

**Empire of Culture:
U.S. Entertainers and the Making of the Pacific Circuit, 1850-1890**

by

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For my grandfathers, Vernon Henry Smith (1918-2008) and
Narvin Otto Wittmann (1919-2009)

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Chapter One

Introduction: The U.S. Culture Industry and the Pacific World

In the summer of 1853, New York City hosted its own version of the famous Crystal Palace Exhibition, which was the progenitor and model for the series of grand World's Fairs staged during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The exhibition was a matter of national pride for the still relatively young nation, one intended to demonstrate the progress of American industry and culture to the world.¹ As the exhibition was coming together, the *New York Clipper* newspaper editorialized that: "It has been suggested, and the suggestion meets with general favor, that arrangements be entered into with Barnum, to get his consent to have himself placed over the principal entrance to the Crystal Palace, as the greatest specimen of American manufacture to be found in this country."² Although perhaps in jest, the idea that Barnum, or more particularly the brand of commercial popular culture he personified, was the singular contribution of the United States to the world was a remarkably perceptive observation.

¹ On the World Fairs in the United States, see Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). On the New York City exhibition specifically, see Charles Hirschfeld, "America on Exhibition: The New York Crystal Palace," *American Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (1957): 101-16 and Ivan D. Steen, "America's First World's Fair: The Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations at New York's Crystal Palace, 1853-1854," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1963): 257-87.

² Although this was its initial year of publication, the insight of the *Clipper* into the workings of commercial popular culture was suggestive inasmuch as it became the first and most significant trade paper for the U.S. culture industry during the second half of the nineteenth-century. *New York Clipper*, July 2, 1853.

At about the same time, a minstrel troupe from the United States known as the New York Serenaders was playing before packed houses at the Victoria Theatre in Sydney.³ Their presence and popularity in a city on nearly the opposite side of the world was a testament to the extraordinary reach and appeal of U.S. popular culture and substantiated the *Clipper's* bold assessment. The New York Serenaders were the pioneering performers on an emerging entertainment circuit that stretched across the Pacific and linked together an ever-increasing and shifting set of cultural markets as the century progressed. This “Pacific circuit” was a historically complex entity that involved an international cast of players, but the most influential entertainers, managers, and entrepreneurs on the circuit were predominately from the United States. The ongoing development of a robust and expansive U.S. culture industry during the mid-nineteenth century dovetailed with the emergence of a recognizable “Pacific world” shaped by the integrative forces of colonialism and capitalism. In the wake of the California Gold Rush, these seemingly disparate developments intersected as U.S. entertainers flocked to San Francisco and began to tour around the larger Pacific, giving birth to a vibrant entertainment circuit that fomented interactions and mediated exchanges between the United States and the diverse peoples and cultures of the Pacific world.

What follows is a transnational cultural history of this Pacific circuit as it developed over the course of the latter half of the nineteenth century and the U.S. entertainers that animated it. Most fundamentally, transnational history emphasizes the movement and circulation of people, goods, and culture beyond national boundaries. As Joanne Meyerowitz usefully observes,

Transnational histories are neither world histories with comprehensive

³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 4, 1853.

accounts of everything everywhere nor comparative histories that compare and contrast isolated or static entities. Instead, they attend to specific movements, transits, and circulations that crossed or transcended one or more national borders.⁴

The specific focus of this dissertation is on the U.S. entertainers that toured through the Pacific, and it thus makes what Osterhammel and Peterson describe as a “diagonal” inquiry, one that cuts “across national histories” and analyzes “the relations among peoples, countries, and, civilizations from perspectives other than those of power politics and economics.”⁵ While the primary emphasis is on the experiences of U.S. entertainers, touring the Pacific circuit necessarily involved engaging and interacting with a wide variety of peoples and cultures, and the dissertation also addresses the reciprocal influences that this process put into play. The making of the Pacific circuit was an uneven process shaped by contestation and circumstance, one that at every stage existed in a complex relationship with both Western imperialism and the local societies that variously accommodated, enjoyed, and resisted the efforts of U.S. entertainers.

While the Pacific circuit generated a range of responses and served a variety of ends, within its capacious framework I seek to develop three broad and related theses. The first centers on the question of why so many U.S. entertainers and entrepreneurs played such a prominent part in fomenting the circuit. Here I consider the rapid growth and sophistication of the U.S. culture industry, which was thriving by mid-century and

⁴ Joanne Meyerowitz, “Transnational Sex and U.S. History,” *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009): 1273. For a useful introduction to the growing literature on transnational history, see *The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History*, Special Issue, *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999); Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (2006): 1441–64; Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005) 17-57; Ian R. Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective Since 1789* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁵ Jurgen Osterhammel and Niels P. Peterson, *Globalization: A Short History* translated by Dona Geyer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 19-20.

produced a surfeit of performers well situated to take advantage of opportunities that opened up overseas. The remarkably agile fashion in which U.S. entertainers spread around the Pacific and consolidated their position on the emergent circuit was a direct function of the advanced state of the show trade in the United States, which was already becoming one of the nation's dominant export economies at mid-century. The success of cultural exports was predicated in part upon a strong domestic market, which allowed entrepreneurs to develop the strategies and accumulate the capital that made the amusement business in the United States such a dynamic force around the globe.⁶ While a host of other factors played a part, it was profit imperatives and the expanding reach and of the U.S. culture industry that drove the making of the Pacific circuit.

My second thesis, expressed simply, is that the performances of U.S. entertainers in transnational contexts were dynamic interactions imbued with cross-cultural meaning and long-term impacts.⁷ These performers and shows communicated some of the first and most immediate ideas of America to audiences abroad. They also provided a forum for cultural exchange that saw particular practices and forms variously adopted and reworked by their audiences for both pleasure and profit. The precise terms of these interactions of

⁶ As Donald Sassoon notes in an analysis of the variegated pattern of development in the culture industries of Europe and the United States, "the export of cultural commodities is a by-product of a thriving home industry," and the relatively more freewheeling and robust commercial entertainment business that developed in the United States reflected this. "On Cultural Markets," *New Left Review* 17 (September-October 2002), 114. For a similar argument in terms of print culture in the United States, particularly vis-à-vis Europe, see Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

⁷ The relationship between performance and identity has become an axiom of a wide variety of scholarship across the humanities. Although the particulars of popular culture, performance, and American identity will be dealt with at length, for some key texts from the wider literature, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Philip Joseph Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Greg Dening, *Beach Crossings: Voyaging Across Times, Cultures and Self* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). For useful survey of the genealogy of performance studies from one of its chief popularizers, see Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003).

course varied widely, but U.S. popular entertainment was never simply monolithic in its messages and effects, and it engendered a wide and shifting range of responses from its disparate local audiences and commentators. Although the Pacific circuit was built on commercial transactions, it promoted cross-cultural engagement and introduced a wide diversity of people to the forms and images of U.S. popular culture.

Finally, I seek to explore the complex relationship between the evolving Pacific circuit and a rising U.S. empire, two major historical developments that were both contemporaneous and interconnected. By the time professional performers began touring in the 1850s, the United States already had a long-standing commercial, missionary, and naval presence in the Pacific.⁸ With a continental empire essentially established with the end of the Mexican-American War, the attention of government officials and expansionists increasingly turned to the wider Pacific world.⁹ At the same time that the *New York Clipper* was puffing Barnum and the New York Serenaders were performing in Sydney, a United States Navy squadron under the command of Commodore Matthew Perry was steaming through the Pacific in an effort to force the “opening” of Japan. The eventual success of that venture was an important milestone in the history of U.S. empire and, despite tensions, the signing of the resulting Treaty of Kanagawa proved to be a celebratory occasion. After a *kabuki* exhibition by their Japanese hosts, the Americans reciprocated with an invitation to a banquet onboard the USS *Mississippi* at which some of the sailors staged a minstrel show. According to the official narrative, it "produced a

⁸ Ernest Stanley Dodge, *New England and the South Seas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965); Arrell Morgan Gibson, *Yankees in Paradise: The Pacific Basin Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993); Arthur Power Dudden, *The American Pacific: From the Old China Trade to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Jean Heffer, *The United States and the Pacific: History of a Frontier* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).

⁹ Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

marked effect even upon their sedate Japanese listeners, and thus confirmed the universal popularity of ‘the Ethiopians,’ by a decided hit in Japan.”¹⁰ This moment stands as a rich example of one of the ways in which empire and entertainment intersected in the Pacific. The events in Japan also signaled the increasingly aggressive role the United States would play in Pacific affairs over the second half of the nineteenth century, culminating with the annexation of Hawai’i and the Spanish-American War.¹¹

Although there were certainly vicissitudes in American foreign policy, on a structural level it is important to appreciate how the evolving entertainment networks responded to the United States’ broadening economic and political involvement in the Pacific. While U.S. entertainers were to some extent implicated in American imperialism, they operated independently of it as well and often relied on imperial networks maintained by European powers and the British Empire in particular. Indeed, the history of the Pacific circuit is inseparable from that of the British diaspora and the British Empire, which served as a market and channel for American popular culture around the Pacific. In a chronicle of his tours abroad, the magician Harry Kellar recalled that he “breathed more freely under the protection of the English flag, which, next to the glorious

¹⁰ Francis L. Hawks, ed., *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan...* (New York: D. Appleton, 1856), 538; George Feifer, *Breaking Open Japan: Commodore Perry, Lord Abe, and the American Imperialism of 1853* (New York: Smithsonian Books/Collins, 2006); Peter Booth Wiley, *Yankees in the Land of Gods: Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan* (New York: Viking, 1990).

¹¹ For a useful survey, see Edward P. Crapol, “Coming to Terms with Empire: The Historiography of Late Nineteenth-Century American Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 16, no. 4 (1992): 573–97. For key texts on U.S. empire in the Pacific, see Foster Rhea Dulles, *America in the Pacific: A Century of Expansion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932); Richard Warner Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1960); Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Ernest N. Paolino, *The Foundations of the American Empire; William Henry Seward and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Involvement: American Expansion across the Pacific, 1784-1900* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001); Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

stars and stripes,” was “the most cheering sight an American can see abroad.”¹² The “explosive colonization” of California and Australia, the overlapping British and U.S. empires in the Pacific, and, not insignificantly, a common cultural heritage, ensured that the Pacific circuit took on a distinctly Anglo-American cast.¹³ Yet, U.S. entertainers were never simply limited by the structural or cultural restraints of the Anglophone Pacific. While the Australian colonies were undoubtedly the single most important overseas market for U.S. entertainers, they ranged widely from Eastern Pacific ports such as Valparaiso and Callao to the colonial capitals of Batavia and Manila and even ventured to seemingly small and out of the way islands like Rarotonga.¹⁴ Although the dimensions of the circuit and entertainer’s itineraries both changed over time, they were consistently enterprising in their efforts to seek out new markets and audiences for U.S. entertainment around the Pacific.

Ultimately, performers and entrepreneurs worked according to their own agendas, but their activities were certainly shaped by the expanding political and economic involvement of the United States in the Pacific over the nineteenth century. The contested, variable, and at times ambivalent interactions that characterized the Pacific circuit, though, also defy any kind of neat or sweeping characterization about the

¹² Harry Kellar, *A Magician's Tour Up and Down and Round About the Earth: Being the Life and Adventures of the American Nostradamus, Harry Kellar* (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons, 1886), 93.

¹³ James Belich, “The Rise of the Angloworld: Settlement in Australasia and North America 1784-1918,” in *Rediscovering the British World*, ed. P. Buckner and D. Francis (Calgary: Calgary University Press, 2005), 39-57. On the relationship between British and U.S. empire, see Paul Kramer, “Empires, Exceptions and Anglo-Saxons: Race and Rule Between the British and U. S. Empires, 1880-1910,” *Journal of American History* 88, no. 4 (2002): 1315-53; Paul Kramer and John Plotz, “Pairing Empires: Britain and the United States, 1857-1947,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 2, no.1 (2001).

¹⁴ A troupe of vocalists and bell-ringers known as the Alleghanians visited Rarotonga in January 1860 while on tour through the Pacific Islands. With a relatively small total population of around 2,500 people and only a handful of Europeans, it seemed to be an unpromising place to perform. Despite this, the party was able to sell tickets via a barter system, which proved extremely remunerative, and they performed a concert at the schoolhouse that was enthusiastically received before moving on. *Alleghanians, Vocalists and Swiss Bell Ringers' Songster: Sketches and Travels* (New York: s.n., 1873).

relationship between U.S. entertainers and U.S. empire. In employing the terminology of an “Empire of Culture,” what I hope to highlight is that while the power of the United States and the dynamism of the U.S. culture industry drove the making of the Pacific circuit, the exercise of that power involved complex cultural work that defies easy categorization.¹⁵ This does not preclude U.S. entertainers from at times acting as agents of American imperialism and preserves a more flexible framework for evaluating their activities and influence. The Pacific circuit was thus an empire not in a conventional sense, but a cultural one, and the term effectively captures the relative prominence and influence that U.S. entrepreneurs and entertainers held in the show trade around the Pacific.¹⁶

While these propositions might suffice as a general introduction to the major aims of this project, a further elaboration of methodology and historiography is obviously necessary. Inasmuch as the Pacific circuit emerged out of a complex dialectic of domestic and international developments, the introduction proceeds by first exploring the concept of the culture industry and how its historical growth in the United States paved the way for the export of popular entertainment abroad. The second part turns to the issue of what exactly constitutes the “Pacific” and offers a brief overview of its history over the second

¹⁵ Although some historians of the foreign relations of the United States have explored these issues, they have tended to lapse into reductive notions of culture as a simply a superstructural layer on already existing empire. For an overview, see Susan Brewer, “‘As Far As We Can’: Culture and US Foreign Relations” *A Companion to American Foreign Relations*, ed. Robert D. Schulzinger (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 15-30. See also, Foster Rhea Dulles, *Americans Abroad: Two Centuries of European Travel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964); Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); Thomas W. Zeiler, *Ambassadors in Pinstripes: The Spalding World Tour and the Birth of American Empire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

¹⁶ Although focused on the turn-of-the-century vaudeville, Leigh Woods contention that “popular entertainment has figured centrally in promoting American influence in surprisingly varied forms and in many parts of the world,” certainly resonates with my own conception about what the kind of work that U.S. entertainers were doing. “American Vaudeville, American Empire,” in *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater* ed. Jeffrey D. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 73.

half of the nineteenth century. The emphasis here is on the principal factors that determined the parameters of the evolving entertainment circuit such as developments in transportation and communication and the pattern of European colonialism and U.S. imperialism in the region. A final section brings these threads together and frames key questions about the history of the Pacific circuit and its contribution to nineteenth-century U.S. cultural and imperial history.

The U.S. Culture Industry

The concept of the culture industry as initially elaborated by Theodor Adorno argued that the logic of corporate capitalism transformed culture into something that was mass-produced, standardized, essentially devoid of aesthetic value, and determinative in “administering” consumption and meaning. This “mass culture” was then foisted upon passive consumers unwilling or unable to escape the imperatives of the industry.¹⁷ This paradigm was subsequently challenged by scholars like Stuart Hall, who in his seminal essay “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” eschewed the term mass culture, arguing that “people are not cultural dopes,” and instead portrayed popular culture as engaged in a “dialectic of culture struggle” with the dominant culture. According to Hall, while the culture industry does have effects on popular consciousness, popular culture is best understood as a “constant battlefield” through which meanings and cultural forms were variously accommodated, reworked, and resisted.¹⁸ This model of culture as contested

¹⁷ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972); Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular,’” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 227-39. Also see Michael Denning, “The End of Mass Culture,” in *Modernity and Mass Culture*, ed. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 253-68.

has proved influential over the last thirty years and broadly shapes the approach adopted here to the cultural interactions that ensued as U.S. entertainers traveled about the Pacific. But as James Cook notes, many of the scholars indebted to Hall's perspective have nevertheless returned to the concept of the culture industry, a move he attributes to the conceptual clarity of that idea vis-à-vis more amorphous and problematic terms like popular and mass. In this formulation, the shift of culture from noun to adjective allows for a more rigorous historical analysis of how "modern cultural production" was shaped by corporate capitalism in specific ways at specific times.¹⁹

Even more important in terms of this project is the assessment Cook offers of the transnational dimensions of the culture industry during the mid-nineteenth century. He posits that the culture industry operated as a "nonlocalized yet interconnected system of capital" that was simultaneously at work expanding into new markets and driving integration in established ones. This process aptly captures the dynamic through which the far-flung cultural markets around the Pacific were relatively rapidly consolidated into a touring circuit. The experiences of the initial minstrel troupes and circuses that left San Francisco to explore markets overseas shaped the subsequent circuit as other entertainers and managers learned from their experiences. Profitable markets were identified and integrated even as new ones were explored; the system developed in ad hoc, but organized manner. As this process implies, the culture industry was not monolithic in character or efficacy, and Cook further cautions that neither was it simply a reflection of an "inexorable logic of capitalists expansion."²⁰ At many points, it developed unevenly

¹⁹ James W. Cook, "The Return of the Culture Industry," in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O'Malley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 291-317.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 299-303.

and was hampered by everything from competing agendas within to imperial rivalries without and was always mediated by local publics and politics. While these particular dynamics will be pursued in more detail over the course of this study, the overall culture industry concept provides the best interpretative lens through which to understand the making of the Pacific circuit.

Although the rise of the culture industry in the United States is often traced to Barnum's acquisition of the American Museum in December 1841, it was unquestionably a development that started much earlier in the century, and one that numerous scholars have related to the ongoing "market revolution."²¹ The ensuing social and economic changes helped transform U.S. popular culture from a local and rather quiescent mode of production into a dynamic commercial industry that catered to the lucrative demand for amusements among the newly urbanized masses. The exponential growth of blackface minstrelsy, the proliferation of theatrical venues, museums, and other amusement venues, and a flourishing publishing industry were all aspects of this larger transformation.²² By mid-century, the commercialization of entertainment and a robust domestic market had given rise to a powerful U.S. culture industry that was able to produce and disseminate cultural commodities en masse both at home and, increasingly, abroad. Initially this

²¹ Charles Grier Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

²² For significant works on the U.S. culture industry, see Neil Harris, *Humbug; the Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973); R. Laurence Moore, "Religion, Secularization, and the Shaping of the Culture Industry in Antebellum America," *American Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1989): 216-42; Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*, Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1998); James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Meredith L. McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); James W. Cook, ed., *The Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader: Nothing Else Like It in the Universe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

transnational expansion was oriented towards the Atlantic world, but as the relatively rapid fashion in which U.S. entertainers capitalized on opportunities that opened up around the Pacific after 1850 demonstrated, the culture industry in the United States proved broadly responsive to international developments further afield.

This raises a key question: why was the U.S. culture industry seemingly so effective at exploiting new and far-flung cultural markets? In an important essay investigating the “international relations of cultural dominance,” Donald Sassoon postulates that the United States became a large and powerful exporter of culture because from the beginning “the production of culture was seen as an industrial enterprise” and a vast and diverse domestic market ensured that U.S. cultural products were both scaled and tested for global consumption.²³ While Sassoon usefully underscores the by now perhaps belabored point that the industrialized production of cultural commodities was central, the notion that particular aspects of the domestic market predisposed certain cultural forms in the United States for success abroad is suggestive. The most important kinds of entertainment on the nascent Pacific circuit, for example, were circuses and minstrel shows, both of which were distinctively American cultural forms. The almost exclusively itinerant mode adopted by circuses in the United States to service a geographically large and expanding national market instilled skills that proved invaluable on the Pacific circuit. The minstrel show developed in the unique socio-cultural and racial context of the United States, and the combination of novelty and vitality it derived from this proved popular all over the Pacific.

In short, it was not only the scale of what the culture industry produced, but also

²³ As Donald Sassoon explains it, “the US domestic-consumer base was already culturally fragmented in a way that approximated the global one (126).”

its particular qualities that enabled U.S. entertainers to succeed abroad. A dynamic and competitive domestic market drove innovation and an ongoing search for new markets and greater profits. In the wake of the California Gold Rush, the Pacific emerged as a potentially lucrative market that U.S. culture industry quickly catered to, and a transnational touring circuit developed as U.S. entertainers explored the new and expansive market and defined the Pacific circuit.

The Pacific

From a programmatic culture industry perspective, the role of the Pacific in this transnational cultural history centers on three related issues: markets, distribution, and reception. But first it may be asked, what constitutes the Pacific? As Arif Dirlik notes, the “modern formulation” of the Pacific was essentially a Euro-American invention that emerged out of the intersection of Western capitalism and imperialism in the region.²⁴ To what extent does it then make sense of today to speak of the Pacific as a geographic or historical entity? As the varying terminology, “Pacific world,” “Pacific Basin,” “Pacific Rim,” and modifiers, “American Pacific,” “Brown Pacific,” “Asia Pacific,” suggests, the Pacific as such has been articulated in a multiplicity of ways.²⁵ Typically, scholars argue that their specific conception was historically constituted through a particular set of

²⁴ Arif Dirlik, ed., *What is in a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 4.

²⁵ For works that effectively situate the Pacific in different ways, see David Igler, “Diseased Goods: Global Exchanges in the Eastern Pacific Basin, 1770–1850,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 3 (2004): 693–719; Matt K. Matsuda, “The Pacific,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (2006): 758–80; Margaret Werry, “The Greatest Show on Earth”: Political Spectacle, Spectacular Politics, and the American Pacific,” *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 3 (2005): 355–82; T. Damon I. Salesa, “‘Travel-Happy’ Samoa: Colonialism, Samoan Migration, and a ‘Brown Pacific,’” *New Zealand Journal of History* 37, no. 2 (2003): 171–88; Stuart Banner, *Possessing the Pacific: Land, Settlers, and Indigenous People from Australia to Alaska* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Kornel Chang, “Circulating Race and Empire: Transnational Labor Activism and the Politics of Anti-Asian Agitation in the Anglo-American Pacific World, 1880–1910,” *Journal of American History* 96, no. 3 (2009): 678–700.

relations or a more diffuse sense of a cultural or social imaginary. The question thus becomes “specifying *whose* Pacific – and when.”²⁶ While keeping in mind its historicity and these ideological undercurrents, the Pacific remains a useful shorthand term for describing the societies along the boundaries of the Pacific Ocean and those within it. But to be more specific and precise about how U.S. entertainers perceived this vast expanse, I use the term “Pacific circuit” to describe their field of activity and the shifting set of markets around the region through which they circulated.

One of the most useful aspects of the term “circuit” is that it helps to bridge the gap between two strains of historiography that inform this project, namely cultural history and the history of empire. One of the traditional ways entertainment has been organized across space is through circuits, which in turn link particular markets or venues together along a more or less established or proscribed route. The vaudeville circuit, the lyceum circuit, and the chitlin circuit, for example, were all contemporary phrases used to describe coordinated systems of commerce, venues, and publics through which entertainers circulated.²⁷ While the Pacific circuit was necessarily more variable, particularly during its early years, it was of the same basic character. The transnational orientation and scale of the circuit was obviously very different, but at its core the Pacific circuit was similarly designed to allow entertainers to move in an efficient and profitable manner.

The transnational dimensions of the Pacific circuit also resonate with recent work

²⁶ Dirlik, 15.

²⁷ On entertainment circuits, see Charlotte Canning, *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005); Robert W. Snyder, “The Vaudeville Circuit,” in *Audience-making: How the Media Create the Audience*, ed. James S Ettema and D. Charles Whitney (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 1994), 215-31; Henry Louis Gates, “The Chitlin Circuit,” *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, ed. Harry Justin Elam and David Krasner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 132-48; Adria L. Imada, “Hawaiians on Tour: Hula Circuits through the American Empire,” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2004): 111-49.

on empire that emphasizes the webs and networks through which people, commerce, and culture historically move. Ann Stoler's analysis of "circuits of knowledge production and exchange" in North America or the "imperial networks" of the British Empire described by Alan Lester, for example, offer comparable ways of understanding how cultural traffic moved through and beyond empires around the globe.²⁸ The Pacific circuit was part and parcel of this transnational traffic and U.S. entertainers moved through many of the same channels carved by colonialism, commerce, and technology, even as they pushed these channels in new directions. The term circuit thus usefully underscores the relationship between the entertainment industry, empire, and the transnational networks through which both operated.

The most important markets for U.S. entertainers on the Pacific circuit throughout this period were California and Australia, where explosive growth driven by their respective gold rushes provided the initial impetus for the transpacific show trade. During the 1850s, the Pacific circuit mainly flowed between San Francisco and Melbourne, and it included a limited number of places like Honolulu and Tahiti that were conveniently located along this primary axis. In the 1860s, new cultural markets took shape beyond the reliably profitable Australian colonies and U.S. entertainers duly expanded their itineraries to include major colonial ports in the Far East like Batavia, Singapore, Manila, and Hong Kong and the largely desultory efforts of earlier troupers gradually gave way to

²⁸ Ann Laura Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 23-67; Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001). See also, Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1-56; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Simon J. Potter, "Webs, Networks, and Systems: Globalization and the Mass Media in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Empire," *Journal of British Studies* 46, no. 3 (2007): 621-46.

a more organized and extensive entertainment circuit. This circuit was part of the larger process of cultural interpenetration that intensified as the disparate peoples of the Pacific were drawn into a more integrated relationship with the rest of the world via Western imperialism, trade, technology, and migration.²⁹

The further development of the Pacific circuit in the 1870s highlighted the crucial role that what might generally be classified as distribution played in the process. One of the main constraints that U.S. entertainers faced was not just identifying and accessing far-flung Pacific markets, but coordinating their activities over these vast distances. Newspapers and sailing ships provided the main means of communication and transportation during the early era of transpacific touring, but the expanding reach of telegraph lines and an enlarged steamship network in the 1870s that included the transpacific service eased transaction costs. This was a real boon for entertainers as the combination allowed for a greater degree of certainty and planning, prompting a surge of U.S. performers and managers on the Pacific circuit.³⁰ Yet, accompanying these changes were also the seeds of its eventual eclipse, for the Pacific circuit was not a sealed, fixed entity, and the increasing interconnectedness quickly became a springboard for a shift to a global entertainment circuit. While this shift was a gradual one, the relatively easier means of distributing popular entertainment that came about in the 1870s ensured that the Pacific circuit became both increasingly broad and open-ended, particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century.

