue with other antebellum impresarios of the grotesque, such as Gliddon and Barnum, the extravagances of his public persona take on fresh meaning, for they overturn the parameters of bodily display and popular enjoyment advanced by many kinds of commercial entertainment. The gold rings that Wells Brown found so vulgar are in fact just one more flourish that unveils the enduring presence of the phallus at the heart of collective formations, a grotesque (or surplus) ornamentation of the body that celebrates the vibrant agency of the subject that brings himself to life. Far from disengaging from the politics of antislavery or, more bluntly, “selling out,” Brown consistently demonstrates how the carnivalesque enacts a politics organized around the assertion of the grotesque body’s phallus, which is to say, the enduring mark of pleasure appended to the body that claims autonomy in an arena of social play.

When we elevate Brown’s reconfigurations of the grotesque body resurrected, a more
nuanced history of the antebellum carnivalesque begins to emerge, one in which the
inexorable rise of new culture industry regimes is much less certain and far from
ideologically monolithic. His comic play shows how the carnivalesque’s entanglements
in the entertainment structures of a growing mass culture do not simply compromise the
transformative possibilities of topsy turvy popular fun. Rather, it is precisely the
carnivalesque’s involvement in the still experimental, yet rapidly expanding, genres of
antebellum commercial entertainment that presents opportunities for politically
innovative forms of comic reversal — for new and renewed constellations of popular
enjoyment. The funny mummies of antebellum performance culture signal that potential
for pleasurable disruption. While figures like Ginger Blue and Sheppard Lee theorize the
carnivalesque’s unstable assimilation to the racist and exclusionary structures of mass
culture, Henry “Box” Brown’s emancipatory play as an antislavery impresario would
later capitalize on the very thorniness of the carnivalesque’s relation to the emergent
culture industries of nineteenth-century public life. It is not enough to say, however, that
entanglement goes both ways, for in truth, the insight of Brown’s ongoing, roving display
of self-revival is more fundamental. Brown’s ostentatious displays of phallic disclosure
demonstrate how the carnivalesque asserts bodily enjoyment as the constitutive feature of
political agency. In other words, the carnivalesque reveals to us the pleasure that is the
very condition for the political. Critical efforts to chart the bleak realities of modernity’s
“endless carnival” tend to lose sight of what Brown so clearly understood, namely, that
pleasure is not inherently the obstructing force against which a politics that would better
serve “the people” struggles to take shape. Rather, it is the desire for pleasure, the drive
for satisfaction in the midst of collectivity, that constitutes politics as such. Brown got
this joke of popular politics, and unlike many of his contemporaries in abolitionist
activism, he did not seek to dismantle it with the mechanisms of serious critique, but
instead mobilized its play to his own ends. It is the ongoing task of politics to give shape
to such collective play in newly expansive ways, making enjoyment more readily
available to all those who play.
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