²⁹ For a useful delineation of increasing global “interconnectedness” during the latter half of the nineteenth century, see C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

³⁰ E. Mowbray Tate, *Transpacific Steam: The Story of Steam Navigation from the Pacific Coast of North America to the Far East and the Antipodes, 1867-1941* (New York: Cornwall Books, 1986); Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Peter J. Hugill, *Global Communications Since 1844: Geopolitics and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

Finally, the contours of the Pacific circuit were shaped by the responses of its disparate audiences. As numerous studies on the transmission and reception of American culture abroad and the localized debates about “Americanization” that often accompany it make clear, audiences and consumers have a great deal of agency in determining how a particular product or performance is received.³¹ Blackface minstrelsy, for one, engendered a variety of responses from audiences located in particular colonial and racial contexts. The vagaries of reception were part and parcel of the Pacific circuit as local audiences variously enjoyed, reworked, and resisted the efforts of U.S. entertainers.

The Making of the Pacific Circuit

The making of the Pacific circuit emerged out a complex dialectic between developments in the United States and developments in the Pacific, but the California Gold Rush, which almost overnight created a large and lucrative new market on the shores of the Pacific, provided the initial impetus. A flood of U.S. entertainers arrived in California and San Francisco rapidly emerged as a commercial and cultural center, but as early as 1850 there were performers ready to explore opportunities overseas. Chapter Two chronicles the experiences of these early U.S. entertainers who ventured into the Pacific during the 1850s and highlights the significance of the gold rushes in California

³¹ For some representative works on this issue, see Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1996); Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993); Reinhold Wagnleitner and Elaine Tyler May, eds., *Here, There, and Everywhere: The Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England 2000); Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Philip Bell and Roger Bell, eds., *Americanization and Australia: Australian Experience* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1998); James T. Campbell, “The Americanization of South Africa,” in *Race, Nation, and Empire in American History* ed. James T. Campbell, Matthew Pratt Guterl, and Robert G. Lee (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 130-53.

and Victoria in stimulating the early transpacific show trade. Minstrel troupes and circuses played a particularly important role in establishing the Pacific circuit, and the chapter explores how and why they were so successful.

One of the major themes of this dissertation centers on how touring U.S. entertainers entered into particular local contexts and mediated cross-cultural exchanges. Chapter Three takes up this theme with regards Honolulu, which was a bustling port and a locus of American activity and influence in the Pacific. This, combined with its geographic location, ensured that Honolulu was a popular stop on the emergent Pacific circuit, and the presence and popularity of U.S. entertainers inflected the contentious cultural politics of the Hawaiian Kingdom in the 1850s. Their performances also served as a forum for cross-cultural exchanges, and the chapter further explores how Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) responded to and interacted with visiting U.S. entertainers.

Chapter Four advances the story of the Pacific circuit through the 1860s when a lull engendered by the Civil War in the United States was followed by a postwar boom in the entertainment industry that echoed across the Pacific. Here General Tom Thumb takes center stage as a representative figure in the development of U.S. culture industry and a harbinger of its expansion overseas. The Pacific leg of the grand tour around the world his company embarked upon in 1869 was an indicator of how significant the Pacific market had become and demonstrated how ongoing economic and technological developments created new opportunities for U.S. entertainers and led to the concomitant expansion of the Pacific circuit.

In 1876, the Cooper, Bailey, & Co.'s Circus, which was the first large-scale American railroad circus to tour abroad, traveled to Australia via a new transpacific

steamer line between San Francisco and Sydney. Chapter Five focuses on this impressive undertaking by James Bailey and examines the factors that led a veritable wave of U.S. entertainers, including a resurgence of American minstrels, to tour on the Pacific circuit during the 1870s. One of the most interesting figures of this era was the magician Harry Kellar, and his successive tours through the Pacific demonstrated how efficient and expansive the circuit had become by the 1880s. Bailey and Kellar's subsequent ascendancy to the forefront of their respective professions in the United States was rooted in their propitious ventures in the Pacific and demonstrated how the circuit could serve as a springboard for domestic success.

Chapter Six looks at how African-American performers took advantage of the opportunities opened up by an expansive U.S. culture industry and assumed a prominent and profitable position on the Pacific circuit in the 1870s and 1880s. Within this larger context, the rather remote colony of New Zealand proved particularly important, and the experiences of two successive troupes of Georgia Minstrels and the Fisk Jubilee Singers are examined in detail. While black entertainers found a degree of commercial and artistic autonomy that was largely denied to them in the United States, they also encountered some problematic issues regarding stereotypes of African-Americans and intertwined colonial and racial discourses in New Zealand

The making of the Pacific circuit during the second half of the nineteenth century was a significant episode in the transnational expansion of the U.S. culture industry. Of course, what follows is not the first study of U.S. entertainers abroad nor even in the context of the nineteenth-century Pacific more specifically. While the literature on this subject in Australia is particularly strong, its often narrow focus also demonstrates how

cultural history still tends to be cut up into national pieces.³² The approach adopted by this dissertation aims to circumvent this limitation by emphasizing the broader transnational circulation of culture and in this probably has more in common with the increasing number of studies about U.S. entertainers and cultural forms in a transatlantic context. The history of the Pacific circuit does more than simply fill in a historiographical gap, though, it also offers a more nuanced perspective on the development of the U.S. culture industry and the dynamics of cross-cultural exchange.

Moreover, understanding the dynamics of the Pacific circuit also pushes the study of the transnational circulation of American culture in productive new directions, particularly vis-à-vis the literature on transatlantic cultural history.³³ Because the Pacific was so much larger and, for the most part, much less developed in terms of infrastructure, it necessarily proved amenable to different kinds of cultural forms and entertainers. The cultural diversity of the Pacific and the more pronounced presence of indigenous peoples represents another wrinkle that has often been overlooked in studies of the Atlantic world. Circulating in largely metropolitan environs involved a different set of challenges and generated responses that were very different than the colonial contexts in which the Pacific circuit operated. Because of their comparative predominance and the at times

³² Peter Downes, *Shadows on the Stage: Theatre in New Zealand: The First 70 Years* (Dunedin: J. McIndoe, 1975); Miriam Shillingsburg, *At Home Abroad: Mark Twain in Australasia* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988); Geoffrey Lealand, *A Foreign Egg in Our Nest?: American Popular Culture in New Zealand* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1988); Richard Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville: The Australian Popular Stage, 1788-1914* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1990); Roslyn Poignant, *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Mark St. Leon, *Spangles & Sawdust: The Circus in Australia* (Richmond, Vic: Greenhouse Publications, 1983).

³³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); W. T. Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Cockrell, Dale, ed. *Excelsior: Journals of the Hutchinson Family Singers, 1842-1846* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1989).

asymmetrical power relations that came into play, U.S. entertainers exerted a greater influence on local cultural life in the Pacific, particularly in places like Hawai'i. Perhaps most importantly, the way that the Pacific circuit gave way to an increasingly global circulatory system over the course of the late nineteenth century suggests that the Atlantic world paradigm was much more porous than has often been supposed.

Finally, this study also contributes to ongoing debates within American studies about the relationship between culture and U.S. empire. In an important essay on the “absence of empire in the study of American culture,” Amy Kaplan sought to reveal the complex and mutually constitutive relationship between the culture of empire and domestic cultural forms.³⁴ This study follows Kaplan in her efforts to break down neat boundaries between internal and external developments, but whereas Kaplan largely focuses on the domestic incarnations of imperial culture, the focus here is on how U.S. culture operated abroad and at times served imperial ends. More recently, and from a rather different angle, Victoria De Grazia has argued that the United States developed an informal “market empire” in twentieth-century Europe based around the pleasures of consumption of American goods.³⁵ De Grazia’s insight into how American business established a nontraditional empire through a combination of technology, marketing, and capital has useful parallels with the ways in which the U.S. culture industry exploited the Pacific market in the nineteenth century. This study of the making of the Pacific circuit

³⁴ Amy Kaplan, “Left Alone with America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture,” in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 3-21. For works that have attempted to address Kaplan’s concern, see G. M. Joseph, Catherine LeGrand, and Ricardo Donato Salvatore, eds. *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); John Carlos Rowe, *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

³⁵ Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

and the entertainers that enlivened it draws on both of these influential formulations to chart the emergence and influence of the United States' "Empire of Culture" in the nineteenth-century Pacific world.

Chapter Two

Pioneering the Pacific Circuit, 1850-1859

"It is a singular but no less a fixed fact that the Yankee Nation are most essentially a nation for Amusement; no matter where they go, or in what quarter of the globe they locate, they invariably carry with them the germ of dramatic entertainments."¹

--- San Francisco's *The Golden Era*, 1853

On December 14, 1849 during a late night of drinking, Arthur Reynolds and some friends got into a brawl at the Bella Union, San Francisco's infamous gambling house. In the resulting fracas, Reynolds, who played the "bones" part in the saloon's "negro band," was stabbed in the neck and killed.² He was a member of the New York Serenaders, a minstrel troupe that joined many other entertainers in journeying to California that year in an effort to take advantage of the lucrative opportunities created by the gold rush. The tragedy must have been a tough blow given their initially successful season, and when a great fire gutted the city the following week, the remaining company elected to try their luck elsewhere and cleared out for Honolulu. They proved a sensation in that bustling port, and, apparently emboldened by their first taste of prosperity abroad, the troupe made

¹ Quoted in George R. MacMinn, *The Theater of the Golden Era in California* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton, 1941), 21.

² Fellow minstrel William White testified that a local troublemaker named Reuben Withers was the killer, but he somehow escaped the authorities. An American warship later captured Withers in Mazatlan and returned him to California to stand trial, but to the consternation of many in the city he was acquitted on a technicality. The episode was infamous enough to have been listed as one of the miscarriages of justice by the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance that briefly took over the city in 1851. *Alta California*, December 25 and 31, 1849, September 15, 1850, and June 14, 1851.

for the Australian colonies, but their run of ill luck continued when the sailors on their vessel mutinied and they were left on Tahiti. While stranded the company reportedly gave a series of concerts “having received a demand from Queen Pomares to amuse her,” and they finally reached the port city of Hobart, Tasmania in March 1851. The applause that greeted their debut was described as a “physical hurricane” by the *Hobart Town Courier*, and the troupe proceeded on a triumphal tour through the Australian colonies before heading to India and then returning over the same ground to San Francisco in early 1854.³ Although in some ways exceptional, the New York Serenaders story was broadly representative of a new cultural trajectory that many American entertainers followed in the wake of the California Gold Rush. Their impressively wide-ranging overseas tour was the first of many undertaken by American performers in the 1850s and the cumulative effect of their efforts were to map – and make visible – a newly coalescing entertainment circuit that linked together the emerging cultural markets of the Pacific world.

As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, the “Yankee Nation” was often stereotyped as one characterized by a predilection for amusements, though the exponential growth of the antebellum entertainment business in the United States certainly provided a rationale for such a proposition. While the notion that Americans “invariably carry with them the germ of dramatic entertainment” was something of

³ *Honolulu Times*, January 30, 1850; *Hobart Town Courier*, March 26, 1851; *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 23, 1853. William L. Slout has compiled a collection of articles from the *New York Clipper* documenting the history of blackface minstrelsy. The majority of the material was drawn from a series by Col. T. Allston Brown on the “Early History of Negro Minstrelsy,” which was published in fifty-nine installments (1912-1914). This valuable resource was supplemented by other noteworthy articles on minstrelsy drawn from the *Clipper* and self-published by Slout as a CD-ROM and it is also now available at the website of the Circus Historical Society (<http://www.circushistory.org>). For the passage on the New York Serenaders, see *Burnt Cork and Tambourines: A Directory of American Minstrelsy*, CD-ROM (William L. Slout, 2005), 84.

exaggeration, *The Golden Era* was simply reflecting on the remarkable reality of the enormous and thriving amusement business that emerged in San Francisco during the early 1850s. The demographic and economic boom that accompanied the gold rush created lucrative markets for U.S. entertainers in California, and the rapid growth of the amusement business profitably met this demand and engendered increasingly stiff competition amongst performers as new arrivals and established attractions struggled for public favor. In this context, a few pioneering entertainers that possessed the requisite wherewithal and mobility began to look for opportunities further afield. It was through the initial efforts of minstrel troupes like the New York Serenaders and enterprising circus managers like Joseph A. Rowe that were willing to venture overseas that the beginnings of the Pacific circuit lie.

How then did the Pacific, which was essentially an unknown territory for American entertainers in 1850, develop into a profitable touring circuit in a single decade? And why did minstrels and circuses play such a prominent role in shaping and defining it? The fundamental catalyst driving the process was the burgeoning U.S. culture industry, where fierce competition and profit imperatives meant that there was a large pool of professional performers looking for advantage and opportunity wherever they emerged.⁴ The New York Serenaders, for example, initially formed in 1848 as the lucrative demand for commercial amusements in urban centers like New York City and the developing institutional infrastructure of the culture industry created incentives that drove the creation of a wave of dozens of new troupes. A byproduct of this was of course increasingly cutthroat competition, and, after spending their first season touring through New Jersey, the troupe opened in New York City in early May. Their modest

⁴ Slout, *Burnt Cork and Tambourines*, 66; *New York Herald*, May 1, 1849.

advertisement was squeezed between ads for more prominent troupes like the Christy Minstrels and the New Orleans Serenaders (a.k.a. the Buckleys) along with numerous notices about ships departing for the California gold fields. Given the stiff competition, it is easy to see why the company decided to try their luck elsewhere and ventured west to explore the markets beyond the United States. In this, the New York Serenaders were part and parcel of the longer process by which the dramatic growth of domestic markets engendered expansion in the U.S. culture industry, which in turn led to the out migration of cultural capital to all corners of the globe.

Of course, the remarkably rapid fashion in which U.S. entertainers spread around the Pacific during the 1850s was also a function the profitable markets that they found there. The dominant factor shaping the early flow of entertainers was the exponential gold-fueled growth of California and Victoria (Australia). In both places, the business of popular amusement boomed, and the cultural traffic between San Francisco and Melbourne became the major axis of the emergent circuit. The explosive colonization of California and Australia during the decade saw the population in the former quadruple to over four hundred thousand while the population in the colonies soared to over one million people.⁵ As the urban centers of these respective markets, San Francisco and Melbourne were by far the most popular destinations, and the traffic between them was the primary purpose for transpacific touring. In the process, though, U.S. entertainers also ranged further afield and discovered much less populous but generally underserved cultural markets in growing Pacific ports like Honolulu, Batavia, and Hong Kong that it

⁵ On “explosive colonization,” see James Belich, “The Rise of the Angloworld: Settlement in Australasia and North America 1784-1918,” in *Rediscovering the British World*, ed. P. Buckner and D. Francis (Calgary: Calgary University Press, 2005), 39-57; “United States Census of 1860,” <http://www.census.gov>; B. R. Mitchell, *International Historical Statistics: Africa, Asia & Oceania, 1750-2000*, 4th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

paid to visit. As they tentatively explored these far-flung locales, the parameters of the Pacific circuit shifted as successful ventures were repeated; it was essentially a process of experimentation that gave the circuit shape. The intelligence generated from the experiences of these early touring entertainers helped along those that followed, who traveled along established routes and continued to plumb new markets as well. The robust cultural traffic between California and the Australian colonies during the 1850s was the primary impetus for the development of the Pacific circuit and established its central contour, but the process also led some U.S. entertainers to search out other relatively uncharted markets around the larger Pacific world led to a progressively more expansive and organized cultural circuit in the 1860s and 1870s.

The performers that toured on the early Pacific circuit were a diverse lot of actors, equestrians, musicians, minstrels, acrobats, and sundry other specialists that reflected the wide range of Western popular entertainments at mid-century. Although the focus here will be on the U.S. entertainers, the circuit featured an international mix of talent that was drawn to the Pacific in the 1850s by the lucrative opportunities that accompanied the gold rushes. For example, Honolulu, which was a convenient and frequent way-station for entertainers between California and Australia, and thus a good index of the circuit's makeup, was visited by luminaries like the Irish prima donna Kate Hayes, the German pianist Miska Hauser, and the Scottish magician John Henry Anderson amongst other lesser known performers from around the globe. Still, in terms of simple numbers, U.S. entertainers were preponderant as the most frequent and seemingly popular entertainments on offer in Honolulu were those provided by American minstrel troupes, circuses, and theatrical companies. Given the Anglo-American cast of the early circuit, it

was hardly surprising to note that the stiffest challenge to American predominance was from British entertainers. Indeed, what was probably the first professional transpacific tour was embarked upon by British theatrical couple, Mr. and Mrs. Ray, who were playing in Auckland when news of gold in California broke. On their journey across the Pacific, the Rays stopped and performed in Honolulu and arrived in California in early 1850 and participated in the first theatrical performances in Sacramento and San Francisco.⁶ Because the several Australian cities had purpose-built theatres by the 1840s, there were a substantial number of mostly British thespians present when the initial transpacific circuit emerged. In short, the Pacific was neither fixed nor exclusive, and U.S. entertainers faced both local and international competition as they toured.

The most prevalent cultural forms on the early Pacific circuit were minstrel shows and circuses, which, largely due to their itinerant traditions, proved particularly adaptable at overcoming the varying challenges involved with touring the expansive Pacific. During this initial decade, mobility was at a premium, and the relatively less capital and fewer properties required by minstrel shows and circuses, as well as an ability to perform in a wider range of venues, allowed them to flourish. Minstrel troupes and circuses thus played a formative role in establishing the Pacific circuit, and the focus of this chapter will be on the experiences of the initial American entertainers to tour overseas.

The first part of this chapter chronicles successive transpacific tours by three minstrel troupes, the New York Serenaders (1850-1854), Rainer's Serenaders (1852-1855), and the Backus Minstrels (1855-56). The New York Serenaders deserve primacy

⁶ Peter Downes, *Shadows on the Stage: Theatre in New Zealand: The First 70 Years* (Dunedin: John McIndoe, 1975), 25; Helene Koon, *Gold Rush Performers: A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Singers, Dancers, Musicians, Circus Performers and Minstrel Players in America's Far West, 1848 to 1869* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 1994).

of place as the first American professionals to travel around the Pacific, while Rainer's Serenaders demonstrated the alacrity with which entertainers in the United States recognized and exploited a thriving Australian market. With its roster of star performers, the Backus Minstrels represented the first premier minstrel party to tour and confirmed the importance of the nascent Pacific circuit for the American entertainment industry.

The second part of the chapter centers on the activities of Joseph A. Rowe and William H. Foley, two enterprising circus performers and managers who arrived in San Francisco together in 1849, but subsequently became rivals, first in California, and then overseas. Rowe's peregrinations took him through Hawai'i and Tahiti before settling in Melbourne, where through a confluence of strategic business moves and dumb luck he realized some of the most spectacular profits of this early era. The relentlessly independent and peripatetic Foley initially followed a similar course, but ultimately ended up spending much of his initial decade abroad barnstorming through New Zealand and aptly demonstrated how to successfully exploit what at the time was a relatively marginal market. Collectively, these pioneering minstrel parties and circuses assumed a much greater degree of risk and reward than their U.S.-based contemporaries. Their transnational trajectory and the larger process through which the Pacific circuit took shape was driven by a complex dialectic of push and pull factors, but the spark was the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill outside of Sacramento in January 1848.

U.S. Entertainers and the California Gold Rush

The singular event that drew U.S. entertainers to the Pacific Coast was the gold rush that began in early 1848 just as California was incorporated as a territory of the

United States with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. While the acquisition of California essentially culminated long-held American ambitions for continental expansion through "manifest destiny," the great distances involved, combined with the relatively small population of American residents, which numbered in the hundreds, meant that the actual consolidation of this vast new territory remained more a proposition than a reality.⁷ This changed almost overnight as news of the gold discoveries spread and prompted a worldwide gold rush that led over 300,000 people to migrate to California during the next five years.⁸ The rapid influx of immigrants and the immense wealth pouring out of the mines combined to create an extremely profitable and largely untapped cultural market that was centered in San Francisco and extended through Sacramento to the gold camps. The so-called "forty-niners" and their immediate successors represented a broad, though almost exclusively male, cross-section of American society and included a polyglot amalgamation of European, South American, and Asian prospectors in addition to the local Californios and Indians. The somewhat unruly mix that resulted presented both challenges and opportunities for American performers, but much like the miners, the prospect of easy money proved irresistible to hopeful entrepreneurs and entertainers.

While it was not until the fall of 1849 that a professional amusement business took shape in San Francisco, Americans had been entertaining themselves around the Pacific since the first traders and whalers visited in the late eighteenth century. Singing

⁷ Neal Harlow, *California Conquered: The Annexation of a Mexican Province, 1846-1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Norman A. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (New York: Ronald Press, 1955); Thomas Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire*, Rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

⁸ J. S. Holliday, *The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981); Kenneth N. Owens, ed., *Riches for All: The California Gold Rush and the World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

and dancing were an integral part of a vibrant maritime culture, and prominent ports like Honolulu offered bars that mixed drinking and music with other assorted diversions.⁹ In the year immediately preceding the gold rush, American soldiers sent to secure California for the United States during the war staged amateur minstrel shows to relieve the boredom of extended garrison duty.¹⁰ As the rush progressed in late 1848 and into 1849, the burgeoning gold camps generated their own ribald culture of drinking, dancing, and gambling at "public houses," which were supplemented on occasion by local novelties such as bullfighting.¹¹ In sum, a largely pre-industrial mode of popular culture was flourishing in a variety of vernacular contexts around the Pacific long before the arrival of professional entertainers. While these more localized, ritualized, and spontaneous forms of amusement continued, they were increasingly supplanted and superseded by culture industry professionals intent on turning "fun" into profit.¹²

Local histories credit an Anglo-American performer named Stephen Massett with offering San Francisco's first public entertainment in the form of a one-man variety show staged at a small schoolhouse on June 22, 1849.¹³ The program consisted of ballads,

⁹ On minstrelsy and maritime culture, see James Revell Carr, "In the Wake of John Kanaka: Musical Interactions between Euro-American Sailors and Pacific Islanders, 1600-1900" (PhD diss: University of California-Santa Barbara, 2007).

¹⁰ Donald C. Biggs, *Conquer and Colonize: Stevenson's Regiment and California* (San Rafael: Presidio Press, 1977); MacMinn, 23-24.

¹¹ Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000); Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

¹² This transition echoes the key historical development noted by Stuart Hall in his influential essay emphasizing the remaking of "the popular" as a transition from "people's cultures" to more explicitly commercialized and standardized versions of popular amusement. "Notes on Deconstructing the 'Popular,'" in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 227-39. For a useful collection of essays on this dynamic more attuned to the United States, see Richard Butsch, ed., *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

¹³ The cultural history of San Francisco was documented by an invaluable research project undertaken during the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration on the literary, musical, and theatrical history of the city. *San Francisco Theatre Research* (20 volumes, 1938-1942), *History of Music in San Francisco* (7 volumes, 1939-1942) and an earlier *California Literary Research Project* edited by Joseph Gaer (12

recitations, and characterizations, most notably a "Yankee Imitation." According to Frank Soule's first-hand account: "The little room was crowded to suffocation, the proceeds yielding the vocalist over five hundred dollars."¹⁴ The evident success of this seemingly pedestrian entertainment demonstrated an intense thirst for amusement amongst the exploding population, and an accompanying willingness to pay exorbitant sums for the privilege and ensured that commercial entertainments quickly proliferated. In late October 1849, Rowe's Olympic Circus opened on a lot next to the City Hotel, and the Philadelphia Minstrels commenced a season at the Bella Union; the entertainment business in San Francisco was off and running.¹⁵

That minstrels and circuses were at the forefront of the move west was hardly surprising given that both cultural forms, in colloquial terms, traveled well. With comparatively less restrictive requirements in terms of personnel, infrastructure, and capital than traditional theater, minstrel troupes and circuses enjoyed a degree of mobility that allowed them to flourish in the disparate and far-flung locales that made up the

volumes, 1934-35) offer a comprehensive overview of the major personalities, events, and cultural forms that enlivened nineteenth-century San Francisco. Two related publications that deserve mention attempt a synthetic account of the theatre research: a two-volume *Annals of the San Francisco Stage* (1937) by Lois Foster, et al., and Edmund Gagey's, *The San Francisco Stage* (1950). The former represented an effort by the editors of the project to offer an overall account of San Francisco's theatrical history, but it was never published and exists only as a two-volume typescript in the Bancroft Library. Gagey's somewhat later study, which was "based on *Annals Compiled by the Research Department of the San Francisco Federal Theatre*," thus provides the only published synthesis of the research: *The San Francisco Stage: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950). The *San Francisco Theatre Research* series was somewhat confusingly divided into separately subtitled and numbered monographs on particular topics that were subsequently grouped together and published as volumes. For the sake of clarity, only the volume number will be referenced herein. On Massett, see *San Francisco Theatre Research*, vol. 1 (1938) and his autobiography: "*Drifting About*," or, *What "Jeems Pipes of Pipesville" Saw-and-Did: An Autobiography* (New York: Carleton, 1863).

¹⁴ Frank Soule, John H. Gihon, and James Nisbet, *The Annals of San Francisco...* (New York: D. Appleton, 1855), 655-56.

¹⁵ Aside from the already mentioned WPA series, for the best secondary sources on the history of entertainment in San Francisco, see MacMinn, *Theater of the Golden Era*; ; Koon, *Gold Rush Performers*; Misha Berson, *The San Francisco Stage*, 2 vols. (San Francisco: San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum, 1989 and 1992). Though not as well sourced as these other works, Constant Rourke presents an engaging portrait of the early California theatrical scene in *Troupers of the Gold Coast, or, the Rise of Lotta Crabtree* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1928).

nascent Pacific circuit. Indeed, their early presence in San Francisco was indicative of a pattern that would be repeated throughout the 1850s, as the first professional entertainers most audiences around the Pacific applauded were either minstrel shows or circuses. The prominence of these particular cultural forms was also a reflection of the remarkable expansion of the American entertainment industry during the decade or so preceding the gold rush. In the wake of the economic and social changes fomented by the market revolution over the course of the early nineteenth century, traditional American popular culture was transformed from a local and rather quiescent mode of production into a dynamic commercial industry that catered to the lucrative demand for amusements among the newly urbanized masses. The commercialization of American entertainment following the Panic of 1837 represented a seismic shift in the way popular culture was produced and consumed in the United States and paved the way for its export abroad.¹⁶

The most dynamic example of this ongoing cultural shift was blackface minstrelsy, which in the 1840s developed into an extremely popular and profitable form of mass entertainment. While Dale Cockrell has usefully detailed the longer historical trajectory of blackface performance in the United States, the more immediate origins of the minstrel show rested on the spectacular success of Thomas Dartmouth Rice's performance of "Jump Jim Crow." The transatlantic success of Rice's celebrated song-and-dance routine and his subsequent theatrical work expanding the character in the 1830s made the figure of Jim Crow, in W. T. Lhamon's elegant formulation, "an

¹⁶ "It was ironically a downturn in growth that produced even more innovations in American popular amusements and that gave rise to further forms of a distinctly national character." Peter G. Buckley, "Paratheatricals and Popular Stage Entertainment," in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre* ed. Don B. Wilmeth and C. W. E. Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 456-57.

inaugural icon of international popular culture."¹⁷ As Jim Crow's songs and dances were absorbed into Anglo-American maritime culture, they spread around the globe during the 1830s and were, for example, performed on a number of occasions during the United States Exploring Expedition that traversed the Pacific Ocean from 1838-1842.¹⁸ In the wake of Rice's success, blackface performers proliferated, but for the most part they remained relegated to working in circuses or as entr'actes until 1843 when the Virginia Minstrels offered a full evening of blackface entertainment in New York City and gave birth to what would come to be known as the minstrel show.¹⁹

Early minstrel troupes like the Virginia Minstrels, the Ethiopian Serenaders, and Christy's Minstrels each had their particular style and specialties, but they also established a number of conventions that proved remarkably durable. The foremost convention was of course the act of "blacking up" itself, which allowed performers to offer putatively realistic and entertaining caricatures of both "dandy negroes of the north" (Zip Coon) and "plantation darkies" (Jim Crow). Donning blackface was a license to explore cultural otherness for the performers, and the show catered to a piquant interest in black life among its primarily urban and Northern audience. The format that crystallized in the late 1840s began with a standard opening act that featured the minstrels seated in a

¹⁷ Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3. Also see Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); W. T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ During the extended voyage, the role of Jim Crow was reprised by one of the ship's tailors, a man named Oliver. According to Wilkes' official narrative, his performances in Tahiti and Fiji were exceedingly enjoyed "by their savage as well as civilized spectators": Charles Wilkes, *Voyage Round the World: Embracing the Principal Events of the Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition...* (Philadelphia: Geo. W. Gorton, 1849), 165 and 423-24.

¹⁹ As W. T. Lhamon, Dale Cockrell, and other recent scholarship has pointed out, this conventional story of the minstrel show's emergence belies its complexity. Moreover, blackface performance were central parts of theatrical entertainments and circuses years before the Virginia Serenaders took the stage. On the Virginia Minstrels, see Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962); Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*.

semi-circle performing vocal and instrumental numbers while the so-called "end-men," stock characters known as Tambo and Bones, added comical commentary and antics. Seated in the middle was the interlocutor, a kind of gentlemanly host who directed the proceedings and served as a foil and straight man for the jokes and jests of the end-men. The second part of the show, known as the olio, was a kind of variety show during which performers showcased their individual skills as comedians, dancers, and musicians. The finale typically consisted of either a plantation skit or a send-up of a popular opera or play. Groups generally consisted of four to eight versatile performers, and although the overall structure remained fairly consistent, it was flexible enough in practice to allow for a wide degree of variations, something that proved to be an important element of both its portability and enduring popularity.

Although the specific content of minstrel shows shifted over time and varied among troupes, the audience could expect certain standard features by about 1850. One of the chief attractions was the music. The minstrel troupe was essentially a musical ensemble based around the violin, banjo, tambourine, and bones, and songs ranged from rousing rhythmic tunes like "Old Dan Tucker" to the more sentimental and melodic airs of Stephen Foster. While instrumental solos, particularly on the banjo, were often featured, vocal music dominated programs and a good tenor in particular was necessary for a troupe to be successful. Beyond minstrel tunes, a variety of "nonracial" music in the form of ballads, duets, glees, and even operatic selections were incorporated into shows, a process that underscores the way other cultural forms were subsumed into blackface

minstrelsy.²⁰ The music also served as an accompaniment to specialized dance routines that included variations on traditional jig and clog dancing as well as more innovative moves like the acclaimed "Essence of Old Virginny," which involved shuffling and sliding steps characteristic of black dance.²¹ The music of minstrelsy, whether sentimental, rousing, or virtuosic, served as the backbone of the overall performance and made a lasting impact on American popular music.²²

Humor was the other principal element of a minstrel show, and broadly speaking it derived from the use of blackface to burlesque conventional society, culture, and anything else that stood in the minstrel's way.²³ Shakespearian plays and Italian operas were regularly targeted and lampooned for their supposed propriety and pretentiousness. The minstrels parodied a wide variety of theatrical productions, concerts, and specific performers, and this essentially appropriative ability ensured that there was always new material being presented. Some of the more sophisticated troupes and performers also developed original plays and farces.²⁴ One of the comedic staples of the olio were stump speeches and sermons by bumbling blackface performers that made light of political and religious leaders. Female impersonation or "wench roles" was another regular feature through which performers exaggerated presumed feminine foibles for laughs.²⁵ In the first part, the humor was provided by the jokes, puns, and malapropisms of the

²⁰ For the most complete account of early minstrel music, see William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

²¹ Marshall Winslow Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (Da Capo Press, 1994), 35-62.

²² Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

²³ Mahar in particular emphasizes that "burlesque was one of minstrelsy's essential traits (2)."

²⁴ For some useful examples, see Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow* and Gary D. Engle, ed., *This Grottesque Essence: Plays from the American Minstrel Stage* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

²⁵ Annemarie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy," in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed. Annemarie Bean, et. al., 245-56.

buffoonish Tambo and Bones and the occasional comic song. Physical comedy also played a role throughout the performance as the gyrations of particularly good performer provoked laughs and skits often incorporated slapstick routines. Though much of this humor was predicated on an essentially denigrating notion of what it meant to be black, it is important to recognize how this impulse towards burlesque imbued minstrelsy with a multifaceted character that could cut in multiple directions.

Nowhere was this more clear than with the so-called "plantation material," which represented the last major part of a typical minstrel show. As Robert Toll, among others, has observed, early minstrelsy often presented sympathetic portraits of slave life and included a diverse array of black characters that ranged from clever to pathetic to heroic. If the inferiority of blacks more generally was largely assumed, there was a significant degree of racial ambivalence and latitude within the actual performance. Plantation scenes mixed silliness and pathos in a manner meant to entertain, but the underlying message of such performances was a complicated matter. The prevalence of plantation material, particularly during the early years, raises an ongoing and contentious debate about whether or not, and to what extent, blackface minstrelsy incorporated "authentic" elements of African-American culture. While no scholarly consensus on this question is likely to be reached, most commentators acknowledge that although the antebellum minstrel show was largely created and almost exclusively staged by white performers, it did introduce and popularize certain aspects of black music and dance.²⁶ Whatever its roots, the minstrel show was a sensation that captivated Americans in the 1840s and its

²⁶ For some contrasting views on this question, see Carl Frederick Wittke, *Tambo and Bones; a History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1930). Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 244-309; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: a History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

inherent versatility and evolving repertoire ensured that it remained the dominant form of American entertainment for the next quarter century.

While the preeminence of blackface minstrelsy in antebellum American popular culture is undeniable, its ostensible racism has made for a complicated and at times contentious historiography. Broadly speaking, the early studies of minstrelsy understood these performances as an honest representation of black folk culture, a perspective that echoed the claims of many contemporaries.²⁷ During the Civil Rights era, this interpretation faltered as commentators began to see the minstrel show as a fantasy and caricature that effectively denigrated blacks and legitimized white supremacy.²⁸ A spate of scholarship in the 1990s further complicated matters by highlighting minstrelsy's shifty syncretism, its malleable and at times rebellious complexion, and perhaps most controversially, its racial ambivalences.²⁹ The most important lesson of these studies, and one that has too often been missed by many commentators, was to underscore the historical complexity of blackface minstrelsy by demonstrating its disparate and contested meanings for people located in different social and cultural contexts.³⁰ While this obviously makes any exploration of the success of the minstrel show during the 1840s a complicated affair, taken together these works offer compelling account of the

²⁷ T. D. Rice's apocryphal story about the origins of his Jim Crow routine is perhaps the most infamous contemporary example and one that has continued to provoke debate among scholars.

²⁸ In the revisionist vein, see Ralph Ellison's penetrating essay, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 45-59. For the best scholarly reflection of this shift and a work that remains the best overall history of the minstrel show, see Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

²⁹ In addition to the aforementioned works of Cockrell, Mahar, and Lhamon, see Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England [for] Wesleyan University Press, 1996).

³⁰ For a particularly compelling exploration of this issue, see W. T. Lhamon's discussion of Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit conundrum and blackface performance in *Raising Cain*, 136-38.

historical development and meaning of blackface minstrelsy in antebellum America.

Generally speaking, explanations for the popularity of the minstrel show have supplemented discussion of its commercial success with analyses of the deeper ideological elements involved. Robert Toll, for example, writes that

Minstrelsy provided common Americans with folk-based earthy songs, vital dances, and robust humor as well as with beautiful ballads and fine singing that they could enjoy at reasonable prices. It also provided a nonthreatening way for white Americans to cope with questions about the nature and proper place of black people in America.³¹

The first sentence neatly summarizes the evident commercial appeal of minstrelsy as a relatively cheap but lively and varied form of mass entertainment. The latter sentence raises the more abstruse issue of how minstrelsy was both implicated in and influenced contemporary racial politics in the United States. In this context, the minstrel show of the 1840s has largely been seen as an expression of Democratic political sensibilities that catered to urban workers who were both critical of majority values and shared an antipathy towards blacks. While some scholars have rightfully highlighted the rebellious and racially transgressive character of early minstrelsy, the conventional narrative holds that this critical edge was gradually denuded as minstrelsy became simultaneously more refined and overtly racist in the 1850s. In the course of this change, minstrelsy moved beyond its somewhat rough image and extended its appeal to a more respectable audience. By the time of the California Gold Rush, the minstrel show that dominated American show business represented a commercialized and domesticated version of blackface performance that was fit for middle-class consumption and more or less unambiguous in its racism.

The popularity of blackface minstrelsy also derived from the ways in which it

³¹ Toll, 57.

intersected with the nationalism of the era and the prominent role it played in America's nascent culture industries. In regards to the former, the belligerent political nationalism of the 1840s was accompanied by efforts to forge an assertive and uniquely American culture that could rival European traditions and validate the presumed greatness of American democracy. While the literary dimensions of this relationship have been explored at length, blackface minstrelsy also served as a vehicle for nationalist sentiment.³² As a novel and native cultural form that was broadly democratic in orientation, the minstrel show embodied the emergence of distinctively American popular culture and was almost invariably described in nationalist terms by its auditors. Upon hearing a band of minstrels in Sacramento amidst the tumult of the gold rush, the journalist Bayard Taylor was moved to express the following:

The Ethiopian melodies well deserve to be called, as they are in fact, the national airs of America. Their quaint, mock-sentimental cadences, so well suited to the broad absurdity of the words—their reckless gaiety and irreverent familiarity with serious subjects—and their spirit of antagonism and perseverance — are true expressions of the more popular sides of the national character. They follow the American race in all its emigrations, colonizations and conquests, as certainly as the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving Day.³³

Indeed, blackface minstrelsy represented the first successful U.S. cultural export and played an important role in both affirming an inchoate American identity at home and projecting it abroad.

That blackface minstrelsy proved so successful overseas was also in large part due to the efficiency with which the American culture industry was able to package and

³² F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941). On the relationship between nationalism and blackface minstrelsy see Lott, 89-100 and Robert C. Nowatzki, "Our Only Truly National Poets': Blackface Minstrelsy and Cultural Nationalism," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (2006): 361-78.

³³ Bayard Taylor, *Eldorado, or, Adventures in the Path of Empire: Comprising a Voyage to California Via Panama, Life in San Francisco and Monterey, Pictures of the Gold Region, and Experiences of Mexican Travel* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1850), 275.

circulate blackface entertainment in a global commodity market.³⁴ This transnational trajectory built upon a profitable domestic minstrel industry grounded in publishing and encompassing the mass production of sheet music, songsters, joke books, literature, advertising, and images. Minstrelsy also sustained an expansive and interconnected network of managers, agents, and performers that was tied into the circus, theatrical, and music business. In this context, it was hardly surprising that contemporary newspapers frequently referred to blackface minstrelsy as the "Ethiopian business." Ultimately, the commercial success of blackface minstrelsy in the United States was the driving force behind the diffusion and currency of the minstrel show internationally.

At present, the rich literature focusing on blackface minstrelsy and its antebellum American context largely ignores the variegated international dimensions of the minstrel show, though several scholars have explored its transatlantic routes.³⁵ The one noteworthy exception in terms of the Pacific is Richard Waterhouse's study of the Australian popular stage, which includes a lot of material on visiting American troupes.³⁶ It is important to note that although minstrelsy largely catered to Anglo-American audiences abroad, it was never limited to them. While Australia was certainly the most important overseas market for American minstrels during much of the nineteenth century, they also circulated much more widely, and the transnational dynamics of blackface

³⁴ On this point, see Lott's analysis of minstrelsy as "one of our earliest culture industries (8)."

³⁵ On the transatlantic angle, see Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*; Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008); J. S. Bratton, "English Ethiopians: British Audiences and Black-Face Acts, 1835-1865," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 11 (1981): 127-42. For work on minstrelsy further afield, see Dale Cockrell, "Of Gospel Hymns, Minstrel Shows, and Jubilee Singers: Toward Some Black South African Musics," *American Music* 5, no. 4 (1987): 417-32; Veit Erlmann, *African Stars: Studies in Black South African Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); John G. Blair, "Blackface Minstrels as Cultural Export: England, Australia, South Africa," in *Yankee Go Home (& Take Me with U): Americanization and Popular Culture*, ed. George McKay (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997): 53-66.

³⁶ Richard Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville: The Australian Popular Stage, 1788-1914* (Sydney: New South Wales University Press, 1990).

minstrelsy in the nineteenth century Pacific thus remain largely uncharted.

Of course minstrel troupes were not the only entertainers plying the Pacific show trade, and a number of different American circus companies toured extensively during the 1850s as well. These circuses extended a long tradition that took its modern form under an Englishman and equestrian named Philip Astley (1742-1814). During the late eighteenth century, Astley popularized a multi-act performance of acrobats, rope-walkers, clowns, and equestrians that utilized purpose-built amphitheatres located in several European cities.³⁷ In 1793, another English equestrian, John Bill Ricketts, began offering this sort of entertainment in Philadelphia and by the 1820s most large cities in the United States possessed one or more circus amphitheatres in the Astley mold.³⁸ In 1825, J. Purdy Brown revolutionized the circus business in the United States by introducing a canvas tent, which afforded shows an unprecedented degree of mobility and opened up lucrative possibilities for touring beyond the few large cities. Circuses quickly adopted the tenting system and proliferated amidst the general economic and geographic expansion of the United States during the 1830s. Some ambitious owners also tested international markets and took shows to Canada, the Caribbean, and as far as South America. By the 1840s American circuses were almost exclusively itinerant operations that traversed the nation from April to October each year and it was during this decade, according to Stuart Thayer, that the circus reached "maturity as an art" and "became part of American culture."³⁹ As news of the gold discoveries filtered east during the 1848 season there were approximately twenty circuses on the road nationally and while there were certainly

³⁷ A. H Saxon, *The Life and Art of Andrew Ducrow & the Romantic Age of the English Circus* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1978).

³⁸ The history of the antebellum American circus has been comprehensively covered in a series of works published by Stuart Thayer. *Annals of the American Circus* 3 vols. (Seattle: Dauven & Thayer, 1977-1992).

³⁹ Thayer, *Annals of the American Circus*, vol. 2, 108.

variations among them, by this point shows offered a fairly standard mix of acrobatics, clowning, and equestrianism.

The typical circus performance was presided over by a ringmaster and began with a grand entry into the tent by costumed horses and riders accompanied by suitably dramatic music from the circus band. Equestrian acts were the central attraction of the antebellum circus and the opening routines that followed were performed by apprentices whose main skill was simply standing and posing on their mount's back as the animals trotted around the ring. There was also scenic riding during which the performer rode around the ring as one of a number of stock characters like the "Dying Moor," the "Roman Gladiator," or the "Indian Hunter" while demonstrating the requisite skills. Lady equestriennes were particularly popular and typically featured a mix of scenic and acrobatic riding. Vaulting, strength acts, tumbling, slack and tight rope routines, and eventually the trapeze were some of the standard acrobatic features of the entertainments.⁴⁰ Animal acts in the early circus usually consisted of trained ponies or dogs that performed assorted and often comical tricks. Although clowns were usually featured throughout the program and in between acts, they also did specialized acts like comic songs, though as minstrelsy became increasingly popular an "Ethiopian" performer took over some of these duties.⁴¹ In short, the circus presented a wide combination of acts, but the real stars of the antebellum circus was the so-called principal rider.

Principal riding involved performing a variety of feats while standing on the back of a horse. In a typical act, he would leap over or through variety of obstacles, most

⁴⁰ Steve Gossard, *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance: The Evolution of the Trapeze* (Normal, IL: Self-published, 1994).

⁴¹ Stuart Thayer, "The Circus Roots of Negro Minstrelsy," *Bandwagon* 40, no. 6 (1996): 43-45. Although focused on Britain, Jacky Bratton and Ann Featherstone's recent study offers a wealth of analysis and detail on circus clowns: *The Victorian Clown* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

commonly paper-sheeted hoops called balloons. He would stand on his head, juggle, dance, and perhaps hold an apprentice on top of his head as the horse continuously circled the ring. Another common display was "Two Horse Riding," a deceptively simple act during which the performer rode around the ring on the back of between two to six horses trotting parallel to each other. The highlights of the performance were the somersaults, performed both on the horse's back and while mounting and dismounting, with forward and backward variations depending on the rider's skill. Though variations and innovations were continuously introduced, the basic act centered on athletic feats that displayed a rider's balance and strength and changed little over the course of the nineteenth century.⁴²

Although later synonymous with the circus, menageries and sideshows did not play a large part in the American circus before 1860 and while there were obviously variations between the size of particular shows and the skill of their performers, the basic format held through the end of the nineteenth century. As W. C. Coup, who managed Barnum's circus in the 1870s, observed, "no great changes have ever occurred in the actual style of performance, save in magnitude."⁴³ But if the show itself remained fairly constant, the circus business expanded rapidly in the 1840s amidst the ongoing transformation and commercialization of entertainment in the United States.⁴⁴ In developments that echoed blackface minstrelsy, the circus was both incorporated into and drove an emergent American culture industry that popularized and profited from the public thirst for entertainment. Nowhere was the circus more evident in this larger

⁴² Stuart Thayer, *The Performers: A History of Circus Acts* (Seattle: Dauven & Thayer, 2005).

⁴³ *New York Clipper*, May 16, 1891.

⁴⁴ For a compelling analysis of the relationship between the circus and an evolving consumer market in Britain, see Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005).

process than in advertising, which it is fair to say the circus revolutionized. Press agents, innovative ads, publicity stunts, flashy bills, and shameless self-promotion were hallmarks of the circus industry and shows needed to make enormous investments in advertising to succeed.⁴⁵

The circus business also required, and could potentially generate, a good deal of money. One significant marker of this was the introduction of trained elephants, which obviously involved great expense but also proved a profitable innovation. In a detailed analysis of the books for the Sands, Nathan & Co. Circus, Stuart Thayer concludes that the outfit cleared \$79,000 in profits during a single season, which was an impressive sixty percent of the gross receipts and eventually made owner Richard Sands into a millionaire.⁴⁶ That particular circus was a large concern, with two elephants and over twenty performers in addition to support personnel, and it traveled in a caravan of thirty wagons on a route through the Indiana and Ohio during its five-month long season. Such an undertaking required a great deal of capital, organization, and advertising, but it could also obviously mean spectacular profits, which in turn drove increased competition and a concomitant search for new markets. While some enterprising owners looked overseas in the 1830s and 1840s, it was the massive migration touched off by the gold discoveries and the hope of exploiting new cultural markets there that attracted the initial circuses to the Pacific Coast and beyond.

The extensive popular literature on the circus has been supplemented in recent

⁴⁵ Philip Fox and Tom Parkinson, *Billers, Banners, and Bombast: The Story of Circus Advertising* (Boulder: Pruett, 1985); William Slout, ed., *Ink from a Circus Press Agent: An Anthology of Circus History from the Pen of Charles H. Day* (San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1995); T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

⁴⁶ During the 1856 season, the outfit grossed \$131,500 total minus \$52,500 in expenses (\$350 a day). When he died in 1861, owner Richard Sands estate was valued at over \$2 million dollars. Stuart Thayer, *Traveling Showmen: The American Circus before the Civil War* (Detroit: Astley & Ricketts, 1997), 20-21.

years by a number of excellent academic studies that highlight the pivotal role it played in the evolution of the entertainment business in the United States.⁴⁷ And while there has also been some interest in the circus at a theoretical level, circus history for the most part has remained within the purview of its enthusiasts, performers, and collectors.⁴⁸ Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the circus historiography is the extent to which has been written in national terms. Many of the early circus owners in the United States were European and rosters throughout the antebellum era reflected an eclectic and international mix of performers.⁴⁹ Moreover, circuses were touring abroad as early as 1830, when Benjamin Brown took a show around the Caribbean and through South America. Brown later joined the animal and artifact trade that provided novelties for menageries and museums in the United States in Europe traveled extensively in Africa and the Middle East. His career illustrates the extent to which the circus business, tethered together by an international network of agents, performers, and touring shows, had become a global enterprise by the 1840s.⁵⁰ While circus historians in the United States have obviously been aware of its transnational dimensions, its history still tends to be written up as a national affair. It is not a problem unique to the United States and while we know much about the history of the circus Britain, France, and Australia, for example, the broader

⁴⁷ David Carlyon *Dan Rice: The Most Famous Man You've Never Heard Of* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001); Janet Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) George J. Renoff, *The Big Tent: the Traveling Circus in Georgia, 1820-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008). For a useful, though somewhat dated, overview, see George Chindahl, *A History of the Circus in America* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton, 1959).

⁴⁸ Paul Bouissac, *Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

⁴⁹ William Slout, *Olympians of the Sawdust Circle: A Biographical Dictionary of the Nineteenth Century American Circus* (San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1998).

⁵⁰ Benjamin F. Brown Collection, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan; Thayer, *Annals of the American Circus*, vol. 2, 161-62.

story of touring shows still tends to be cut up into national pieces.⁵¹ One of the aims of this project is thus to provide a fuller transnational account of circus history.

The itinerant tradition of the circus in the United States and its early movement abroad ensured shows were well prepared for the challenges of touring around the emergent Pacific cultural markets. The transpacific circuses relied on the economy of traveling afloat rather than overland and demonstrated that even the vast distances connecting Pacific markets were both manageable and profitable. In contrast to the minstrel show, which traveled well because it required little by way of capital and properties, the circus was a type of entertainment that relied more on spectacle than sophistication and was able overcome linguistic and cultural barriers that hampered other kinds of shows. Circuses thus circulated much more widely than other amusements and consistently appealed to an audience beyond the small numbers of Europeans and Americans scattered around the Pacific.

Much like the minstrel show, the circus also benefited from offering a varied and exciting entertainment at what was usually the cheapest price going. While minstrel shows were able to keep admission prices low because of low overhead, circuses did so by drawing in the largest possible audience. With multiple daily performances and tents or outdoor venues able to accommodate large crowds, a typical circus was only charged about half of the price of a theatre. Another rather obvious part of the appeal of these types of shows was simply that during the 1850s professional entertainers in the Pacific were few and far between and generally confined their activities to major urban centers.

⁵¹ Mark St. Leon, for example, has done comprehensive and invaluable work on the history of the circus in Australia that recognizes the broader transnational circulation of circus folk but essentially only focuses on telling an Australian story. *Spangles and Sawdust: The Circus in Australia* (Melbourne: Greenhouse Publications, 1983).

Part of the reason that these early minstrel troupes and circuses did so well was that they were able to service not only the major cities, but marginal markets where transportation, infrastructure, or simple size made them inaccessible or unprofitable for star performers or theatrical productions to visit. Thus by the very novelty of their presence, minstrel troupes and circuses generated business. The outfits discussed here all possessed a combination of effective management and mobility that allowed them to respond to and exploit emerging cultural markets around the Pacific, and it is to their stories we now turn.

The New York Serenaders

Although the Philadelphia Minstrels have been credited with offering the first minstrel show of Gold Rush-era San Francisco in October 1849, the historical record is ambiguous, and it seems likely that a professional troupe called the New York Serenaders actually preceded them, opening at the Parker House saloon in late August.⁵² Whatever the case, the Philadelphia Minstrels were an ad-hoc combination inasmuch as only one of the listed performers, W. H. Smith, subsequently had a successful career in entertainment.⁵³ The New York Serenaders, on the other hand, were a professional troupe that performed in major northeastern cities before coming to San Francisco and counted among their numbers several members that became prominent in show business. The rival troupes performed at halls attached to gambling saloons during November and the

⁵² Slout, ed. *Burnt Cork and Tambourines*, 84.

⁵³ Smith was an important minstrel performer and manager on the Pacific Coast for a number of years. In 1856 he opened the Varieties Theater in San Francisco and traveled on the Pacific circuit as manager of the California Minstrels, visiting Hawaii, Australia, and South America. Edward Le Roy Rice, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy, from "Daddy" Rice to Date* (New York: Kenny Publishing Co., 1911), 41; Slout, ed., *Burnt Cork and Tambourines*, 66.

New York Serenaders actually took part in benefits at the recently opened circus amphitheatre for both J. A. Rowe and W. H. Foley.⁵⁴ They subsequently traveled to Sacramento, but after a successful opening there, constant rain and eventual flooding drove them back to San Francisco.⁵⁵ Two weeks later Arthur Reynolds was killed at the Bella Union and the New York Serenaders began their overseas sojourn.

The minstrel troupe traveled initially to Honolulu, which in 1850 was a bustling port and home to some twelve thousand people, including around fifteen hundred foreign residents and a much larger fluctuating population of transient whalers, sailors, and traders.⁵⁶ Despite some imperial entanglements in the 1840s, the Hawaiian Kingdom had managed to remain independent and established a constitutional form of government under the influence of Protestant missionaries. The thriving economy of the islands, known as the Sandwich Islands to most outsiders, was based around the whaling industry and the merchant community, which received an unexpected boost from the California Gold Rush as demand for food and commodities temporarily soared.⁵⁷ Because of its geographic location and the fine harbor at Honolulu, the islands played an important role in transpacific commerce and around 700 ships a year were calling at Hawaiian ports by 1850. Indeed, Honolulu would become a kind of relay station for U.S. popular culture, both as a market in and of itself and as a stepping stone into the larger Pacific.

While the haole (foreign) community in Honolulu had a long history of amateur theater, it was only with the rise of the whaling industry in the 1830s that commercial

⁵⁴ *Pacific News*, November 15, 1849; *The Alta California* (San Francisco), December 1, 1849.

⁵⁵ *Placer Times*, December 8, 1849.

⁵⁶ The official census of 1853 recorded an islands-wide population 73,137, of which 1,687 were foreigners concentrated around the ports of Honolulu and Lahaina. Andrew William Lind, *Hawaii's People*, 4th ed. (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980).

⁵⁷ Theodore Morgan, *Hawaii, a Century of Economic Change, 1778-1876* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).

amusements proliferated.⁵⁸ As the historian Ralph Kuykendall observed, “whaling seamen on shore leave were a boisterous, pleasure-seeking rabble” and along the waterfront, venues sprang up that offered music, dancing, and other forms of recreation like bowling.⁵⁹ There was thus a strong demand for entertainment, primarily stimulated by the raucous sailors that arrived in port during the high season (October-January), but also from the resident haoles and, as U.S. entertainers quickly discovered, from the much larger Native Hawaiian population as well. This demand ensured that Hawaii would see a steady parade of talent from California during the winter months throughout the 1850s.

If the need for public entertainment was clear, there were fierce and ongoing debates about what form it should take, debates that were framed by a nineteenth-century discourse that emphasized the need for elevating entertainments and “improvement” over simple “amusement.” When a proposal to build a proper theater was first aired in 1848, there was strong opposition to the venture by missionaries who denounced theatrical performances.⁶⁰ Despite these objections, the Hawaiian Theater was eventually built and opened to a full house on June 17, 1848; news of the major gold discoveries arrived just one week later, and it closed after a short season as a significant part of the foreign population, including most of the actors, cleared out for California. The theater briefly reopened for the whaling season that fall, and during early 1849 an unnamed group staged minstrel shows in an empty carpenter’s shop for a couple of weeks but otherwise California effectively monopolized entertainers until the New York Serenaders arrived in

⁵⁸ On the early history of theatre in Hawai’i, see Helen P. Hoyt, “Theatre in Hawaii—1778-1840,” *Annual Report of the Hawaiian Historical Society* (1960): 7-18.

⁵⁹ Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom*, vol. 1 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1948), 311-312; Briton Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do for Me: The American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994); Richard Greer, “Grog Shops and Hotels: Bending Elbow in Old Honolulu,” *Hawaiian Journal of History* 28 (1994): 35-67.

⁶⁰ On the debate over entertainment between missionaries and assorted boosters, see Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Time: A History of the Hawaiian Islands* (New York: Macmillan, 1968): 162-67.

January 1850.⁶¹

The group featured six performers, C. Cushing on banjo, Bill White on violin, J. P. Nash and J. H. Gantz on guitar, and J. Lee and J. O. Pierce respectively as Tambo and Bones. They opened at the Hawaiian Theatre on January 29, 1850, and a playbill for their January 31 show in the Hawai'i State Archives indicates that it conformed to the standard minstrel format.⁶² The first part, performed "As Dandy Negroes of the North," offered a popular burlesque of the "Phantom Chorus" from the opera *La Sonnambula* by Bellini and "De Colored Fancy Ball," which ridiculed overdressed and pompous blacks for vainly attempting to imitate white gentlemen. The second part of the show, done "As Plantation Darkies," featured a banjo solo, songs like "Oh! Susannah" and "My Old Kentucky Home," and the whole concluded with a "Virginia Breakdown." The overall show was extremely similar to the format laid down by the era's leading company, the Christy's Minstrels, and used many of the songs and routines that famous troupe had popularized.⁶³

The existing playbill for the second performance indicates that the theatre was filled to capacity for their debut, but this seems to have been the last show that the minstrels were able to give at the Hawaiian Theatre, which in the following months was offering standard melodrama and theatrical fare one night a week on Saturday evenings. The New York Serenaders shifted to a new venue, referred to as the "Melodeon," though the fact that they stayed in Honolulu over five months certainly indicates they continued

⁶¹ H. L. Sheldon, "Reminiscences of Theatricals in Honolulu," in *Thrum's Hawaiian Almanac and Annual* (Honolulu, 1881): 34-39; *Polynesian*, March 3 and June 30, 1849.

⁶² *Polynesian* (Honolulu), January 26, 1850; "New York Serenaders," January 31, 1850, Broadside Collection, Hawai'i State Archives.

⁶³ For a comparison, see the Christy's Minstrels programs reproduced in Mahar, 18-20.

to be successful there.⁶⁴ The only subsequent mention of the party in the *Polynesian* concerns the fact that their rooms were robbed of \$592.00 on the evening of March 29.⁶⁵ In an attempt to recoup their losses, the party circulated a notice for a private subscription concert on April 8 that acknowledged “the very liberal patronage which has been extended to us by the Ladies and Gentleman of Honolulu,” which they would recall “with pleasure during the remainder of our tour through the Pacific Ocean, Australia, and the East Indies.”⁶⁶ The episode is interesting because it indicates that the minstrels were doing quite well financially, and, even if the solicitation resorted to a bit of flattery, they clearly found a significant audience in Honolulu despite having missed the high season. It is also interesting to see that the minstrels were already planning on a much more ambitious transpacific tour at this early date.

The robbery ostensibly, albeit temporarily, frustrated these grand plans, and by August, the New York Serenaders were back performing in San Francisco.⁶⁷ There the party was reorganized, with Gantz replaced by James Kitts and William H. Bernard taking over as manager and interlocutor. Kitts was a failed prospector with a fine bass voice while Bernard was a true minstrel professional and would become established as “the greatest interlocutor, or middle-man, that minstrelsy has ever known.”⁶⁸ Thus situated, the troupe departed San Francisco for Van Diemen’s Land or Tasmania, but as previously detailed, the troupe ran into trouble and was stranded in Tahiti before they finally reached Launceston in March 1851. One local paper feted their debut performance

⁶⁴ A “melodeon” was a short-hand term for what was more or less a minstrel or variety hall, and such venues could be found in San Francisco and major northeastern cities in the United States like New York and Boston.

⁶⁵ *Polynesian* (Honolulu), April 6, 1850.

⁶⁶ New York Serenaders Circular, “Programs – Musical, 1800-1899,” Hawai’i State Archives.

⁶⁷ *Alta California*, August 15, 1850.

⁶⁸ Rice, 71.

as “a culminating point beyond which we look not for transcendence” and noted that the audience reveled in the antics of Pierce as Tambo, the “decided excellence” of the musicians, and songs that “were such music as one could for ever hear.”⁶⁹ In a move that suggests that blackface minstrelsy was not necessarily yet seen as a legitimate form of entertainment, the troupe gave a “Select Musical Soiree” in Hobart to an invited audience of prominent citizens prior to their public debut in an apparent attempt to establish their respectable credentials.⁷⁰ They apparently carried this off with aplomb because at their crowded debut every song was encored and “the imposing finale was no sooner executed, than the applause broke out as a physical hurricane.”⁷¹ During their over month-long stand in Hobart, the troupe incorporated a Chinese juggler for a week, hosted a benefit for the Infant School, entertained Lieutenant-Governor Sir William Dennison, and presented T. D. Rice’s burlesque opera *Bone Squash Diavolo* complete with fireworks for the finale before departing for Sydney.⁷²

The extraordinary success and popular acclaim that the New York Serenaders found in Tasmania was perhaps all the more remarkable because they were not the first minstrel troupe in Australia. Blackface songs and routines worked their way onto theatrical programs in the 1840s, even though Jim Crow was denounced as “a mass of vulgar buffoonery and impiety” by the *Sydney Herald* when it was introduced to the Australian stage in 1838.⁷³ In 1850, British showman Henry Burton arrived from England intent on starting circus, but instead ended up organizing Australia’s first minstrel troupe,

⁶⁹ *Launceston Examiner*, March 15, 1851.

⁷⁰ *Hobart Town Courier*, March 19, 1851.

⁷¹ *Hobart Town Courier*, March 26, 1851.

⁷² *Hobart Town Courier*, April 9, 18, and May 24, 1851.

⁷³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 12, 1838, quoted in Waterhouse, 27. That a Jim Crow routine was being performed in Australia at such an early date underscores how quickly cultural forms and tropes could circulate through imperial and maritime networks.

known as the Blythe Waterland Serenaders. Burton eventually left the concern and went on to become an institution in the Australian circus business, but his minstrels continued to tour with seemingly limited success.⁷⁴

There were also a few other ad-hoc troupes that made a go in Sydney prior to the arrival of the New York Serenaders, but that these groups failed to please was evidenced by the fact that *Bell's Life in Sydney* noted that the party needed to overcome the “unfavorable impressions left behind them by counterfeit predecessors.” The New York Serenaders’ advertising certainly catered to this notion, playing up their authentic American background and pronouncing that “the true American negro character will be represented.” As in Hobart, the group was a sensation in Sydney, and a review of their debut performance gushed that “the plaudits of the audience could scarcely be restrained until the termination of the exquisite passages.” The review also suggests the extent to which the New York Serenaders, perceived as the first bona fide minstrel troupe in Australia, were burdened by the need to ensure their performance was accepted as a legitimate entertainment.⁷⁵ If, as they say, the best measure of success is crowded houses, the New York Serenaders certainly succeeded, securing large and respectable audiences over the following weeks, including the “rarity” of a significant “presence of ladies” at the theatre.⁷⁶ The party even got into merchandising and licensed their most popular songs to a Sydney music publisher.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Generally speaking, the repertoire for the Waterland troupe reflected an Anglicized minstrel show, which tended to dispense with “plantation material” in favor of an emphasis on more refined vocal and instrumental music. The differences should not be overstated, but American and British minstrelsy were developing in different directions, even in this early period. On this point, see Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain*; Waterhouse, 12-15.

⁷⁵ *Bell's Life in Sydney*, June 28, 1851.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, July 12, 1851.

⁷⁷ “Nelly’s a Lady,” “The Virginia Rose Bud,” “Rosa Lee,” and “O would I were a boy again,” were among the initial songs advertised by local printer Henry Marsh: *Bell's Life in Sydney*, July 5, 1851.

As the company was entertaining Sydney in July 1851, news of the gold discoveries in Victoria began filtering into that city, and the minstrels departed with the other gold seekers for Melbourne. The troupe was somewhat unlucky inasmuch as it arrived in Victoria a bit too early to really take advantage of the full force of the rush that ensued, and, after some months in Melbourne, they continued with their planned tour and embarked for India.⁷⁸ Over the next year and a half, the troupe toured through the East Indies, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and India and were recognized as the “pioneers of minstrelsy” in those regions.⁷⁹

In May 1853, the New York Serenaders announced their triumphant return to Sydney with a notice that puffed their reputation with a list of British officials, Indian rajahs, and celebrities for whom they had performed. Although this was a standard publicity ploy used by professional entertainers, such endorsements helped legitimize their performances, something that was still particularly important for blackface minstrels. *Bell's Life in Sydney* noted that “though long out of sight...they have been to memory dear,” and they treated a “fashionable assemblage” to a “brilliant” show on the occasion of their reappearance.⁸⁰ Despite this initial success, they soon faced competition from another American troupe, Rainer's Serenaders, that had become popular with the Australian public during their prolonged absence. An advertising war ensued with short notices expanding to full columns and eventually half-page illustrated ads as the rival troupes struggled for patronage. The New York Serenaders tried to bolster their prospects with a production of the classic T. D. Rice playlet “Oh Hush! or The Virginny Cupids,”

⁷⁸ Cushing left the party before they embarked for India and returned to Hawai'i to retire.

⁷⁹ On the tour by the company see Slout, ed., *Burnt Cork and Tambourines*, 119. Also see J. E. Kitt's obituary in *Table Talk* (Melbourne), May 29, 1891.

⁸⁰ *Bell's Life in Sydney*, June 11, 1853.

and Rainer's Serenaders elected to embark on a provincial tour of New South Wales. They remained at the Royal Hotel in Sydney for the rest of 1853, taking benefits during the months of November and December before dissolving in early 1854 after four years of touring overseas. Although perhaps rather limited in terms of talent and repertoire compared to the troupes that followed, the New York Serenaders were the maiden American minstrel troupe to tour through the Pacific Islands, Australasia, and India.

Rainer's Original Ethiopian Serenaders

Like the New York Serenaders before them, the story of Rainer's Serenaders begins with California and its allure of easy money for entertainers. As with the miners, this promise often went unrealized as competition and challenges abounded. So it was for Rainer and Donaldson's Minstrels when they opened at San Francisco's American Theatre with high hopes but were forced to compete with the New Orleans Serenaders, which in 1852 became the first troupe of national renown to grace Pacific shores.⁸¹ A WPA chronicler dispassionately remarked about the Rainer company,

Their troupe as a whole was not a strong one. Competition was severe and theatres few. The city was filled with hostile elements struggling for supremacy. In July, unable to gain popular support, J. C. Rainer severed relations with his partner W. B. Donaldson and organized the Rainier Operatic Serenaders...They opened another season at the American Theatre July 11, with prices of admission greatly reduced, but after two weeks of only moderately filled houses they were forced to close. Thereafter, emulating other luckless theatrical companies, Rainer's Operatic Serenaders sailed for Australia -- another land which held forth the lure of gold.⁸²

⁸¹ Also known as the Congo Melodists and Buckley's Serenaders, this group rivaled Christy's Minstrels as the most important and innovative troupe of the early minstrel era. The core of the outfit was the Buckley family and they were known for presenting a very refined performance that emphasized musical and instrumental virtuosity. They were also the first troupe to specialize at staging elaborate and fully realized burlesque operas. Rice, 15-18.

⁸² *San Francisco Theatre Research*, vol. 18 (1940), 27. The party was actually reorganized before it sailed for Australia and included Rainer, White, Foans, Moran, Bryant, and Brower.

Luckily for the Rainer troupe, Australia proved much more congenial than California, so much so that they spent the next three years touring the colony. While the New York Serenaders had begun the work of legitimizing and popularizing blackface minstrelsy in Australia, it was the Rainer's Serenaders who saw this to fruition and reaped the considerable rewards. While the New York Serenaders largely confined their performances to the major capitals, the Rainer's Serenaders embarked on provincial tours that introduced the minstrel show to a much wider audience. Moreover, the New York Serenaders, for all their plaudits, remained relegated to performing in hotels and concert halls whereas the Rainer's Serenaders were able to secure the best venues and theatres wherever they went. While the reviews given to the Rainer's Serenaders were not quite as effusive as those granted to their predecessors and some of the novelty of the minstrel show had undoubtedly worn off for Australian audiences, their overall impact was much greater.

Despite their ill luck in San Francisco, the Rainer party arrived in Australia at an auspicious time. Although the Victorian Gold Rush technically started in September 1851, it was not until the great discoveries around Bendigo and Ballarat in early 1852 that the boom began in earnest.⁸³ As news filtered into California, there were many that elected to undertake the long voyage to Australia, essentially reversing the flow of transpacific migration from the previous few years.⁸⁴ Much like the earlier rush to California, events in Victoria inevitably attracted entertainers, and a wide variety of U.S.

⁸³ For a general account of the global gold rushes of the nineteenth century, see W. P. Morrell, *The Gold Rushes* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1941).

⁸⁴ Charles Bateson, *Gold Fleet for California: Forty-Niners from Australia and New Zealand* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1964); Jay Monaghan, *Australians and the Gold Rush; California and Down Under, 1849-1854* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); E. Daniel Potts and Annette Potts, *Young America and Australian Gold: Americans and the Gold Rush of the 1850s* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1974); David Goodman, *Gold Seeking: Victoria and California in the 1850s* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

made their way to Melbourne, which much like San Francisco served as a gateway to the gold fields. Echoing San Francisco's explosive growth, Melbourne's population shot up from 29,000 in 1851 to 123,000 in 1854 and it was the largest English-speaking city in the Pacific during the nineteenth century.⁸⁵ Indeed, these two cities, Melbourne and San Francisco, represented the largest natural markets in the Pacific circuit for American entertainers during the nineteenth century and served as the poles for a rapidly expanding set of transpacific entertainment circuits. Although this was never a one-way street, performers from the United States played a very prominent role in entertaining Australian audiences during the 1850s.⁸⁶ More broadly, the fact that these entertainers were able to capitalize so quickly on the Victoria Gold Rush demonstrated how responsive the U.S. culture industry was becoming to developments in far-flung locales overseas.

Rainer's Serenaders were thus playing a seminal part in a much larger and longer process when they opened in Melbourne on December 6, 1852. The reviewer for the *Argus* wrote that the show sustained a "pitch of perfection...no other party of these sable imitators has yet attained."⁸⁷ Governor La Trobe attended a performance that was "crowded by the rank and fashion of the city" the following week, and according to the reminiscences of one minstrel, "their success was equal to that of the original Christy's in New York" and "their receipts were greater."⁸⁸ The Rainer's Serenaders introduced a

⁸⁵ On Melbourne's rapid development, see Jill Roe, *Marvellous Melbourne: The Emergence of an Australian City* (Sydney: Hicks Smith & Sons, 1974).

⁸⁶ Potts and Potts, 123-53; Brisbane, Katharine, ed. *Entertaining Australia: An Illustrated History* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991); Richard Waterhouse, "Popular Culture," in *Americanization and Australia: Australian Experience* ed. Philip Bell and Roger Bell (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1998), 45-60.

⁸⁷ *Argus* (Melbourne), December 8, 1852.

⁸⁸ *Argus* (Melbourne), December 15, 1852. The reminiscence referred to is an article published in the *New York Clipper* entitled, "The First Minstrel Troupe in Australia." Although the title is mistaken, the piece is accurate on most counts, and was clearly written by a former member of the troupe, most likely J. M. Foans. *New York Clipper*, March 8, 1873.

number of innovations, and one of the most salient features in this regard was their emphasis on advertising. The party possessed a flair for publicity, and their initial advertisement in the *Argus* announced that they were “originators of the present popular style of Ethiopian Entertainments” and claimed that they had performed for Her Majesty Queen Victoria and the President of the United States. The troupe apparently brought several woodcuts with them for on special occasions such as benefits or holidays, they took out large illustrated ads in local newspapers, which was novelty in Australia. The State Library of Victoria also holds a series of forty or so nicely illustrated playbills in a variety of colors, an indicator that the group was willing to spend significant sums on advertising. Additionally, Rainer’s Serenaders employed an agent named Totten, something that apparently contributed significantly to their success. The *Argus* noted that “During the two months that Mr. Totten has been here, he has ever proved himself upright, prompt, and energetic; and we have no doubt that his activity and business habits have tended in no small degree to render the company as popular as it has been here.”⁸⁹

Beyond such organizational matters, the outfit possessed a wide and up-to-date repertoire that included a number of new features for the Australian public. J. M. Foans specialized in the “wench” role and his “Lucy Long,” a dance routine in a bloomer costume, was one novelty that became a perennial favorite.⁹⁰ Neil Bryant’s solo on the flutina, a precursor to the accordion, variously flummoxed and amused reviewers while the “Characteristic Banjo Trio” was another instrumental innovation. “Uncle Tom’s Farewell” as sung by J. C. Rainer capitalized on the sensational success of Harriet

⁸⁹ *Argus* (Melbourne), February 4, 1853. In 1854, J. P. Nash, formerly of the New York Serenaders, took over the role of agent.

⁹⁰ At least one reviewer found Foans “peculiarly attractive” in his drag dancing. *Empire* (Sydney) May 11, 1855. For an interesting read of “Lucy Long,” see Lott, 160-61.

Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel and mesmerized Australian audiences. When Rainer sang it for the first time in Adelaide, "not a breath could be heard – the large assembly hung with an air of intensity of feeling on every note, and at the close the pent-up sentiment exploded in a burst of approval and a prolonged round of applause."⁹¹

Beyond these kinds of novel acts and songs, the Rainer's Serenaders repertoire was large enough to allow frequent changes in the program and helped sustain public interest in their performances over a number of years. One example of this was the number of afterpieces the company used, which included "The Nigger Postman" (Negro Extravaganza), "The Plantation Jubilee," "Rose of Carolina" (Negro Opera), "The Black Rivals" (Farce), "Otello," "Dutch Drill Burlesque," "Oh Hush!" (Negro Opera), "Julien Burlesque," "Shoemaker and Apprentice" (Burlesque Ballet), and "The Bootblacks of Old Virginia." Moreover, this kind of depth extended throughout their entire program and the blend of novelty and versatility was an important factor in their success over their three years touring around Australia.

One of the interesting things about the reception of blackface minstrelsy in Australia was the way it seemed to develop in the opposite direction of minstrelsy in the United States. The conventional narrative holds that the minstrel show in the United States was becoming more racist and less sympathetic to the abolitionist cause as the 1850s wore on. In Australia, by contrast, sympathies were broadly abolitionist, and a common refrain of the reviews was to mention the "stain" of slavery and express sympathy for slave's conditions as it was portrayed in the songs, dances, and scenes performed by white minstrels. Referring to an "Ethiopian Dirge" sung by J. C. Rainer in Hobart, the reviewer opined that "however this composition must have been received in

⁹¹ *South Australian Register* (Adelaide), January 26, 1855.

the ‘Slave States’ of America, we can only say that it was calculated here to awaken any feeling but that of satisfaction, when reflecting upon the national curse still in operation among our brethren.”⁹² So there was a certain disjuncture in how the content of blackface minstrelsy was being interpreted by its Australian and American auditors. On the other hand, all seemed to agree that minstrel shows had become a legitimate form of entertainment for respectable citizens. When Rainer’s Serenaders performed in Melbourne under the patronage of Lt. Governor La Trobe and the city’s elite turned out in force, it was evident that minstrelsy had effectively shed its putatively low associations. Although there were obviously some in the United States and Australia that continued to regard minstrelsy as disreputable, the broad play-going public certainly found it acceptable.⁹³

The most important point about the Rainer’s Serenaders simply centers on appreciating the duration and scope of their activities in Australia. The Rainer party toured much longer and more widely than any of their American brethren before dissolving in 1855. In doing so, they introduced the minstrel show to a much broader swath of the Australian public and helped to legitimize and popularize this form of entertainment beyond the colonial capitals. Although ad-hoc outfits came and went and amateur minstrel shows were common, a visit from a proper professional organization was a special occasion.⁹⁴ The Rainer’s Serenaders capitalized on this and toured extensively through provincial areas, particularly in rapidly developing rural Victoria.⁹⁵

⁹² *Hobart Town Courier*, March 11, 1853.

⁹³ *Argus* (Melbourne), December 15, 1852.

⁹⁴ Richard Waterhouse, *The Vision Splendid: A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia* (Fremantle: Curtin University Books, 2005), 143-55.

⁹⁵ J. C. Rainer actually settled in the central Victorian gold rush town of Castlemaine after the troupe disbanded and ran the Royal Hotel and Theatre for a number of years before returning to the road. *New York Clipper*, March 8, 1873.

The troupe acquired a canvas tent in the circus style to tour the diggings and set up in Bendigo and then Ballarat, where their run was interrupted by the Eureka Rebellion and they were forced to beat a quick retreat to Melbourne.⁹⁶ An American miner who encountered the troupe in the diggings recalled that although they were “coining money,” it was “such slippery stuff that few of the company were able to hold on to it.”⁹⁷ Whether or not they were good at holding on to it, the Rainer’s Serenaders certainly proved capable of generating money and in doing so played an important in extending the reach of the American minstrel business to Australia’s distant shores.

Backus Minstrels

The last of the major American minstrel troupes to embark on a transpacific tour during the 1850s were the Backus Minstrels, an outfit that featured some the greatest talents of the day. Charley Backus emigrated to California in 1852, but failed as a tradesman before making his debut on stage with Donnelly’s Minstrels in the fall of 1853. By September of the following year he was a great favorite with the now renamed San Francisco Minstrels and it was said that “no single Ethiopian Minstrel in California can be compared with the great Backus.”⁹⁸ This was placed in doubt in October 1854, when E. P. Christy arrived with his famous organization, which counted among its numbers comedian Eph Horn, Jerry Bryant, “one of the most capable and popular performers that ever blacked up,” and Sher Campbell, “conceded to be the greatest

⁹⁶ *Argus* (Melbourne), March 17, 1854; *Ballarat Star*, November 27, 1854. On the Eureka Rebellion, see John Molony, *Eureka* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001).

⁹⁷ Charles D. Ferguson, *The Experiences of a Forty-niner during Thirty-four Years’ Residence in California and Australia* (Cleveland: Williams Publishing Co., 1888), 261.

⁹⁸ *Pioneer Magazine*, September 9, 1854; *San Francisco Theatre Research*, vol. 13 (1940), 35-37.

baritone that minstrelsy ever knew.”⁹⁹ Their move suggested how important San Francisco was becoming as an entertainment market, drawing what was perhaps then the most profitable troupe in the country to undertake the long and risky journey from New York.¹⁰⁰ The rivalry that ensued pitted the quality and fame of Christy’s Minstrels against the hometown favorites, and a partisan press threw their weight behind Backus. By December the troupes had compromised and combined, and the organization that eventually formed for the overseas tour in July 1855 was an amalgamation of the two organizations.¹⁰¹ In a move that echoed Christy’s move west, the overseas tour by the Backus Minstrels, with a roster full of star performers, suggested just how important and profitable the greater transpacific entertainment scene was becoming for American minstrels.¹⁰²

The Backus Minstrels left San Francisco with a great fanfare in early August 1855 and first traveled to Honolulu, where they “created quite a *furor*” during a weeklong stand at the Royal Hawaiian Theatre. According to the *Polynesian* newspaper, the minstrels drew large crowds and its review noted that “strangers looked at each other and laughed as if they had been friends—they were so tickled with the Minstrels.” The paper singled out Jerry Bryant’s Bones as the principal source of this seemingly infectious good cheer and the warm reception accorded to the minstrels suggests that some of the strictures the New York Serenaders evidently faced had loosened considerably in the

⁹⁹ *Alta California*, October 24, 1854; Rice, 58-60.

¹⁰⁰ These risks were underscored when Tom Briggs, the great banjoist with Christy’s Minstrels, contracted “Panama fever” en route, and he eventually passed away the day after they arrived in San Francisco. *New York Clipper*, December 9, 1854.

¹⁰¹ MacMinn, 424-26.

¹⁰² Although the minstrels no doubt kept up with developments abroad via the newspapers, it also seems important to point out that Jerry Bryant (of the Christy and Backus troupes) and Neil Bryant, who had by then been touring with Rainer’s Serenaders for three years in Australia, were brothers. It is reasonable to suppose that they were in at least occasional contact with each other and when the Backus Minstrels arrived in Melbourne, Neil joined their party for the duration of the tour.

intervening years.¹⁰³ Although this will be explored in more detail in the following chapter, blackface minstrelsy had clearly become a popular and accepted part of the local entertainment landscape.

The Backus Minstrels sailed for Sydney and debuted at the Royal Victoria Theatre in early November, prompting what *Bell's Life* described as “black fever” to rage through the city.¹⁰⁴ The party moved on to Melbourne in December, visited Tasmania and the gold diggings in quick succession, and completed return visits to Melbourne and Sydney before most of the troupe headed back to California the following April. Overall, the troupe spent just over six months in Australia on a tour that was limited to the largest markets, likely because of the expenses and salaries involved with such a large and prestigious outfit. Although the Backus troupe was the grandest conglomeration of minstrels yet to visit, some reviewers still betrayed a lingering uncertainty about the propriety of minstrel performances. The *Argus* critic admitted a prejudice “against the class of entertainment” but was soon taken in by the troupe’s charms, observing that “from the first note in the opening chorus (the drinking chorus in ‘Ernani’) to the last words sung in the burlesque which terminates the performance they are made aware of the fact of there being talent of a high order before them.”¹⁰⁵ Indeed the Backus Minstrels succeeded at drawing “the most distinguished families in the city” in Sydney, and at Hobart’s Royal Victoria Theatre the presence of a large “congregation of carriage company” was seen as proof that the minstrelsy was “becoming fashionable as well as popular.”¹⁰⁶ Like the Rainer’s Serenaders before them, the company occupied the boards

¹⁰³ *Polynesian* (Honolulu), September 8, 1855.

¹⁰⁴ *Bell's Life in Sydney*, November 17, 1855.

¹⁰⁵ *Argus* (Melbourne), December 4, 1855. “Ernani” was an 1844 opera by Verdi.

¹⁰⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 26, 1855; *Hobart Town Daily Courier*, January 8, 1856.

of the best theatres and their programs, which reflected a decidedly traditional bent, were for the most part well-received by Australian audiences.

Employing between nine to twelve performers during the tour, the Backus Minstrels were a rather large troupe, but it was their obvious skill and the precision of their performances that left reviewers stumbling for words.¹⁰⁷ The repertoire was traditional in the sense that there was a distinct emphasis on “plantation material” as opposed to some of the more modern developments in minstrelsy. “My Old Kentucky Home,” “Lucy Long,” “Old Dan Tucker,” “Old Bob Ridley,” and plantation afterpieces were staples, leaving one reviewer with a “misty impression of having spent a good many hours (brief and pleasant hours) upon a plantation in South Carolina, among the happiest, merriest, and most musical assemblage of Uncle Toms ever congregated together.”¹⁰⁸ Without elaborating at length upon every individual performer, it was evident that the real stars of the concern were the comedians, Backus and Bryant. Though Sher Campbell’s tenor certainly moved audiences, it was the antics of Backus as Tambo and Bryant as Bones in the first part and their good humor in subsequent specialties made “aching sides” a common refrain of reviews. Perhaps the most remarked upon part of the show was the “Burlesque Chinese” or “John Chinamen” act performed by Backus, which elicited “roars of laughter” and “shouts of applause” from the miners of Ballarat and moved the *Polynesian* to state that “people who have not seen his Chinese personation are to be pitied.”¹⁰⁹ Though this point will be returned to, the popularity of this routine

¹⁰⁷ The nine that made the trip from San Francisco were Backus, Bryant, D. F. Boley, A. N. Morgan, W. M. Barker, Otto Burbank, C. D. Abbott, W. A. Porter, and Sher Campbell. They were joined on various occasions by former members of the New York and Rainer’s Serenaders, picking up Neil Bryant in Melbourne and performing with Brower and Nash in Sydney, where they ran a hotel.

¹⁰⁸ *The Age* (Melbourne), December 4, 1855.

¹⁰⁹ *Ballarat Star*, March 15, 1856; *Polynesian* (Honolulu) September 8, 1856; The act featured Backus as a comical laundryman and Krystyn Moon credits Backus with offering “the first impersonation of a Chinese

amongst settler/colonial publics across the Pacific shows how racial caricatures played a role in generating an ideology of white difference and superiority that served imperial ends.

Not that everything went smoothly for the party. Backus in particular riled the public on occasion. In Bendigo, a dentist insulted by a supposed allusion to him in jest by Backus threatened him in the street with a whipping.¹¹⁰ One of his more renowned acts was an imitation of the principal actors of the day, but when he included the famous American actress Charlotte Cushman in the routine, a perturbed Sydney critic wished he would desist, opining that “gentleman are fair game, ladies are not.”¹¹¹ A Geelong reviewer was outraged by a burlesque version of the Irish song “Norah M’Shane” that he described as “a piece of unutterable vulgarity.”¹¹² Despite these occasional problems, the overall show went over well and at their farewell benefit in Sydney, the Backus Minstrels “drew from the pockets of the public a shower of gold and from their hands a perfect storm of applause.”¹¹³

Although the Backus tour was brief and no other major troupe would cross the Pacific during the remainder of the 1850s, enough veterans of this and earlier tours elected to remain abroad that American minstrels continued to make their presence felt. Many of these performers joined a long-running troupe known as the San Francisco Minstrels, which continued to tour through Australia and further afield, becoming the first professional minstrels to tour New Zealand in 1860.¹¹⁴ In 1862, many of this group

immigrant” on the American stage. *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 43.

¹¹⁰ Potts and Potts, 153.

¹¹¹ *Bell's Life in Sydney*, November 10, 1855.

¹¹² *Geelong Advertiser*, February 16, 1856.

¹¹³ *Bell's Life in Sydney*, April 12, 1856.

¹¹⁴ Downes, 43.

were killed in a shipwreck off the Mauritius on their way back to New York.¹¹⁵ Different performers left the stage and engaged in other pursuits. Tom Brower and J. M. Foans, formerly of Rainer's Serenaders, owned a hotel in Sydney for a number of years, and Bill White, the tenor who had "caused a great sensation among the belles of Melbourne" eventually joined the Otago Gold Rush and ran a hotel in Dunedin.¹¹⁶ J. C. Rainer and J. E. Kitts parleyed their voices and management skills into other entertainment ventures and both would become veritable institutions in the Australian amusement business.¹¹⁷ Although this chapter sketched the story of the three most important outfits, there were many other American minstrels floating around the Pacific in the 1850s and they often appeared in assorted companies organized by veterans of the earlier troupes that came and went.

Among the minstrels who did return to the United States, there were several like Frank Moran and William Bernard who went on to fame and fortune, though others simply disappeared from the historical record altogether. The Pacific circuit often served as a training ground of sorts for young minstrel performers, who were able to find work outside of the crowded American scene and cut their proverbial teeth performing in front of what were generally less discerning audiences. One of the more interesting stories was that of the Bryant brothers, Jerry and Neil, who returned to New York City in the fall of 1856 flush with their success in Australia. In conjunction with their other brother Dan, the Bryants opened their own hall on February 23, 1857, and No. 472 Broadway

¹¹⁵ D. F. Boley, who had "married a wealthy widow" and had several children, and Mr. Totten, the ex-agent of Rainer's party, were among those lost. *New York Clipper*, October 18, 1862.

¹¹⁶ *New York Clipper*, March 8, 1873.

¹¹⁷ See Kitt's obituary, *Table Talk* (Melbourne), May 29, 1891. For Rainer's obituary, see *The Lorgnette* (Melbourne), October 30, 1883.

(formerly Christy's) was a veritable institution of minstrelsy for the next twenty years.¹¹⁸ The move was an apt illustration of the way in which transnational capital was shaping the entertainment business in the United States, a dynamic that would only intensify as the century progressed.

While these various stories illuminate the American end of the process, the larger question of what minstrelsy meant to audiences around the Pacific represents a rather more complicated question. The short and rather unsatisfactory answer is that it meant different things to different people embedded in varying social and cultural contexts. At the most superficial level, a minstrel show made for cheap and diverting entertainment, but what, if anything, did the audience “take” from the show? As Bruce McConachie points out in his review of Eric Lott's work, we need to be careful about relating “how the immediate enjoyment of a performance connects with memories derived from it to shape later action.”¹¹⁹ Perhaps most clearly for white Australians, minstrel shows bolstered a sense of racial superiority. In his study on the minstrel show in Australia, Richard Waterhouse argues that “the prism through which Australians viewed Aborigines was one which was cut by the minstrels.”¹²⁰ Popular enthusiasm for minstrel shows among white audiences certainly promoted or at least rested comfortably within a broader worldview in which nonwhite peoples were understood as inherently inferior or childlike. In this context, minstrelsy was part and parcel of a broader set of ideas and practices about race and power that effectively legitimized Euro-American imperialism in the nineteenth-century Pacific.

¹¹⁸ Slout, ed., *Burnt Cork and Tambourines*, 123; Rice, 58-59 and 87-88.

¹¹⁹ Bruce McConachie, review of *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working-Class*, by Eric Lott, *TDR* 40, no. 1 (1996): 176.

¹²⁰ Waterhouse, 100.

In *Drawing the Global Colour Line*, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds “trace the transnational circulation of emotions and ideas, people and publications, racial knowledge and technologies that animated white men’s countries,” and clearly blackface minstrelsy could be subsumed into this sort of framework.¹²¹ While there was no simple cause and effect relationship, touring minstrel troupes and the white audiences that enjoyed them were on some level cementing “whiteness” as a transnational form of racial identification that ultimately had real world effects. That the Chinese personations of Charley Backus were so enjoyable for both American and Australian audiences represented a good example of the way in which a performance on stages reflected and reified racial differences across the Pacific and ultimately helped engender very similar policies regarding Asian immigration and racial exclusion.¹²² In this sense, American minstrel troupes were in effect selling a racializing cultural form to white colonial publics. Whatever the racial undercurrents, the American minstrel troupes that toured during the 1850s demonstrated the maturation of cultural markets around the Pacific, a point that a turn to the circus side of the story further substantiates.

Rowe’s Pioneer Circus

On October 12, 1849, Joseph Andrew Rowe arrived in San Francisco on board the bark *Tasso*, and with impressive alacrity Rowe’s Olympic Circus debuted in a newly constructed amphitheatre just over two weeks later. Rowe was an experienced equestrian and manager who spent much of the prior decade touring through the Caribbean and

¹²¹ Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹²² Andrew Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California, 1850-1901* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1979).

South America; he was in Lima with a small company when news of the gold rush hit.¹²³ Although the company packed up immediately and headed for California, the crush was such that it took the outfit almost five months to secure passage to San Francisco.¹²⁴

The circus consisted of Rowe, manager, trainer, and equestrian; Mrs. Eliza Rowe, equestrienne; an apprentice, Master Rafael; Signor and Signora Levero, rope dancers; and an enterprising clown and rider named W. H. Foley. Although rather small in terms of numbers, the amusement-starved public of San Francisco proved willing to pay three dollars each to see the show in what the *Alta California* described as a “comfortably fitted up” amphitheatre that accommodated fifteen hundred people. Although the reviewer noted that the company required some practice, they “evinced decided talent” and garnered “frequent and uproarious bursts of applause” during a performance that featured a typical mix of equestrianism, clowning, and acrobatics.¹²⁵ After a successful opening month, Foley abruptly left the circus “because, he said, he could not live on the salary he was receiving of \$1200 a month,” and was replaced by Dave Long.¹²⁶ Although Foley would return to the outfit the following spring, the bust-up was the first in a long series of acrimonious encounters between the two men that stretched across the Pacific over the coming decade.

¹²³ A box of Joseph Andrew Rowe’s papers are held by the California State Library in Sacramento. Albert Dressler edited a volume together that combines those materials with contemporary newspaper reviews and offers a fairly comprehensive review of Rowe’s activities in California during the 1850s: *California’s Pioneer Circus* (San Francisco: H. S. Crocker, 1926). There is also a monograph on Rowe in the WPA’s theatre series, though for the most part it is simply a recapitulation of Dressler’s work: *San Francisco Theatre Research*, vol. 1 (1938).

¹²⁴ The *Alta California* (October 18, 1849) indicates that there were 102 other passengers on board the ship from Panama and an indicator of just how massive the influx of people was as gold fever raged.

¹²⁵ *Alta California*, November 1, 1849.

¹²⁶ Though this may sound like an exaggeration, Rowe was obviously making a lot of money off the concern (\$3 tickets x 1500 seats = \$4500 a night) and on top of that prices for goods and services in San Francisco were out of control. By way of comparison, the two leading actors in a dramatic company in Sacramento at the time were receiving \$275 a week: John H. McCabe, “Historical Essay on the Drama in California,” in *First Annual of the Territorial Pioneers* (San Francisco: W. M. Hinton & Co., 1877), 73-76.

William H. Foley had arrived in San Francisco with Rowe, who was ten years his senior and had trained him in the circus business. Though little is known about Foley's early years, his story was probably similar to that of Rowe, who was orphaned at a young age and joined Asa T. Smith's circus as an apprentice in 1829.¹²⁷ Rowe proved a good rider, and, after touring with several different outfits in the 1830s, he and Mariano Perez, a contortionist and foot juggler, took a circus to Cuba in 1837. After a number of years touring through the Caribbean, Rowe returned to the United States and organized a new circus that left New Orleans in the spring of 1844 and toured through Central and South America until the gold rush beckoned. According to later records, Foley was born in Washington D.C. around 1828, and his name does not appear in Stuart Thayer's *Annals of the American Circus* until the San Francisco season so it seems likely he was apprenticing with Rowe abroad during the 1840s. Whatever the case, Foley was clearly well-trained as a performer and learned enough of the business side of managing a circus to strike out on his own after their initial success in San Francisco.

In January 1850, Rowe reorganized the company and erected a stage that allowed him to offer a combination of dramatic performances and circus entertainment, and the mix proved popular with audiences. Foley bought the amphitheatre in May when Rowe headed to Sacramento, but the structure burned in June and the two rival managers spent the remainder of the year shuttling between Sacramento and San Francisco. In August both men occupied new amphitheatres in San Francisco and over the next several months

¹²⁷ It was fairly typical for orphans or otherwise unhappy children to join the circus at the time. Becoming a successful performer required training from an early age and apprentices were popular with managers because they were cost effective. A litany of great performers, including James Robinson, James Nixon, and Tony Pastor, were brought up in this manner after coming from broken homes or being orphaned. Because of their vulnerable position, this time was not always a happy one for the apprentices, and Rowe for example remained bitter about his experiences with Smith, whom he left after four years of training in a dispute over salary and an unfulfilled promise of an education. Dressler, ed., 3-4; Thayer, *The Performers*, 15-20.

“Rowe’s and Foley’s circuses would divide the patronage of the community; each of the producers would make his spurt, would be obliged, before long, to close down, and would then manage to work up a reopening.”¹²⁸ By December, Foley’s newly refitted amphitheatre triumphed using Rowe’s formula of mixing dramatic and circuses entertainments and Rowe elected to head to Hawai’i with a small group of performers.

Rowe arrived in Honolulu in late December on the down side of the high season for whalers and opened his circus in a specially constructed pavilion on the evening of January 10, 1851. A nicely illustrated playbill of the occasion indicates that the show began with a “Grand Waltz and Star Entree,” with the riders offering a number of “rapid and pleasing evolutions,” culminating in a dance number by Rowe’s horse Adonis. Master Rafael, an apprentice, then performed a number of leaping feats and the first part ended with Rowe doing a scene called “Montezuma and His Wild Charger.” The second part opened with Walter Howard’s riding act in costume, “Red Man of the Woods,” and was followed by Henry Ellsler, a “French Herculean and Gymnastic Professor,” doing assorted “feats of strength.” The principal act featured Rowe as three different characters, a Pantaloon, a Gladiator, and Mercury, during which he assumed “the most beautiful classic attitudes” as his horse galloped around the ring. The show concluded with an equestrian farce called “Billy Button’s Journey to Branford.”¹²⁹ Dave Long clowned throughout the evening and Howard doubled as the ringmaster, though Mrs. Rowe did not appear on the bill for this debut performance.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Macminn, 474.

¹²⁹ “Billy Button’s, or the Tailor’s Ride to Brentford” was a traditional clown act first developed by Astley in the 1770s. The title character is a bumbling tailor that encounters a series of difficulties in mounting and riding his steed on a journey. Joan Selby-Lowndes, *The First Circus: The Story of Philip Astley* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1957).

¹³⁰ “Rowe’s Olympic Circus,” January 10, 1851, Broadside Collection, Hawai’i State Archives.

Although the *Polynesian* did not deign to review the show, it was evidently a great success. A playbill for a performance on January 14 notes that Rowe was erecting some private boxes for families, but more significantly there are some contemporary annotations in pencil on the bill by Emma Rooke or Queen Emma as she was later known. A note at the top of the bill reads, “Mother & I went up to the Palace as the King had desired us to & we came down together with them...I walked with the King into His box, Mother & John followed and then the boys Lot, Alex, & Bil[l], the band struck up ‘God Save the King.’”¹³¹ That Rowe was able to secure royal patronage was significant as there were clearly elements in Honolulu community that saw the circus as disreputable.¹³² When W. H. Foley arrived a year and a half later, the Privy Council denied his application to establish a circus due to several petitions against the concern by “natives and Foreigners.”¹³³ While missionary objections were obvious, one of the principal points raised against the circus at that time was by the merchant community, which felt that Hawaiians should not be spending their money on frivolous entertainment.¹³⁴ Although the *Polynesian* mentioned Rowe’s circus only in passing, it was clearly buoyed by the royal support and was extremely popular with kanaka or ordinary Hawaiians. The Honolulu correspondent for the *Alta California* reported in mid-March that the circus was “quite the rage here,” and it “happened to hit the fancy of the Kanakas, who are all hard riders.” The letter moreover suggested that Rowe was clearing

¹³¹ The king was Kamehameha III (1813-1854) while Alex (Alexander Liholiho), Lot (Lot Kapauaiwa), and Bill (William Lunalilo) were respectively the next three rulers of the Hawaiian Kingdom. Emma married Alexander Liholiho and was queen from 1856-1863 during his reign as Kamehameha IV (1854-63). “Rowe’s Olympic Circus,” January 14, 1851, Broadside Collection, Hawai’i State Archives.

¹³² Perhaps there were some issues at the debut performance as the second in the series of playbills includes a warning that, “An efficient police will be in attendance to preserve order.”

¹³³ Privy Council, Aug. 29/1852, Hawai’i State Archives.

¹³⁴ *Polynesian* (Honolulu), August 28, 1852. The complaint also suggests the extent to which ordinary Hawaiians were already enmeshed in a transnational market economy. Mark Rifkin, “Debt and the Transnationalization of Hawai’i,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2008): 43-66.

the tidy sum of “\$1200 to \$1400 a night.”¹³⁵ Those kind of numbers certainly suggested why Rowe ended up staying in the islands over the next eleven months.

The relatively small company demonstrated an impressive degree of versatility as the program evolved over their months in Honolulu. Mrs. Rowe and the trick ponies Bobby and Billy were introduced in February and during March Walter Howard did a “Grand Trampolening [*sic*]” act that involved somersaulting over eight horses and through a fire balloon.¹³⁶ A bill from the March 21 show contains some commentary in pencil that underscores the dangerous nature of equestrian acts. While Mrs. Rowe’s routine was “very well done,” it describes how Master Rafael fell off his horse on three different occasions during his act and that Walter Howard likewise fell down during his “Spanish Reaper” routine and was unable to continue.¹³⁷ In May, the performers took their benefits and then visited Lahaina, the other major port on Maui, and the island of Hawai’i before returning to Honolulu where the show was reorganized with some new additions brought in from California.¹³⁸

The fall of 1851 was also when news of the Victorian gold rush was starting to filter back across the Pacific and Rowe was clearly alert to these sorts of opportunities. In November, Rowe purchased a 200-ton brig, the *General Worth*, and advertised a grand farewell benefit for the evening of December 6, 1851. The bill produced for this occasion was interesting for its mix of Hawaiian and English text and the fact that it featured a turn from the “renowned and truly celebrated banjo player, Mr. Cushing,” formerly of the New York Serenaders. Cushing had apparently left that party during August 1851 while

¹³⁵ *Alta California*, March 31, 1851.

¹³⁶ “Rowe’s Olympic Circus,” March 6, 1851, Broadside Collection, Hawai’i State Archives.

¹³⁷ The annotations in pencil are presumably again by Emma Rooke, though there is no definitive indication. “Rowe’s Olympic Circus,” March 21, 1851, Broadside Collection, Hawai’i State Archives.

¹³⁸ Dressler, ed., 13.

they were in Melbourne and headed back to Hawai'i to retire and would have been a rich source of information for Rowe about the Australian entertainment scene.¹³⁹ After a successful benefit and some belated praise in the pages of the *Polynesian*, Rowe departed for Tahiti on December 12, 1851.¹⁴⁰

The island of Tahiti had become a French protectorate in 1842 and, though neither as populous nor as frequently visited as Honolulu, its primary port at Papeete had a small European population and was advantageously situated for transpacific maritime traffic.¹⁴¹ Although Rowe later referred to it as the “Cannibal Islands” and described as a “very poore place,” the circus was apparently received graciously there, and it performed for several weeks before continuing on to Australia.¹⁴² The ship was damaged in a violent storm en route and limped into port in Auckland six weeks later. Rowe's company was the first circus to visit New Zealand and stayed in Auckland three weeks, but with only a limited market there and the promise of the Victoria's gold beckoning, they sailed for Melbourne on April 13.¹⁴³

When Rowe arrived in Victoria in May 1852, the circus was already an established part of the Australian entertainment scene with Launceston, Hobart, and Sydney having amphitheatres by 1851.¹⁴⁴ The first circus opened in Melbourne was actually organized by another American circus man named John Sullivan Noble, who came to Australia in

¹³⁹ “Rowe's Olympic Circus,” December 6, 1851, Broadside Collection, Hawai'i State Archives.

¹⁴⁰ *Polynesian* (Honolulu), December 13, 1851.

¹⁴¹ Robert Langdon, *Tahiti: Island of Love*, 3rd ed. (Sydney: Pacific Publications, 1968); Colin Newbury, *Tahiti Nui: Change and Survival in French Polynesia, 1767-1945* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980).

¹⁴² J. A. Rowe to John Center, February 7, 1858, republished in Dressler, ed., 92-93.

¹⁴³ *New Zealander* (Auckland), March 24 and 31, April 3 and 7, 1852.

¹⁴⁴ St. Leon, *Sawdust and Spangles*, 17-24.

1851 via Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town with a small group of performers.¹⁴⁵ In February 1852, Noble opened his “Olympic Circus” but had departed for Sydney by the time that Rowe arrived due to ongoing trouble with a city magistrate, John Thomas Smith, who happened to have an interest in Melbourne’s Queen’s Theatre and worked to frustrate any competition.¹⁴⁶ Rowe auctioned off the *General Worth* to raise funds to construct an amphitheatre, but Smith was initially able to prevent a license from being issued and during the ensuing controversy the Melbourne press sided with Rowe. Smith was denounced for his “detestable tyranny” and the fact that his theatre pandered to “to the worst passions of the lower classes,” whereas Rowe’s circus, backed by a petition of one hundred and fifty “respectable inhabitants,” promised to be “beneficial to the community” as it tended “to draw parties away from public-houses and dissipation.”¹⁴⁷ With the public clearly rallying behind Rowe, the application was granted and on the evening of June 28, 1852 Rowe’s American Circus opened to an overflowing house.¹⁴⁸

For the next two and a half years, despite occasional competition from other outfits, Rowe’s circus was the premiere attraction in the burgeoning city. The well-appointed amphitheatre could accommodate upwards of a thousand people and, most impressively, Rowe maintained an inflated pricing structure of 8s-dress circle, 5s-boxes, and 2s 6d-pit for the duration. The circus presented the standard mix of equestrian, acrobatic, and animal acts with an afterpiece, though with a complement of six riders and a full brass band, the show was the largest and most complete that Rowe had yet fielded. Master Raphael was now billed as the principal rider and became a great favorite for his great

¹⁴⁵ Mark St. Leon, *Circus in Australia: Its Origins and Development to 1856*, vol. 1 of *The Circus in Australia* (Penshurst, NSW: Mark St. Leon, 2005), 208-12.

¹⁴⁶ *Argus* (Melbourne), February 24, 1852.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, June 3, 1852; Potts and Potts, 148-49.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, June 28, 1852.

skill at “jumping through hoops, leaping over garters, and standing on his head as if it were the easiest thing imaginable.”¹⁴⁹ The performances were kept fresh through frequent changes of program and Rowe courted a wide public by reserving Thursday evenings for families and hosting “Grand Promenade Concerts” on Saturday evenings that proffered a refined mix of vocal and orchestral music.¹⁵⁰

The amphitheatre also hosted other U.S. entertainers when they were unable to secure suitable venues such as when Rainer’s Serenaders played for a week in September 1853 or when Rowe held a magnificent farewell benefit held for the actress Sarah Stark.¹⁵¹ The company’s success allowed Rowe to open “an American bar, supper, oyster, and refreshment” house on a neighboring lot and he gave liberally to various charitable causes.¹⁵² The circus also employed a revolving cast of colonial favorites like the minstrel Billy Barlow and equestrian Thomas Nunn as well as newer arrivals such as the rope-walker Signora Honori, and Master Hernandez, a rolling globe performer.¹⁵³ Rather than relying on an itinerant approach, Rowe simply stayed in Melbourne and worked to keep the show at the amphitheatre varied and appealing as he reaped the rewards of the ongoing gold rush.

In early 1854, Rowe returned to California, leaving his capable wife Eliza in charge of the circus, and its success continued unabated despite a challenge from an outfit led by

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., June 29, 1852.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., July 9, 1853, November 14, 1853

¹⁵¹ Ibid., September 20, 1853. The benefit for Mrs. Stark was so crowded that over two-thousand people were left outside and the paper speculated that the total money raised fell “very little if any short of £1,000.” *Argus*, March 29, 1854.

¹⁵² Potts and Potts, 149; Dressler, ed., 19.

¹⁵³ *Argus*, September 15, 1852, March 21, 1854, and October 19, 1853.

the erstwhile W. H. Foley in July 1854.¹⁵⁴ The purpose of his voyage was to secure property for retirement and engage some new talent for the circus. On his arrival, Rowe told the California press that he had cleared £40,000 over the last year and a half and he subsequently bought \$56,000 dollars worth of land in and around Los Angeles during May and June.¹⁵⁵ Soon after Rowe became very ill, and as it seemed he would be unable to return to Australia, Eliza took out an advertisement in the *Argus* thanking the public profusely for their patronage and announcing that the circus would be closed forthwith and the horses and properties sold off at auction.¹⁵⁶ Just days after this, a recovered Rowe suddenly reappeared, announcing “he still flatters himself to make his Circus the microcosm of amusement in Melbourne and receive a continuance of their liberal support.”¹⁵⁷

Despite this pronouncement, Rowe’s return to the ring was short and whether hastened by a new rival amphitheatre or the lure of retired life, after just one week Rowe’s American Circus closed for good. This brief reappearance perhaps explains why Rowe does not seem to have brought any circus performers back with him as planned, although the fact that Edwin Booth, David Anderson, and Laura Keene arrived on the same vessel suggested that he was certainly making professionals back home aware of the lucrative opportunities in Australia.¹⁵⁸ Having already made their fortune, in the spring of 1855 the J. A. Rowe and his wife returned to California reputedly laden with

¹⁵⁴ W. H. Foley refitted a venue known as “Salle de Valentino” and opened it as the “Cirque National” with an accomplished company that included an elephant on July 3, but by August they departed for the gold diggings. *Argus* (Melbourne), July 3, 4, and August 5, 1854.

¹⁵⁵ Potts and Potts, 149; Dressler, ed., 21-22.

¹⁵⁶ *Argus* (Melbourne), October 14, 1854.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, October, 19, 1854.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, October 16, 1854. Anderson was an established actor and though Keene and Booth were less well known at this point, they would become two of the luminaries of nineteenth-century American theatre. On the brief Australian careers of Booth and Keene, see Eric Irvin, *Dictionary of the Australian Theatre, 1788-1914* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1985).

“over \$100,000 in cash and numerous chests of treasure” and retired to a ranch near Los Angeles.

The exceptional profits Rowe generated in Melbourne were partially attributable to the novelty of the venture as prior efforts to establish a circus there were either frustrated or transitory. Moreover, Rowe went to great lengths to ensure that the entertainment was seen as respectable by spending rather lavishly on the amphitheatre, prohibiting smoking, and employing a “strong body of police” to deal with any disturbances. These efforts paid off when Lieutenant-Governor Charles La Trobe visited the show soon after it opened, leading the *Argus* to effuse that it was “pleased to see entertainments of this nature conducted in such a manner that His Excellency and the better classes of society can patronize them.”¹⁵⁹

From the first, Rowe maintained good relations with the local press, and he endeared himself to the Melbourne public by holding frequent benefits for a variety of local charities and benevolent institutions. Indeed, when Rowe was unceremoniously abandoned in Melbourne years later by Chiarini’s Circus, the weekly paper published an appeal to raise money sufficient to help him return to California, noting,

When it is remembered that with one exception Mr. Rowe contributed the largest sum ever given by any single individual to the Melbourne Hospital, it will be confessed that he has some preferent claim upon the public of this metropolis.”¹⁶⁰

This good publicity and effective management by Rowe was of course abetted by the simple fact that Melbourne’s exploding population and gold-fueled economy created an environment in which commercial amusements flourished. In evaluating his success versus other outfits, Mark St. Leon writes that “Rowe’s showmanship qualities, perhaps

¹⁵⁹ *Argus* (Melbourne), n.d., quoted in *San Francisco Theatre Research*, vol. 1 (1938), 96.

¹⁶⁰ *Australasian* (Melbourne), June 28, 1873.

dynamically ‘American’, appear to have effectively distinguished his company before colonial audiences.”¹⁶¹

Joseph Rowe was one of the earliest and certainly the most successful individual American entertainer to tour through the Pacific during the 1850s. First in San Francisco, then in Honolulu, and finally in Melbourne, Rowe demonstrated an almost uncanny ability at finding and exploiting new cultural markets. In doing so, he also deserves much of the credit for developing the transpacific entertainment circuit, particularly the connection between San Francisco and Melbourne at its center. Rowe was the first in a parade of American circus managers that brought progressively larger and grandiose outfits to tour Australia during the nineteenth century.¹⁶² After two years of retirement, Rowe returned to the circus business and, partnering with John Smith, engaged a complete company from back East for a season touring the Pacific Coast. Although this outfit was the best collection of talent yet seen in California, the high costs associated with the venture and the general economic downturn meant trouble. Rowe reorganized the outfit and attempted to recreate his earlier success, embarking on a transpacific tour through Hawai’i and back to Australia from 1857-1859. Unfortunately, he found things “very different here to what they wore [*sic*] when I left this country,” and the circus floundered.¹⁶³ Part of the problem came from the increased competition that characterized the circus business as performers and managers arrived in Australia and the Pacific in an attempt to replicate Rowe’s early success. Among this group was W. H. Foley, Rowe’s erstwhile protégé, and he adopted a rather different tack on how to best

¹⁶¹ St. Leon, *Origins and Development*, 249.

¹⁶² Mark St. Leon, *The American Century, 1851-1950*, vol. 3 of *The Circus in Australia* (Penshurst, NSW: Mark St. Leon, 2007), 215-38.

¹⁶³ J. A. Rowe to John Center, June 1858, in Dressler, ed., 97.

operate a circus on the Pacific circuit.

William H. Foley

William Henry Foley arrived in San Francisco with Rowe's Olympic Circus in August 1849 and was praised as a "very clever clown" and "dashing rider" when the show opened in late October.¹⁶⁴ As previously mentioned, Foley's early career remains a mystery, but he was clearly well-trained and over the next decade he would perform as a rider, clown, acrobat, animal trainer, minstrel, and actor depending on what his shows required. Over the next two years he was a manager and performer with a number of different amphitheatres and circuses in California, often in rivalry with his old boss J. A. Rowe, but in July 1852 he ended up back where he started, working as a clown in San Francisco, this time with Col. Mann's Philadelphia Circus.¹⁶⁵ Sometime in the interim, Foley married an actress, known only as Mrs. Foley, and the two headed to Honolulu that fall to open a circus amphitheatre.¹⁶⁶ Public officials denied Foley's application for a circus and he instead took over management of the Hawaiian Theatre. A playbill for the evening of October 28, 1852 lists the Foleys playing parts in the farce "Who Speaks First!" and the pantomime "The Golden Dream" with a Mr. and Mrs. Ray.¹⁶⁷ For the entr'actes Foley did a "nigger song" called "Pompey Smash," and Mrs. Foley sang "Old

¹⁶⁴ *Alta California*, November 1, 1849.

¹⁶⁵ *Daily Herald*, July 29, 1852

¹⁶⁶ Despite efforts by a number of different researchers, both Mrs. Foley's first and maiden name remain unknown, so she will be referred to simply as Mrs. Foley.

¹⁶⁷ Mr. Henry Ray and Mrs. Ray were the leading attractions at the Queens Theatre in Auckland during the late 1840s before coming to California during the gold rush where they took part in the earliest theatrical performances in Sacramento and San Francisco. At this point they were not acting, but were keeping a hat store in Honolulu when Foley arrived and enticed them back onto the stage. Given this background, it hardly seems like a coincidence that the Foleys would subsequently spend much of the following decade touring New Zealand. Downes, 25. "Hawaiian Theatre....Who Speaks First!," October 28, 1852, Broadside Collection, Hawai'i State Archives.

Folks at Home,” a testimony to the popularity of minstrel songs and an indicator of the way minstrelsy was interwoven with other forms of entertainment.

Apparently not content at just being a manager, Foley bought a building and refitted it as a theater, dubbed Foley’s Varieties, which opened with a melodrama called “The Wife, or a Tale of Mantua” on September 12, 1853.¹⁶⁸ A later commentator remembered that “the best acting Honolulu ever witnessed in the palmy days of the drama was undoubtedly at the Varieties,” and the performances typically mixed standard theatrical fare with minstrel and circus entr’actes.¹⁶⁹ An undated playbill in the Hawai’i State Archives, for example, features a play, “The Honeymoon,” minstrel songs by the Foleys, a “Chinese Balancing Act” by a Mr. Brewer, and an afterpiece called “The Swiss Cottage.”¹⁷⁰ After just two months, there was trouble in the company, as Mrs. Foley quarreled with and reportedly stabbed actor J. H. Brown. Foley was soon advertising for creditors to present claims before his departure and in due course the Foleys departed for Australia on the schooner *Pau* on December 17, 1853.¹⁷¹ Upon arriving in Australia, the Foleys found employment with Malcolm’s Royal Amphitheatre in Sydney, but Foley, who seemed to loathe working for others, soon departed for Victoria with a teenage equestrienne named Martha Louisa O’Neil.¹⁷² In July 1854, Foley opened the Cirque National in competition with Rowe’s by then long-running amphitheatre in Melbourne,

¹⁶⁸ *Polynesian* (Honolulu), September 17, 1853.

¹⁶⁹ [H. L. Sheldon?], “Reminiscences of the Stage in Honolulu,” in *Thrum’s Hawaiian Almanac and Annual* (Honolulu, 1906): 98.

¹⁷⁰ “Theatre! To-Night! Great Success!!! The Performances will Commence with Mr Tobin’s beautiful comedy in four acts entitled THE HONEYMOON!” n.d., Broadside Collection, Hawai’i State Archives

¹⁷¹ The Foleys left few friends in Honolulu. After spending all night drinking at the French Hotel with friends, they “forgot” to pay their tab before departing. [H. L. Sheldon?], 99.

¹⁷² Around this time W. H. Foley and Mrs. Foley either separated or came to some other sort of understanding. Although the Foleys would continue to travel together, ostensibly as a couple, the birth certificates for Foley and O’Neil’s children over the years suggest that they were married in 1855. Thanks to Peter Downes for sharing his research into this matter with me. Also see St. Leon, *Origins and Development*, 267.

and the star of his show was Martha O'Neil, now using the *nom d'arena* Mademoiselle Marie Tournear.¹⁷³ Ostensibly unable to crack the market in Melbourne, Foley entered into a partnership with John S. Noble, and the two took a circus through the Victorian goldfields. After many months in the diggings, Foley and a small outfit that included both Miss Tournear and Mrs. Foley, an apprentice known as Master Bird, an acrobat and rope-dancer named Mr. Rossiter, four horses, and a small menagerie crossed the Tasman Sea to New Zealand.¹⁷⁴

Historian Peter Downes regards the arrival of the Foleys as “one of the most significant dates in the entire history of New Zealand” because they presented the “country’s first real opportunities for continuing interest in professional entertainment,” and for the next decade they crisscrossed the colony, Foley with his circus and Mrs. Foley as the first bona fide star of the New Zealand stage.¹⁷⁵ In 1855 the colony represented something of a backwater when contrasted with the ongoing developments in Australia and California. The settler population of some 37,000 was largely concentrated in and around the four major centers of Wellington, Auckland, Christchurch, and Nelson. These European inhabitants existed in a relatively peaceful but unsettled relationship with the over sixty thousand Maori spread over the countryside of the North Island.¹⁷⁶ All in all, New Zealand seemed like a rather marginal market, but increasing competition in Australia, and the Foleys’ independent streak led them to try and “make it pay.” While there had been limited efforts at public amusement previously and a few professional

¹⁷³ The name was “borrowed” from the famous French equestrienne Louise Tourniare and was variously spelled Tournear, Tourniere, and Tourniare over the years Martha O’Neal performed. For consistency she will simply be referred to as Miss Tournear. Foley appeared as the “Dashing Horseman” and presented his trained mare, Lucy. *Argus* (Melbourne), July 4, 1854.

¹⁷⁴ Among the animals were a leopard and a double-headed goat. *Nelson Examiner*, September 15, 1855.

¹⁷⁵ Downes, 27.

¹⁷⁶ James Belich. *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders: From Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Auckland: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1996).

thespians visited from Australia, the Foleys were the real pioneers of professional entertainment in New Zealand.¹⁷⁷

W. H. Foley's Victoria Circus debuted in Nelson on September 20 and although made up of just five performers, they presented a varied bill:

PROGRAMME

This Evening's Entertainment will commence with a
POSTURING ACT OF HORSEMANSHIP, by MASTER BIRD
FANCY DANCE, by MISS TOURNEAR
COMIC SONG, by the CLOWN [Foley]
THE AUSTRALIAN'S FIRST VISIT TO THE CIRCUS, by T. BIRD
MR. ROLLA ROSSITER will appear on the WIRE COLANTE
MR. FOLEY will then introduce the world-renowned TRAINED MARE "LUCY"
MISS TOURNEAR, the graceful and fearless FEMALE EQUESTRIAN, in her
LEAPING ACT
MASTER BIRD, AS THE STILT BOY, Or, "Long Legs are the Best"
COMIC DUETS, by MR. and MRS. FOLEY
The whole to conclude with
A LAUGHABLE AFTERPIECE¹⁷⁸

The performance took place in a pavilion that the company traveled with that could accommodate an audience of around eight hundred people, and, after a somewhat furtive start, a visit and endorsement of the show from Governor Thomas Gore Brown confirmed its respectability and ensured crowded houses. The local press was encouraging and Miss Tournear's riding, and the trained mare Lucy, who among other things danced a hornpipe and discharged a pistol, figured prominently in reviews. Mrs. Foley made only a brief appearance in the pavilion before departing for Auckland with the menagerie while the circus company took benefits and headed across the Cook Strait in November.¹⁷⁹ While Mrs. Foley was making her debut on the stage, the circus settled in for a successful run in Wellington where it proved a "great novelty," and Master Bird's feats on the slack rope

¹⁷⁷ It will be remembered that Rowe gave several performances in Auckland on his way from Tahiti to Australia in March-April 1852. On early entertainment in New Zealand, see Downes, 9-26.

¹⁷⁸ *Nelson Examiner*, September 20, 1855.

¹⁷⁹ *Nelson Examiner*, September 26, October 3, 20, 1855.

were lauded as “truly astonishing.”¹⁸⁰

By Christmas the circus was in Auckland, where Mrs. Foley’s theatrical debut was celebrated by the *Daily Southern Cross* as inaugurating “a new era in the history of public amusements” in the city, and the Foleys ambitiously decided to build a proper theatre in early 1856. The circus properties were auctioned off as work on what Foley advertised as a “capacious new theatre” began.¹⁸¹ The Theatre Royal opened on March 3, 1856 with a production of *Othello* starring Mrs. Foley that was in the usual fashion interspersed with circus and minstrel turns from Master Bird and Foley. The *Southern Cross* praised the theatrical performance because “instruction and entertainment are simultaneously conveyed, and the drama raised in the scale of public amusements” but scoffed at the circus routines. The reviewer noted that “there is a large class, especially natives, to whom this species of entertainment forms a great attraction” and reluctantly supposed that although they did not meet with his “personal approval,” it was an “important means of rendering the establishment remunerative.”¹⁸² The comment highlights the opposition that American entertainers sometimes faced from “respectable” local citizens, but is also worth noting because it suggests that there was significant Maori patronage of Foley’s circus. In May, the peripatetic Foley sold the theatre after just two months and took a reorganized circus on a tour through New Zealand that lasted over two years.¹⁸³

Now billed as “Foley’s Royal American Circus,” the outfit was supplemented by

¹⁸⁰ *Wellington Independent*, November 24, 1855.

¹⁸¹ *Daily Southern Cross* (Auckland), n.d., quoted in Downes, 29; *Daily Southern Cross*, January 4, 1856.

¹⁸² *Daily Southern Cross* (Auckland), March 14, 1856.

¹⁸³ Downes suggests that Foley recognized that the theatre was not going to pay despite its early success. A young actor named Harry Jackson took over management and Foley’s liabilities when they left and within two months the concern was bankrupt (31-33).

new talent brought over from Australia, including rope specialist Pablo Fanque, a clown named C. A. Axtelle, and a riding monkey called “Dandy Jack” that proved a great draw.¹⁸⁴ The “chief attraction” of the circus was Pablo Fanque’s “extraordinary” highwire act, which was a novelty for New Zealand.¹⁸⁵ During early 1857, Foley introduced the circus to Canterbury, performing in Lyttelton, Christchurch, and Kaiapoi despite some opposition from some locals who felt that entertainments were inappropriate during Lent. The Foleys announced plans to open a theatre in Lyttelton provoked further controversy, but despite this the Theatre Royal opened to popular acclaim in July 1857, and soon after Foley and his circus continued their touring while Mrs. Foley stayed on and managed the theatre.¹⁸⁶

This theatre proved to be the last cooperative venture between the Foleys, though Mrs. Foley would continue to star on New Zealand stages until 1866 when she returned to the United States. W. H. Foley and Miss Tournear kept up their itinerant lifestyle, visiting every corner of New Zealand and touring the trans-Tasman circuit with a variety of different outfits over the following decade.¹⁸⁷ For the 1866-1867 season, Foley introduced a show called the “The Marvels of Peru,” that featured minstrels, acrobats, an educated dog named Jonathan, and juvenile performances by two of his children, billed

¹⁸⁴ Pablo Fanque (William Darby) was a famous black circus performer and proprietor in Britain. The Pablo Fanque in Foley’s outfit was actually his nephew whose real name Billy Banham. John M. Turner, “Pablo Fanque, Black Circus Proprietor,” in *Black Victorians/Black Victoriana* edited by Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 20-37; St. Leon, *Origins and Development to 1865*, 118.

¹⁸⁵ Fanque also seems to have tutored Miss Tournear in the art, for she took over the act when his infant child died in Wellington and subsequently performed a number of daring wire routines. *New Zealand Spectator* (Wellington), July 26, August 9 and 23, 1856.

¹⁸⁶ *Lyttelton Times*, March 7, 14, 18, and 28, July 25, 1857.

¹⁸⁷ It was not until 1866 when the Cooke, Zoyara, and Wilson’s World Circus arrived from San Francisco that audiences in New Zealand saw a circus that did not involve Foley.

as Master John and Miss Kate.¹⁸⁸ At the end of the season, Foley purchased a hotel and settled down in Wellington with his family, but when a menagerie visited the following March he purchased it and went back on the road.¹⁸⁹ It was around this time that Tournear and Foley seemed to have separated, for he continued to tour with John and Kate as the “Foley Magnet Troupe” while Martha Foley remained in Sydney where she passed away indigent on April 7, 1871.¹⁹⁰

The always-peripatetic Foley continued to tour the trans-Tasman circuit with his children through the 1870s and in 1882 took a small circus through New Zealand in what seems to have been his last professional turn.¹⁹¹ Throughout his thirty-year career abroad, Foley demonstrated a consistent desire to remain independent and a willingness to explore what might best be described as marginal markets in order to do so. Foley made his living touring with smaller outfits on routes outside the major Australian markets and spent over a decade traveling through New Zealand before most other entertainers even bothered.¹⁹² One of the central reasons that so many circuses were successful in the United States was that for many rural Americans it was only kind of professional entertainment that visited their area. A similar dynamic was in play in terms of the Pacific, where a touring circus like Foley’s was able to travel though and turn profits in regions that had usually never been visited by professional entertainers. Foley thus

¹⁸⁸ *Evening Post* (Wellington), March 25, 1867.

¹⁸⁹ *Evening Post* (Wellington), March 28, 1868.

¹⁹⁰ Martha Foley, *Equestrienne*, Age 31, Disease of Liver and Effusion on the Brain. New South Wales Registry of Deaths, #355, April 7, 1871. Thanks to Peter Downes for a copy of the death certificate.

¹⁹¹ *New Zealand Mail* (Wellington), July 22, 1882. Foley subsequently disappears from the historical record. His daughter Kate Foley married an agent with Cole’s Circus during its 1881 Australasian tour and went to the United States, where she became popular as a soubrette. *Bulletin* (Sydney), July 7, 1884. Johnny Foley continued as a one-man variety show called “Foley’s Festivities” and continued to tour through New Zealand into the 1890s.

¹⁹² Mark St. Leon, *Index of Australian Show Movements, 1833-1956* (CD-ROM, 2002). On New Zealand’s development as an entertainment market, see Adrienne Simpson, “Putting Entertainment on the Map: the New Zealand Touring Circuits in 1874,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 26 (1995): 153-76.

followed a very different course than his old mentor Rowe, and though ostensibly less successful, he seems to have carved out a prosperous niche for himself in the trans-Tasman circus business.

Conclusion

The experiences of U.S. entertainers that performed Pacific circuit during the 1850s produced a variety of different outcomes. For Frank Moran and William H. Bernard, it provided a fruitful introduction into show business, and both subsequently became well-known minstrel men in the United States.¹⁹³ In this fashion, overseas markets often served as a kind of junior circuit where performers could learn their craft before trying to crack the intensely competitive American market. For many, the Pacific circuit proved so profitable that they spent the remainders of their careers abroad. J. E. Kitts, a basso with the New York Serenaders, made a new career in opera, first as a vocalist and later as a business manager.¹⁹⁴ J. C. Rainer worked as an agent in Australia for other visiting attractions and eventually found success as a manager of traveling dioramas.¹⁹⁵ W. H. Foley toured a mixed bag of circuses, menageries, and variety shows on the trans-Tasman circuit straight through till the 1880s. Although Charles Backus and Joseph Rowe came back to the United States after their respective and remunerative early tours of Australia, each would return to Pacific circuit on different occasions, although this time not as successfully. Overall, although there were some exceptions, the evidence suggests that most entertainers found their time overseas profitable, both in the sense of

¹⁹³ Rice, 54 and 71.

¹⁹⁴ For a detailed rundown on Kitts' career in Australia, see *Table Talk* (Melbourne), May 29, 1891.

¹⁹⁵ Mimi Colligan, *Canvas Documentaries: Panoramic Entertainments in Nineteenth-Century Australia and New Zealand* (Carlton South, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2002).

financial rewards and the way that experience translated into other opportunities, whether the elected to return to the United States or remained abroad.

Collectively, the minstrel troupes and circuses detailed in this chapter played a pivotal role in defining the broader geography and contours of the nascent Pacific entertainment circuit during the 1850s. The Pacific market was more or less was unknown territory for U.S. entertainers prior to 1850, and the earliest touring professionals faced many risks and uncertainties in their ventures overseas, but the rapid growth and intense competition that characterized the U.S. culture industry ensured that there was a ready and able pool of American performers prepared to search out and exploit new markets. Perhaps the best example was the Rainer's Serenaders, who found themselves unable to compete in San Francisco's crowded amusement scene in 1853 and elected to try their luck abroad. The general success that these early minstrel troupes and circuses had touring abroad and in Australia in particular showed that there were certainly opportunities to be had and the knowledge that accrued through their activities provided a template for others to follow.

While the scope and scale of the amusement business in the United States was central, it also engendered cultural forms well-suited for touring abroad. For example, American circuses, in contrast to their European counterparts, were almost exclusively itinerant operations, which fostered traveling skills that proved invaluable for overcoming the challenges associated with touring the Pacific. J. A. Rowe, for one, had already spent almost a decade touring the United States, the Caribbean and South America before he arrived on the Pacific shores. The minstrels great advantage was essentially a combination of low cost and flexibility that allowed them to outpace other forms of

entertainment that were more capital intensive or required relatively more infrastructure and this was one of the primary reasons that minstrel shows flourished in the gold diggings on both sides of the Pacific. In a vast Pacific market where mobility was key, the circus and the minstrels thus proved particularly effective and the growth of the U.S. culture industry ensured that there was a surplus of talent ready to go.

While it seems like an obvious point, American performers, particularly the more successful ones, seemed to have been much more responsive to developments overseas. The fortune that Rowe reaped during his incredible run in Melbourne, while undoubtedly due in part to his efficient management, had as much to do with timing and the dearth of other available amusements as anything else. Similarly, the success of the Foleys in New Zealand for so many years essentially unchallenged demonstrated an ability to identify and exploit a market that many other professionals had overlooked. The fact was that in many cases the U.S. entertainers were simply either the first to visit particular markets or proved more efficient at exploiting established ones. The relative geographic proximity of San Francisco and its thriving amusement business to the emerging opportunities around the Pacific was also an important part of this process. The California and Victoria gold rushes were the central determinant in the emergent entertainment circuit as the former first enticed U.S. entertainers to the shores of the Pacific and the latter provided the motivation to cross it. The early transpacific touring route stretched from San Francisco to Melbourne and came to include markets, most notably Honolulu, that U.S. entertainers found could pay along the way.

Finally, in considering the relationship between U.S. empire and the Pacific circuit in this early era, the most important development was clearly the 1848 takeover of

California, which realized the “manifest destiny” of continental dominance and provided a platform for the United States’ Pacific ambitions.¹⁹⁶ The 1850s were something of a transitional decade as long-held notions of a Pacific empire became more realistic and actionable in the context of San Francisco’s rise as a commercial port and urban center. In 1853 as the early transpacific show trade was developing in earnest and the New York Serenaders were playing in Sydney, the Secretary of the Navy issued an annual report that declared,

A new empire has, as by magic, sprung into existence. San Francisco promises, at no distant day, to become another New York, and our prosperous trade in the Pacific, amid the wonders of commerce, promises to bear the same relationship to China and Japan which that of the Atlantic coast bears to the continent of Europe and Great Britain.¹⁹⁷

The commercial expansion inherent in this vision was fueled by the explosive colonization of California and the Australian colonies, which stimulated transpacific commerce engendered the more expansive and organized cultural circuit that evolved during the 1860s. Although the passage lays out a vision of a “new empire” in economic terms, it was arguably in the cultural realm that the United States was most effective at projecting itself into the Pacific. Perhaps the clearest place where the relationship between the Pacific circuit and U.S. empire intersected during the 1850s was actually the Hawaiian Kingdom, and it is to this rich example that we now turn.

¹⁹⁶ Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

¹⁹⁷ Secretary of the Navy Annual Report for 1853, quoted in Van Alstyne, 132.

Chapter Three

Colonialism's Popular Culture: U.S. Entertainers and Hawai'i, 1848-1863

During September of 1855, the Backus Minstrels created “quite a *furor*” in Honolulu, and in the course of their stay the party were invited to a luau by Kamehameha IV, where it was reported that “they left a most favorable impression not only as performers but as guests and gentlemen.” As part of the evening’s festivities, a hula troupe performed after the minstrels, and the seemingly incongruous mix of entertainment left the *Polynesian* newspaper wondering “whether the native dancers in attendance were more surprised at them or they at the native dancers.”¹ Despite their congenial relations with the court and popularity with the theatre-going public of the port, not everyone in Honolulu was enthusiastic about the success of the minstrels. One missionary paper declared, “The *church-member* ought never to venture within the precincts of the theater” and attacked the troupe’s star, Charlie Backus, remarking, “How a ‘man that is a man’ can stoop to such mimicry is quite unaccountable!” The article went on to claim that the “natives of the Sandwich Islands” called the theatre “Hale Diabolo” or “house of the devil,” but the evident popularity of the minstrels suggested that much of the community was far less pious than the paper presumed.² The episode revealed an ongoing struggle in Honolulu over the character of its public amusements and highlighted how visiting entertainers

¹ *The Polynesian*, September 8, 1855.

² *The Friend*, April 30, 1857.

entered into the contentious cultural politics of the Hawaiian Kingdom during the mid-nineteenth century.

As the previous chapter demonstrated, Honolulu played an important role in the early years of the Pacific circuit both as a market in and of itself and as a kind of relay station for performers touring overseas. The emphasis here shifts from that larger transnational history to focus on the local dimensions of the evolving entertainment circuit, and how it intersected with the culture and politics of the Hawaiian Kingdom. The chapter focuses on the wide variety of performers, primarily from the United States, who visited Honolulu in the fifteen years that followed the foundation of the Hawaiian Theatre in 1848, which inaugurated professional entertainment in the islands. The variety of shows and their motley audiences ensured that these performances were complicated affairs that generated a range of responses and served a variety of ends. After an overview of the principal performers and events of this period, the chapter explores two major themes. The first of these centers on how patronage of popular amusements and the public debates over their propriety were a proxy for ongoing social and cultural struggles between and amongst Honolulu's assorted native and haole (foreign) constituencies.

The second theme centers on the obvious popularity of visiting entertainers among Kanaka Maoli, or Native Hawaiians, and the ways in which these shows promoted cross-cultural interactions. Performances provided opportunities for Kanaka Maoli to learn about and on occasion appropriate American commercial idioms. Touring entertainers were thus a particularly rich site of cultural exchange, but this also raises the charged question of what role they and these interactions played vis-à-vis American colonialism in the islands. As representatives of an encroaching Western culture, to what

extent were visitors like the Backus Minstrels implicated in American imperialism?

While touring entertainers were hardly the most consequential agents in the unfolding history of the Hawaiian Kingdom, they illuminate significant aspects of colonial society and culture in Honolulu and aptly demonstrate how the emerging Pacific circuit operated in and affected one of its most important localized contexts.

Hawaiian Historiography

The overall historiography of the islands has tended to privilege the dramatic transformation of Hawaiian life during the first half of the nineteenth century and the controversial events that ended it at the expense of the comparatively staid 1850s and 1860s. Although largely focused on political developments and the haole elite, the best overall introduction to Hawaiian history in this period remains Ralph Kuykendall's three-volume study, though a rather livelier overview by Gavan Daws offers much more on the cultural life of the island kingdom.³ These older general histories have been supplemented in recent years by a spate of more specialized scholarship on the complex economic, political, and cultural forces that gave rise to a recognizably modern economy and society in the islands centered in and around the "metropolis" of Honolulu.⁴ While the precise dynamics and desirability of this transformation have been much debated, broad agreement exists on the prominent role merchants and missionaries played in the process.

³ Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom. Vol. 1: 1778-1854, Foundation and Transformation, Vol. 2: 1854-74, Twenty Critical Years, The Hawaiian Kingdom. Vol. 3: 1874-1893, The Kalakaua Dynasty* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1938, 1953, and 1967); Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Tim: A History of the Hawaiian Islands* (New York: Macmillan, 1968). For a measured critique of both works by a contemporary native historian, see Jonathan K. Osorio, "Living in Archives and Dreams: The Histories of Kuykendall and Daws," in *Texts and Contexts: Reflections in Pacific Islands Historiography* edited by Doug Munro and Brij V. Lal (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 191-201.

⁴ Kuykendall, vol. 2, 19.

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, increasing Western goods and trade fomented a market driven economy that allowed for the exploitation of Hawaiian labor and resources, undermining the traditional basis of native society.⁵ The abolition of the kapu system of traditional laws and regulations in 1819 and the arrival of American missionaries a year later inaugurated a cultural revolution that almost completely changed the way of life of most Kanaka Maoli.⁶ As disease decimated the Hawaiian population, the number and influence of foreigners increased, a variety of laws were adopted and social reforms undertaken that aimed to remake the islands in a Western image.⁷ The 1848 Mahele, or land division, has often been portrayed as the culmination of this transformative era and an event that represented “the single most critical dismemberment of Hawaiian society” for the ways in which it broke down the traditional relationship between the ali’i (chiefly class), maka’āinana (commoners), and the ‘āina (land).⁸

While the historiography generally agrees on the broad outlines of this modernizing process, the character and desirability of these changes have proved much more contentious. With respect to the missionaries for example, interpretations have

⁵ Theodore Morgan, *Hawaii: A Century of Economic Change, 1778-1876* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948); E. S. Craighill Handy and Elizabeth Green Handy, *Native Planters in Old Hawaii: Their Life, Lore, and Environment* (Honolulu, Bishop Museum Press, 1972); Edward D. Beechert, *Working in Hawaii: A Labor History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985); Patrick Vinton Kirch and Marshall David Sahlins, *Anahulu: The Anthropology of History in the Kingdom of Hawaii*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Mark Rifkin, “Debt and the Transnationalization of Hawai’i,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2008): 43-66.

⁶ For a particularly nuanced account of this period from a Hawaiian perspective, see Lilikala Kame’eleihiwa, *Native Lands and Foreign Desires* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1992). For a more celebratory account of the same, see Harold Whitman Bradley, *The American Frontier in Hawaii: The Pioneers, 1789-1843* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1942). On missionaries specifically, see Bradford Smith, *Yankees in Paradise: The New England Impact on Hawaii*, (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1956) and Patricia Grimshaw, *Paths of Duty: American Missionary Wives in Nineteenth-Century Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989).

⁷ Sally Engle Merry, *Colonizing Hawai’i: The Cultural Power of Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁸ Jonathan Kay Kamakawiwo’ole Osorio, *Dismembering Lāhui: A History of the Hawaiian Nation to 1887* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), 44. For more on the destructive impact of the Mahele, see Kame’eleihiwa.

ranged from approving accounts that emphasize their role in shepherding Hawaiians from supposed “savagery” into “civilization” to scathing indictments blaming them for the destruction of traditional Hawaiian culture and society. The crux of the issue centers on how one evaluates the impact of capitalism and Christianity on the islands, the complex motivations of the agents involved, and the relative merits of indigenous and Western culture. Although the conventional historiography generally eschewed the terminology of colonialism in favor of more neutral terms like expansion or influence, a number of recent histories have relied heavily on the rubric of colonialism to explain developments in Hawai’i. While colonialism is usually defined as the exercise of direct political control by one nation over another people or territory, in these studies the colonizing process portrayed long preceded any kind of formal political takeover.⁹ In this vein, Jonathan Osorio’s *Dismembering Lahui* argues that “Colonialism worked in Hawai’i not through the naked seizure of lands and governments, but through a slow, insinuating invasion of people, ideas, and institutions.”¹⁰ Hawaiians were of course not powerless to resist this invasion as Noenoe Silva and others have shown, but they were forced to do so on very unequal terms.¹¹ This recent turn in the historiography understands colonialism in Hawaii

⁹ Hawai’i was not officially annexed by the United States until 1898, but as early as the 1840s the U.S. government was forthrightly asserting its interest in the islands and raising the specter of annexation. Although the Tyler Doctrine put forth in 1842 recognized the independence of the Hawaiian Kingdom, this was tempered by the assertion that the islands were also within the “U.S. sphere of influence.” For the vagaries of official American policy in the 1850s, see Merze Tate, *Hawaii: Reciprocity or Annexation* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1968).

¹⁰ Osorio, 3. For interpretations of colonialism in Hawai’i from a Kanaka Maoli, Marxist, and poststructuralist perspective respectively, see Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai’i* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993); Noel J. Kent, *Hawaii, Islands Under the Influence* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983); Elizabeth Bentzel Buck, *Paradise Remade: The Politics of Culture and History in Hawai’i* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

¹¹ On the Kanaka Maoli response, see Noenoe K. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Caroline Ralston, “Hawaii, 1778-1854: Some Aspects of Maka ‘ainana Response to Rapid Cultural Change,” *Journal of Pacific History* 29, no. 2 (1984): 21-40.

as stretching back to the early nineteenth century and views it as a contested process that was mediated in cultural terms.

In this context, the question becomes what role visiting U.S. entertainers played in the “insinuating invasion” of Hawai’i, a notion that raises a number of complex issues. One problem with the current literature is that it drifts into a rather monolithic conception of colonialism that presumes a kind of efficacy and purpose that was in practice much more elusive. The categorical view of missionaries and merchants as “agents of imperialism,” for example, elides the complicated dialectic of accommodation and resistance prompted by their intrusion.¹² In perhaps the most direct statement from the colonialism camp on touring performers, Elizabeth Buck remarks that:

Along with Western forms of entertainment came still-developing Western ideas about performance and culture in a capitalist context. With paid-for entertainment and performers working for wages, musical and other forms of performance became commodities and observers became consumers. As a result, the relation between creation, reception, and meaning of symbolic production underwent a major change.¹³

This passage ably captures the way that touring entertainers operated in overlapping social, economic, and cultural fields, but also seems overly programmatic about the putative results. While changes were undoubtedly underway, Hawaiian culture did not simply collapse in the face of Western encroachments as many traditional cultural forms persisted and newer syncretic ones emerged. American cultural forms dislodged but never fully replaced Hawaiian ones; at times the two coexisted and at times they were intertwined, but whatever the case it was a variable and partial process.

¹² Jennifer Fish Kashay, “Agents of Imperialism: Missionaries and Merchants in Early-Nineteenth-Century Hawaii,” *New England Quarterly* 80, no. 2 (2007): 280-98.

¹³ Buck, 106.

Perhaps the best early example of this was the evolution of Hawaiian music, where instruction by Protestant missionaries in hymn-singing led to a situation in which “elements of indigenous performance practice began to appear in the performance of Christian hymnody; and elements of Western music began to appear in indigenous performances.” Moreover, these “syncretized performance streams” coexisted with abiding indigenous traditions and the more straightforward adoption of introduced hymns, indicating the range of Kanaka Maoli responses to the missionary intrusion.¹⁴ Missionaries likewise had diverse approaches and reactions to those they were proselytizing, which reflected competing motivations and agendas amongst themselves and with other Western interlopers in the islands.¹⁵ Perhaps the clearest demonstration of this latter point for this chapter were the consistent and at times, hyperbolic denunciations of touring entertainers by missionaries who saw them as a threat to Honolulu’s moral order and the presumed piety of their relatively recently converted parishioners.

The key point here is that colonialism in Hawai’i proceeded in a very uneven manner and that the relations and boundaries between colonizer and colonized were more varied and complex than has at times been appreciated. This does not somehow excuse Western impositions or the coercion and violence that at times accompanied them, but suggests simply that colonialism was a historically complex and variable process. Nicholas Thomas has most forcefully articulated the case for a more flexible conception of colonialism in a Pacific context, and this chapter pursues his insight into the “colonial

¹⁴ Amy Ku’uleialoha Stillman, "Beyond Bibliography: Interpreting Hawaiian-Language Protestant Hymn Imprints," *Ethnomusicology* 40, no. 3 (1990): 469-88.

¹⁵ Although nominally focused on China, for an excellent discussion of missionaries and imperialism, see Paul W. Harris, “Cultural Imperialism and American Protestant Missionaries: Collaboration and Dependency in Mid-Nineteenth-Century China,” *The Pacific Historical Review*, 60, no. 3 (1991): 309-38.

project” that operated in Hawai’i through the lens of popular culture.¹⁶ In a nod to Thomas, what I call “colonialism’s popular culture” was something both shared and contested, and its complicated agency was played out before the public on the stages of Honolulu.

Kanaka Maoli and Western Entertainment

During the centuries prior to the influx of professional American performers in the 1850s, Hawaiians developed and enjoyed their own forms of entertainment, most centrally through the combination of music and dance known as the hula.¹⁷ One of the first Western scholars to take an interest in studying the hula, Nathaniel Emerson, drew an interesting comparison in noting that

The hula stood for very much to the ancient Hawaiian; it was to him in place of our concert-hall and lecture-room, our opera and theater, and thus become one of his chief means of social enjoyment. Besides this, it kept the communal imagination in living touch with the nation's legendary past.¹⁸

The passage highlights the critical role of hula played as both a leisure activity and communal ritual, and the story of the hula as it developed over the nineteenth century vis-à-vis introduced forms of entertainment provides a good proxy for understanding the evolving cultural politics of the Hawaiian Kingdom and the Kanaka Maoli struggle for political and cultural autonomy.

When Cook, Vancouver, and the other early Europeans voyagers visited the islands in the late eighteenth century, they were treated to a variety of entertainments that

¹⁶ Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel, and Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ Dorothy B. Barrère, Mary Kawena Pukui, and M. Kelly, *Hula: Historical Perspectives* (Honolulu: Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, 1980); George S Kanahale, ed., *Hawaiian Music and Musicians: An Illustrated History* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1979).

¹⁸ Nathaniel Emerson, *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii; the Sacred Songs of the Hula* (Washington: Govt. Printing Office, 1909), 7.

included mock battles, athletic competitions, and elaborate hulas. It was customary to offer something in return, and the earliest Western performances in the islands staged by Cook (1778-79) and Vancouver (1792-93) featured a combination of fireworks and music calculated to impress their hosts with European power.¹⁹ Some years later in 1809, castaway Archibald Campbell recorded that a Scotchman named James Beattie had built a temporary theatre in Honolulu and staged several plays with a mixed cast of Hawaiians and Europeans, but it was not until the 1820s that Western amusements were common in the islands.²⁰ It was during this time that the first merchant houses were opened, the whaling industry took off, and Honolulu's strategic position as the "crossroads of the Pacific" ensured that an ever-increasing number of vessels visited the burgeoning port.²¹ Along the waterfront, "public houses" and "grog shops" catering to the sailor's thirst for entertainment and other more lascivious needs sprang up that offered music, dancing, and other forms of recreation like bowling.²²

The development of these establishments roughly coincided with the arrival of American missionaries, who in their zeal attempted to both repress indigenous cultural practices deemed uncivilized and curb the perceived immorality of amusements along the

¹⁹ In a similar vein, Vanessa Agnew argues in an analysis of the role of music in early Pacific encounters that "the performative use of music not just a simple accessory to power but also a potent and contested instrument of domination in European struggles with colonial and prospective colonial subjects." *Enlightenment Orpheus: The Power of Music in Other Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 103.

²⁰ The only production mentioned by name was the pantomime "Oscar and Malvina," which was a melodramatic Gaelic legend and Campbell observed that "although the audience did not seem to understand the piece," they were "greatly delighted" by the spectacle. Archibald Campbell, *A Voyage Round the World, from 1806 to 1812* (New York: Van Winkle, Wiley & Co., 1817), 143-44.

²¹ In 1820, some 100 traders and whalers called at Honolulu, but by the end of the decade the number had doubled. Edward D. Beechert, *Honolulu: Crossroads of the Pacific* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

²² In 1822, there were reportedly seventeen "grog-shops" in Honolulu. Richard A. Greer, "Grog Shops and Hotels: Bending the Elbow in Old Honolulu" *Hawaiian Journal of History* 28 (1994): 37.

waterfront.²³ When a visiting British frigate staged a magic lantern show accompanied by the ship's band to a large assemblage of locals in 1825, missionaries attempted to disrupt the event and dragged the young king Kamehameha III "kick and screaming" to church. Kamehameha III exacted some measure of revenge a decade later by allowing the first local dramatic company, which was known as the "Oahu Amateur Theatre," to use the palace for some of its early productions. Incensed missionaries sermonized against the perils of the drama, but an organization called the "Friends of the Theatre" provided funding and support that sustained the venture for a number of years.²⁴

For the Protestant missionaries, theatricals and other forms of commercial amusements were viewed as distractions at best and at worst as something that actively promoted indolence and vice. Their disapproval intersected with their concerns over the evils of alcohol and prostitution, and although they remained a powerful force in Hawaiian affairs, the influence of their brand of Puritanism was waning by the 1840s.²⁵ The fortunes of the evangelical's battle against both haole and Hawaiian entertainments reflected this, and an increasing number of Kanaka Maoli were dissatisfied with the direction of the Kingdom under missionary tutelage. A thriving commercial sector and the ever-increasing numbers of sailors in port from the booming whaling business also defied the missionaries' control and ensured that a vibrant entertainment scene developed, though it was not until 1847 when a local amateur company staged theatricals

²³ On Protestant antitheatricalism, see Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Susan Harris Smith, *American Drama: The Bastard Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). On missionary efforts to suppress both indigenous and Western cultural activities elsewhere in the Pacific, see Niel Gunson, *Messengers of Grace: Evangelical Missionaries in the South Seas, 1797-1860* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1978), esp. 180-194.

²⁴ Helen P. Hoyt, "Theatre in Hawaii—1778-1840," *Annual Report of the Hawaiian Historical Society* (1960): 7-18.

²⁵ Gavan Daws, "The Decline of Puritanism at Honolulu in the Nineteenth Century," *Hawaiian Journal of History* 1 (1967): 31-52.

at a leased warehouse known as “The Thespian” that plans for a proper theatre were broached.²⁶ The ensuing controversy was sharp, and the religious community published attacks in both the English and Hawaiian language newspapers arguing that the playhouse would promote indolence and immorality. Despite this opposition, the plan “for a theatre to accommodate not less than 500 spectators, in two tiers of boxes and a pit” moved forward and the *Polynesian* noted, “the building will be so arranged as to afford accommodation for lectures, concerts and other public meetings,” and would thus be “highly serviceable, independent of its original object.”²⁷ The harbormaster William Paty organized a group of investors to fund the project, which was constructed during the spring of 1848 and managed initially by its builder, C. W. Vincent.

The Hawaiian Theatre opened on June 17, 1848 with an amateur production of “She Stoops to Conquer,” and though the night was “marred by the noise consequent upon so crowded a state of the house,” the performances were “much applauded.”²⁸ The *Sandwich Islands News*, perhaps in an effort to tweak the religious community, ended their review with a note about how “the Theatre like the Church is a most excellent school of morality and virtue, and as such ought to be equally well supported by the public.”²⁹ It is worth pausing here to consider in broad strokes who exactly the public referred to here was made up of.

In 1850 there were twelve hundred foreigners and an estimated fourteen thousand Kanaka Maoli residing in and around Honolulu supplemented by a transient maritime population that could swell the size of the city by thousands. Although the theatre seems

²⁶ *Polynesian*, September 18, 1847.

²⁷ *Polynesian* November 6, 1847.

²⁸ *Polynesian*, March 18 and June 24, 1848.

²⁹ *Sandwich Island News*, June 22, 1848

to have primarily been built to cater to a mix of sailors and supportive haole residents, it was evident that Kanaka Maoli were avid patrons of commercial amusements from the start. King Kamehameha and other members of the nobility attended the opening performance, and the royal family became such regular theatre-goers that a royal box was designated. Although the evidence concerning maka'āinana is more circumstantial, the success of something like Rowe's Pioneer Circus, which arrived the year after the theatre opened and drew large crowds in Honolulu and the overwhelmingly indigenous towns of Lahaina (Maui) and Hilo (Hawaii), indicated that many Kanaka Maoli were willing and able to pay for commercial entertainment.

Another significant part of the amusement-going public was due to seasonal influx of whalers, which ran roughly from September to January represented the high season for the merchants, but the low season for the missionaries, who decried the drinking and debauchery that prevailed as thousands of sailors flooded into port.³⁰ According to the *Polynesian* newspaper: "It is the same with public amusements as with every thing else—supply follows demand. The whaling fleet like the Roman of old puts forth two demands; the first is to be fed, the second, to be diverted."³¹ This strong demand was a major reason that Honolulu would see a steady parade of talent from California during the winter months throughout the 1850s.

Finally, there was the resident haole community, which was divided along a number of different political, national, and class lines. The most significant of these divisions derived from the ongoing competition between merchants and missionaries for influence in the islands and this broader conflict was refracted in the debates about

³⁰ *The Polynesian*, June 16, 1847.

³¹ *The Polynesian*, November 3, 1855.

popular amusements. For all of their vehement denunciations, though, the missionaries were unable to stifle the rising tide of commercial amusements and the majority of the haole community welcomed the efforts of touring entertainers. The American Consul, David L. Gregg, kept a diary during his time in Honolulu from 1853-58 that portrays evenings at the Royal Hawaiian Theatre as social occasions attended by prominent haole citizens. They were certainly gradations of taste amongst this group as Gregg, for one, noted the departure of Rowe's circus with a terse "good riddance to the town," and wrote of Foley's Varieties Theatre that he would "never go such places when I can avoid it."³² But these sorts of judgments were common enough, and as we shall see, there was a broad range of opinion about the merits of visiting entertainers, but the key point is that the resident haole community, exclusive of the missionaries, were generally supportive of visiting entertainers.

Despite the positive reviews of on its inaugural night, the opening of the Hawaiian Theatre was soon lost in the excitement prompted by news of the gold discoveries in California. With a significant part of the foreign population leaving for the gold fields, the theatre was only open intermittently through the fall and winter, but this setback proved temporary. During the spring of 1849, entertainers from the United States and elsewhere traveled through in Honolulu on their way to take advantage of the lucrative opportunities opened up by the gold rush. While most of these visitors stayed for only a short time, they were the first real foreign professionals to perform in the islands and inaugurated a new era of entertainment that both enriched the cultural life of the

³² David L. Gregg, *The Diaries of David Lawrence Gregg: An American Diplomat in Hawaii, 1853-1858*, ed. Pauline King (Honolulu: Hawaiian Historical Society, 1982), 379, 172.

Honolulu and channeled ongoing struggles over the bearing and direction of the Hawaiian Kingdom.

Before delving into these struggles, one last matter that warrants commentary are the different newspapers that provide much of the evidence for this chapter.³³ For a rather small market, Honolulu possessed a number of papers, the most influential of these was the *Polynesian*, which served as the “Official Journal of the Hawaiian Government,” and was generally missionary-oriented. The editor during the debate over the proposed theatre and through the first half of the 1850s was a missionary named E. O. Hall, and though not outrightly hostile to commercial amusements, the paper generally accorded visiting entertainers only brief notices. The tenor of the *Polynesian* changed in 1855 when Charles G. Hopkins, who for a time was co-manager of the Royal Hawaiian Theatre, took over as editor. Although Hopkins had some strong opinions about the merits of different cultural forms and particular performers, the coverage accorded to visiting entertainers was much more extensive and detailed. Other than the already referenced episode with the Backus Minstrels that impugned the character of the missionaries and seemingly demanded a response, the long-running missionary-backed newspaper *The Friend* took no notice of public entertainments. The *Sandwich Island News* that advocated so strongly for the construction of the theatre folded in the fall of 1848, but the *Honolulu Times*, founded in the following year by H. L. Sheldon, became a new champion of commercial amusements. As we shall see the paper played a critical role in support of the early visiting entertainers like the New York Serenaders and Rowe’s Circus with friendly articles that framed their performances as a positive

³³ Helen Geracimos Chapin, *Shaping History: The Role of Newspapers in Hawai‘i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1996); *Guide to Newspapers of Hawai‘i, 1834-2000*, rev. ed. (Honolulu: Hawaiian Historical Society, 2003).

contribution to the community something that was undoubtedly motivated in part by the fact that the paper took care of all of their advertising and printing.³⁴

Although illness forced Sheldon to halt publication, a succession of often short-lived newspapers took over the role of challenging the *Polynesian* and by association the Protestant missionary establishment during the 1850s. The *Weekly Argus* (1852-53), for one, was a vocal supporter of W.H. Foley when his initial efforts to secure a license for a circus and new theatre ran into trouble with the authorities.³⁵ Finally, the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* was founded by Henry Whitney in 1856 and soon eclipsed the *Polynesian* as the most influential local newspaper. Politically the paper was of a decidedly pro-American and pro-annexationist bent, and in terms of cultural criticism it offered generally evenhanded coverage of visiting entertainers and was critical of missionary-backed efforts to regulate commercial amusements in the late 1850s. And finally, it should be noted that there were two Hawaiian-language newspapers published in this period by the Department of Education that were edited by the former missionary Richard Armstrong, *Ka Elele* (Messenger, 1845-55) and *Ka Hae Hawaii* (Hawaiian Flag, 1856-61).³⁶ In summarizing the former's contents, Helen Chapin notes that it "advocated Protestant and American values and opposed wine, tobacco, and public amusements," but the latter paper did advertise for events at the Royal Hawaiian Theatre.³⁷ The newspapers of Honolulu thus reflected a diverse set of opinions about the propriety and role of

³⁴ The *Honolulu Times* folded in early 1852 when Sheldon became ill, but he later penned at least one article recalling the popular entertainments of this era. "Reminiscences of Theatricals in Honolulu," in *Thrum's Hawaiian Almanac and Annual* (Honolulu, 1881), 34-39.

³⁵ *Weekly Argus*, October 10, 1853.

³⁶ Esther Mo'okini, *The Hawaiian Newspapers* (Honolulu: Topgallant, 1974); Rubellite K. Johnson, ed., *Kukini 'Aha'ilono [Carry On The News] Over a Century of Native Hawaiian Life and Thought From The Hawaiian Language Newspapers of 1834 to 1948* (Honolulu: Topgallant, 1976).

³⁷ Chapin, *Guide*, 66.

popular amusements in the growing port that mirrored public debates and it is to these that we now at last turn.

The Politics of Popular Entertainment in 1850s Honolulu

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of cultural life in Honolulu during the 1850s was the sheer number and variety of touring entertainers that enlivened it. Following a decade in which only the only formal entertainments were irregular local affairs, the community was treated to performances from a veritable parade of professionals, including legitimate stars like Professor Anderson, Edwin Booth, and Charles Backus. The Royal Hawaiian Theatre, as it came to be known, was at the center of the mix and hosted everything from regular theatricals, concerts, and minstrel shows to more exotic exhibitions of human curiosities, bell-ringing, mesmerism, glass-blowing, and bell-ringing.³⁸ In sum, all of the major forms of commercial entertainment in the United States, and everything in between, appeared in Honolulu at one time or another during this lively decade, and the presence and popularity of so many touring entertainers reinvigorated cultural and social debates.

The essential reason that so many performers visited Honolulu during this time was its fortuitous location within the developing Pacific circuit. As the California Gold Rush commenced in earnest, hundreds of vessels called at the islands on their way to San Francisco and the first professionals to perform in the islands appeared only briefly as

³⁸ After 1853, the Hawaiian Theatre was renamed “Royal Hawaiian Theatre,” a change that obviously implied the sponsorship of the royal family and was an apparent nod towards the British monarchy and patronage system that Alexander Liholiho had been exposed to and admired during his time abroad. See Alexander Liholiho, *The Journal of Prince Alexander Liholiho: The Voyages Made to the United States, England and France in 1849-1850*, ed. Jacob Adler (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press for the Hawaiian Historical Society, 1967).

they were intent on taking advantage of the lucrative opportunities on the Pacific Coast. While some entertainers found fame and fortune in California, many more were frustrated by the difficult conditions there and the surprisingly stiff competition that ensued. This competition obviously provided incentives to look elsewhere for business and such circumstances led the New York Serenaders to undertake what was probably the first purposeful and extended professional visit to the islands in January 1850. News of their success undoubtedly filtered back to California even as the minstrels continued on their pioneering touring across the Pacific.

In these early years, then, Honolulu served as a kind of satellite market for the growing amusement business in San Francisco, but with the onset of the Victoria gold rush and concomitant increase in cultural traffic across the Pacific, it also served as an important way station on the nascent entertainment circuit. While some entertainers visited Honolulu solely for a short season and then returned to California, many more stopped there as part of more ambitious overseas tours. Of the dozen or so minstrel troupes that performed in Honolulu during the 1850s, all of which came from San Francisco, roughly half returned to California while the others continued on to Australia or other locations around the Pacific.³⁹

While Honolulu was not an insignificant market, it was not in itself a large or attractive enough one for many performers. In 1850 there were 1,200 foreigners and an estimated 14,000 indigenous Hawaiians residing in and around Honolulu. An 1860 census recorded 1,616 foreigners and 12,408 Kanaka Maoli and “half-castes.”⁴⁰ Although

³⁹ The circuses that visited Honolulu reflected a similar mix. J. A. Rowe, for example, visited Honolulu on four separate occasions, twice as ventures from California and back and twice on his way to Australia.

⁴⁰ Andrew William Lind, *Hawaii's People*, 4th ed. (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980); *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, January 10, 1860.

the number of foreign residents increased by a few hundred over the course of the decade, the overall population remained fairly constant, and the slow decline of the whaling industry made for fewer potential customers, at least amongst the haoles. As frequent mention in the press made clear, the royal family and local ali'i were keen patrons of all kinds of entertainment, and the evidence suggests that maka'āinana were attending the cheaper entertainments offered by circuses and other tent shows en masse. The market of course varied depending on the style of the entertainment and the standing of performer(s) in question. Whereas a relatively unknown minstrel troupe visiting for the whaling season might find it profitable to stay two or three months, for a luminary like Professor Anderson it made little sense to tarry. Though Anderson did in fact make a good deal of money for his few performances, there were far greater opportunities for someone of his stature elsewhere.⁴¹ Even so, many far less notable performers found ways to make the islands "pay" and this fact, combined with its fortunate geographic position, ensured that a steady stream of entertainers passed through Honolulu.

Although their number and kind varied from year to year, the most prevalent touring shows were theatrical productions, circuses, and minstrels. As the years prior to 1850 indicated, Honolulu had an established tradition of amateur theatre and this served the community well when professional talent began to arrive in the islands. In this era, actors typically traveled with very few and in some cases no supporting players, instead relying on local managers to fill out the cast. When the then well-known tragedian Daniel Waller and his wife came to Honolulu in December 1853, they simply performed in their preferred roles (mostly Shakespeare) with support from what reviewers deemed

⁴¹ William F. Wilson, "Professor John Henry Anderson 'The Wizard of the North' at Honolulu in 1859," *Annual Report of the Hawaiian Historical Society* (1938): 50-70.

“respectable amateurs.” The Waller’s successful engagement lasted three months, which was a fairly typical season and allowed them to run through their full repertoire before departing for Australia.⁴² Of course such a system also made for a very haphazard schedule and many months might pass between seasons, though the theatre was generally open from October through January, which was also the high season for whalers.

Probably the most consistent and popular form of entertainment available in Honolulu was blackface minstrelsy, which was closely intertwined with maritime culture and did not necessarily require as many resources (and some would say the talent) of a proper theatrical production.⁴³ A good example of this link is the story of Frank Hussey, who first sailed to the Pacific on a whaler but soon found a more profitable line of work. According to Hussey, on the way from Nantucket to the whaling grounds,

With the assistance of five of the men on board he organized a minstrel troupe and gave performances in the various ports which the ship touched at in the Western Islands [Azores], Rio Janiero, Chili, Peru, etc. After arriving in the Hawaiian Islands, they erected a platform in a cocoanut grove, and gave entertainments in payment for admission pigs, chickens, sweet-potatoes, goats, and turkeys. The ticket-office consisted of a pen for the animals and a coop for the fowls. The tariff was: A goat would admit eight persons; a pig, four; a dozen of eggs, or a chicken, or a turkey, or a bushel of sweet potatoes, one. The proceeds of the show were sold to various ships in the harbor the next morning for cash. The ship then proceeded to the Arctic regions for the purpose of trading for furs and catching whales. After a time the *America* was wrecked among the icebergs.

After “severe suffering,” the crew was rescued off the ice by another whaler, the *Minerva Smith*, and upon landing again in Honolulu, Hussey gave up the life of a whaler and

organized a minstrel troupe under the title of the first troupe he performed with – the Sable Brothers. They had no hall to play in: but the King Kammehammaha [sic]

⁴² Sheldon, 36; *Weekly Argus*, January 5, 1854 and March 23, 1854; Helene Koon, *Gold Rush Performers: A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Singers, Dancers, Musicians, Circus Performers and Minstrel Players in America's Far West, 1848 to 1869* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 1994), 172.

⁴³ For an excellent analysis of music, minstrelsy, and maritime culture in Honolulu during this period, see James Revell Carr, “In the Wake of John Kanaka: Musical Interactions Between Euro-American Sailors and Pacific Islanders, 1600-1900” (PhD diss., University of California-Santa Barbara, 2007), 226-71.

III gave them a large machine-shop, which they converted into a theatre, and a ran a successful season of five months.⁴⁴

Frank Hussey's story was remarkable on a number of levels. While it obviously underscored the link between minstrelsy and maritime culture, Hussey also showed how minstrel shows overcame challenges that hampered other forms of entertainment. Their initial venue, for one, was simply a platform on the beach, and the fact that he was able to put together a troupe from a seemingly motley collection of sailors demonstrated the relatively low threshold of resources required for staging a minstrel show. The troupe cleverly skirted the cash economy with their barter system, and the implication of all that produce was that it was in large part Kanaka Maoli who were attending these performances. Certainly the presumed support of Kamehameha III and their advertised performances "in Melodian Hall near the Palace" during the spring of 1852 indicated that the nascent troupe found a significant measure of success in Honolulu. Hussey subsequently had a long career on the Pacific circuit and ran a minstrel hall in Melbourne for a number of years before also be noted that Hussey went on to a very successful career on the Pacific circuit, first in California and then in Australia, where he ran alternated between touring as a performer and managing a variety of theatres in Melbourne before passing away in 1889.⁴⁵

In Honolulu, the succession of visiting minstrels began in the spring of 1849, as a number of anonymous troupes performed in Honolulu on their way to California.⁴⁶ The

⁴⁴ This story is taken from a testimony that Frank Hussey furnished to the *New York Clipper* in 1880. Although some elements might be exaggerated, the ships mentioned check out and in February 1852 there are several advertisements placed in the *Polynesian* newspapers by the "Sable Brothers." *New York Clipper*, July 3, 1880; *Polynesian*, February 21 and 28, 1852. Thanks to Jay Cook for bringing this to my attention.

⁴⁵ An article noting his death in Launceston suggested that, "he was once the best of all the minstrel comedians who ever came to the country." *The Australasian* (Melbourne) December 12, 1889.

⁴⁶ *Polynesian*, March 3 and June 30, 1849.

New York Serenaders inaugurated the first extended and successful minstrel season at the Hawaiian Theatre in early 1850, and from that point forward minstrel troupes invariably showed up each year during the high season. Some arrived from San Francisco for a season and then headed back to California, others like the Backus Minstrels stopped through as they traveled about the Pacific circuit.⁴⁷ Another reason for minstrelsy's pervasiveness was the fact that it did not necessarily require a full professional troupe to perform. Countless published bills for the Royal Hawaiian Theatre included minstrel songs, dances, and sketches as entr'actes alongside more standard theatrical fare. Many Honolulu "hotels" also advertised having musicians and minstrelsy was undoubtedly as part of an evening's fun.⁴⁸ In short, blackface saturated both vernacular and commercial popular culture, and in this context it was hardly surprising that Kanaka Maoli adopted minstrelsy with such alacrity.

The show that undoubtedly attracted the largest audiences in Honolulu, the circus, warrants further mention. In anticipation of the arrival of Dan Rice's famous company at the end of the decade, the *Polynesian* noted that

The circus is becoming an annual institution in Honolulu, and no doubt a great number of our people would look upon a season without it, as they would on a pudding without the plums—rather heavy on their hands.⁴⁹

Indeed, with the exception of 1854, a company and sometimes two visited Hawai'i every year so it was clearly known as a reliable market in the circus industry from a very early

⁴⁷ The Backus Minstrels performed in Honolulu on their way to and from Australia. *Polynesian*, September 8, 1855 and June 7, 1856.

⁴⁸ There were distinctions between different times of drinking establishments. A house "for the ordinary entertainment of sailors" was a "victualing house" but known to sailors as "grog shops," while a house "for public entertainment of the higher classes" was called a "hotel." Greer, "Grog Shops and Hotels," 44. The Commercial Hotel and Royal Hotel, for example, both advertised as having "Concert Rooms." *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, September 25, 1856.

⁴⁹ The circus was actually run by John Wilson and rather boldly 'borrowed' Rice's famous name. The newspaper made no mention of the deception, perhaps because of the excitement created by Albert, the first elephant to visit the islands. *Polynesian*, December 24, 1859.

moment. With its emphasis on visual spectacle and physical feats, the circus possessed broad appeal, and the cheap prices also meant that Kanaka Maoli and lower-class whites unwilling or unable to spend fifty cents or a dollar it took to attend the Royal Hawaiian Theatre were able to enjoy an evening's amusement. Although precise figures remain sketchy, circus tents of that era typically accommodated anywhere from one to three thousand people, and the available evidence suggests this was on par with what circuses in Honolulu drew.⁵⁰ Despite the relatively more burdensome loads of animals and equipment they were required to travel with, the itinerant roots of the circus left meant that they were well prepared for the challenges of touring the Pacific Islands. Of the entertainers that visited Hawai'i, it was the circuses that were most likely to tour beyond Honolulu, and several companies visited Maui and Hawai'i in the course of their stays.

While theatricals, minstrel shows, and circuses were thus the major forms of entertainment, a panoply of touring performers passed through the islands during the 1850s. Whatever the type, the locus of popular entertainment was the Royal Hawaiian Theatre, even though a number of other smaller venues came and went during the 1850s. When the writer Charles Warren Stoddard traveled to Honolulu in the 1870s, he penned an essay about the theatre and its longtime manager, which included the following description:

I looked up: in the midst of beautiful garden stood a quaint old-fashioned building; but for its surroundings I might easily have mistaken it for a primitive, puritanical, New England village meeting-house; long windows, of the kind that slide down into a third of their natural height, were opened to the breeze and great dragon-flies sailed in and out at their leisure...the cozy stage flooded with sunshine...The body of the house was in its normal condition—the pit filled with rude benches; a piano under the foot-lights—it

⁵⁰ Stuart Thayer, *Traveling Showmen: The American Circus before the Civil War* (Detroit: Astley & Ricketts, 1997). In an 1852 advertisement for Foley's circus, it was claimed 1500 would be comfortably seated. *Polynesian*, September 25, 1852.

usually comprised the orchestra; thin partitions, about shoulder high, separated the two ends of the dress-circle, and the spaces were known as boxes. A half-dozen real kings and queens had witnessed the lives and deaths of player-kings and queens from these queer little cubby-holes.⁵¹

While Stoddard's rather romantic description touched on some of the cruder aspects of the theatre's construction, it was resilient enough to remain in for over thirty years.⁵²

Years later the British actor Edmund Leathes offered a much less rosy assessment:

The interior of the theatre was neither clean nor ornate; it was fitted with dress-circle seats, stalls, and pit; the stage meagerly furnished with old scenes and wings, the dinginess of which almost permitted them to serve for interior or exterior, the artists original work being hidden by a sort of fog of dust and dirt.⁵³

The more interesting part of Stoddard's essay, though, dealt not with the building but with the man who managed it for much of this time, Charles Derby. Stoddard's affecting profile disguised the "eccentric" and "distinguished" Derby as "Mr. Proteus" and related his story as follows.⁵⁴

Derby was born in 1826 to a wealthy merchant family from Salem, Massachusetts, but left home at an early age following the death of his father. He was a "highly imaginative dreamer, and romantic in the extreme" and after some time wandering about "he traveled some time with the circus" as an acrobat, but "growing weary of this, and having already have know and become enamored with the Hawaii, he

⁵¹ Charles Warren Stoddard, "The Drama in Dreamland," in *The Island of Tranquil Delights, a South Sea Idyl, and Others* (Boston: H.B. Turner, 1904), 192-94.

⁵² The Royal Hawaiian Theatre was supplanted by the "New Musical Hall" in 1881. *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, January 15, 1881.

⁵³ Edmund Leathes, *An Actor Abroad: Or, Gossip Dramatic, Narrative and Descriptive from the Recollections of an Actor in Australia, New Zealand, the Sandwich Islands, California, Nevada, Central America and New York* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1880), 86.

⁵⁴ Again, in contrast to Stoddard rather elegant description, Leathes remembered Derby as "a funny little man with a peculiar squeaky voice, and a strange habit of sticking his arms out in front of him while he was speaking to anyone, like the fore-legs or arms of a kangaroo," Leathes, 86.

returned to the islands, secured the Royal Hawaiian Theatre and began life anew.”⁵⁵ It was 1858 when he took over the theatre and it flourished under his proactive management. When the theatre was not being used for performances, Derby used it as a gymnasium and while it was in operation, he often appeared on stage in supporting roles, specializing in female impersonation.⁵⁶ He was a flamboyant figure, fond of parties and sports, and his support for native culture and causes earned him the esteem of the royal family. Of course, all of this ensured that the more narrow-minded and pious members of the community despised him, and Derby’s disposition and business often placed him at the center of debates about cultural life in the island kingdom.

The battle was joined during the 1850-51 season as touring entertainers started to arrive in force, and Rowe’s Olympic Circus in particular prompted to controversy. The missionary-orientated *Polynesian* newspaper did its best to ignore the circus and during the course of his impressive eleven-month run in the islands, it devoted barely a dozen lines to Rowe. While it continued to cover theatrical events, the circus was apparently considered beyond the pale. A typical terse notice, for example, announced, ”We are requested to announce that Mr. Rowe gives a benefit to the Oahu Charity School, to-night at his Olympic Circus.”⁵⁷ The more liberal *Honolulu Times* on the other hand, was effusive in its praise, printing a long review after the initial performances that closed with the following remarks:

It may appear exaggerated, but it is nevertheless true, and we give it as out candid opinion that arrival of Mr. Rowe’s company a public benefit, in so far as it has broken the ice and removed the barriers wherewith the prejudice and

⁵⁵ Derby toured the Pacific Coast, Tahiti, Hawai’i, and Australia with Lee & Marshall’s Circus during the 1850s. His particular speciality was an acrobatic routine using elastic cords.

⁵⁶ “Nothing seemed quite impossible to him on the stage; anything from light comedy to eccentric character parts was in his line; the prima donna in burlesque was a favorite assumption; nor did he, out of love of his art, disdain to dance the wench dance in a minstrel show.” Stoddard, 207.

⁵⁷ *Polynesian*, February 25, 1851.

bigotry of certain ascetics had fortified themselves, and that it has converted them from hypochondriacs to partakers of the amenities of life. In a national point of view we firmly believe that exhibitions like this tend more towards civilizing and humanizing a semi-barbarous people than all the most thrilling pulpit eloquence; and though missionary historiographers may ignore the cause yet take credit to themselves for the face, we are not blind to, nor shall we be dumb open, the beneficial effects which similar exhibitions never fail to produce upon rude people.⁵⁸

In a proverbial blast across the missionary bow, the *Times* celebrated the circus for breaking the grip of asceticism on the community and even suggested, in a statement seemingly calculated to incite, that perhaps popular entertainments had more to teach Kanaka Maoli than sermons. The fact that Rowe was doing fabulous business and the royal family were such regular patrons that a private box for their comfort was built had to be particularly galling for the missionaries who styled themselves the cultural authorities of the community.⁵⁹

The presence of the royal family at these entertainments was undoubtedly extremely significant. Whatever the changes in the political system up to this point, most maka'āinana still venerated the royal family, and their presence essentially sanctioned the circus as legitimate. Indeed, the two reigning monarchs in this period, Kamehameha III (1824-1854) and Alexander Liholiho (Kamehameha IV, 1855-1863) were both avid patrons of amusements and nearly every touring entertainer that visited the islands in this period received their favor and, more often than not, an invitation to the palace.⁶⁰ Their general endorsement was important for visiting performers. Even accounting for the avid patronage of sailors, the total potential haole audience was

⁵⁸ *Honolulu Times*, January 29, 1851.

⁵⁹ "Rowe's Olympic Circus," January 14, 1851, Broadside Collectino, Hawaii State Archives.

⁶⁰ Liholiho first developed a taste for Western entertainment during a diplomatic trip through the United States and Europe in 1849-1850. During the course of the journey, he visited the American Museum in New York City, the Drury Lane Theatre in London, and saw Robert-Houdin's magic show in Paris. Liholiho, *The Journal of Prince Alexander Liholiho*.

relatively small (perhaps three to four thousand) so the fact that Rowe stayed in the islands for over eleven months and traveled to both Maui and Hawai'i was clearly owed to the fact that Kanaka Maoli were coming to the circus in force. In a battle that pitted the cultural authority of the ali'i nui against that of the missionaries, the maka'āinana decisively choose to followed the example of their traditional leaders.

The missionaries were not completely powerless, and while Rowe was still ensconced with his circus on the Esplanade in May, the government enacted a law “to provide for the licensing of public shows.” The new law required licenses for all “Public Shows, Theatrical, Equestrian, or other exhibitions of any description” and gave the minister of the interior broad discretion to “regulate such show or exhibition in such manner as he shall think necessary for the preservation of order and the public peace.”⁶¹ It allowed for a fine of up to five hundred dollars and although the law has sometimes been portrayed as an effort to curb and regulate public performances of the hula, the timing suggests that it was actually aimed squarely at Rowe and other visiting entertainers. Although the law does not seem to have been regularly enforced, it did put in place a mechanism for controlling public exhibitions if needed. And it may have deterred some performers from trying. When W. H. Foley arrived the following year with his company, a petition decrying it as “injurious to the community” and some unnamed officials delayed, but ultimately failed to prevent, the circus from opening.⁶² By 1856, when circuses were an established part of the local landscape, the opposition came from a consortium of “merchants and saloon keepers” that petitioned to deny Rowe &

⁶¹ *Laws of His Majesty Kamehameha III, King of the Hawaiian Islands* (Honolulu: Printed by order of the government, 1851), 27.

⁶² *Polynesian*, September 11 and 25, 1852.

Marshall's circus a permit because it cut so largely into their profits.⁶³ Although this again failed to prevent the circus from opening, it illuminated something of the shifting social situation entertainers found in Honolulu as evangelical resistance gave way to concerns about economic competition.

One of the more interesting parts of the licensing law was its expressed goal of preserving public order, an issue that inspired anxiety in both haole and Hawaiian elites during the 1850s. There was a fairly sharp cultural divide between the respectable and waterfront communities in Honolulu. In describing the latter's environs, Gavan Daws writes,

It was generally understood that the harbor was not place for a lady. The lower classes-natives, common born part-whites, and white workingmen and sailors-liked the waterfront just the same, even if by definition no ladies were to be found there. At least there were bright lights and entertainments: a night at the variety theater or the circus, conversations in coffee shops, promenades on crowded streets, and dancing.⁶⁴

Places of amusement were an important part of waterfront life, and the crowds that gathered there were made up of at times unruly mix of locals and sailors imbued with drink.

The Royal Hawaiian Theatre was a place where this group and respectable society came together and, at times, clashed. Theatres traditionally had a reputation for drunk and rowdy behavior. The level of disorder obviously varied given the type and quality of entertainment on offer, but the advertised presence of police on bills of this era indicate that deportment was an issue. Before Mrs. Ray, the first professional actress to grace the stage, debuted the *Honolulu Times* published the following notice:

⁶³ *Polynesian*, May 17 and June 17, 1856.

⁶⁴ Daws, *Shoal of Time*, 165.

We need scarcely remind the Theatre-going public (the ‘Pities’ particularly,) that now that we are to have a REAL lady upon the stage, attention must be paid to decorum and order, and we recommend to the manager, adoption of stringent measures to prevent the admission of drunken or disorderly persons—not that we would insinuate any special dereliction of duty on his part heretofore—but impress the matter more forcibly on his mind.⁶⁵

Though Mrs. Ray’s debut went off without trouble, not everyone was as lucky and local papers often express frustration with the pit for everything from loud conversation during performances to drunken fisticuffs.

In an interview with longtime resident Hugh McIntyre published years later in the *Honolulu Advertiser*, he recalled an 1855 performance by Edwin Booth at the Royal Hawaiian Theatre. After noting that, “the house was crowded and whaleman formed a goodly portion of the audience,” he painted a rowdy picture of the evening:

Let it be a pretty girl doing a song and dance or the serio-comic in abbreviated skirts there will be a sudden shower of money on the stage. It was the same as the Booth engagement but it was not always with a shower of gold dust; sometimes fruit took the place of money and it was with good intent. During an intermission Chinese vendors went through the audience with their wares so the sailors could get their supply for the next act.⁶⁶

What all of this revealed were growing divisions within the “theatre-going public” and the efforts by even the more liberal sector of the Honolulu community to manage and control what the *Polynesian* derisively referred to as the “vulgar mobile.”⁶⁷ These concerns were magnified by the events of November 1852, when a whaler’s riot raged through city after the death of a drunken sailor at the hands of police. The rioting sailors burned down the police station and effectively took over Honolulu for several days

⁶⁵ Mr. and Mrs. Ray left New Zealand for California upon hearing of the gold discoveries and took over the theatre after the New York Serenaders. Peter Downes, *Shadows on the Stage: Theatre in New Zealand: The First 70 Years* (Dunedin: J. McIndoe, 1975); *Honolulu Times*, February 27, 1850.

⁶⁶ *Honolulu Advertiser*, 1911, quoted in Carr, 245.

⁶⁷ *Polynesian*, December 18, 1858.

before order was restored.⁶⁸ The episode served as a reminder of the relative weakness of the government and local elites in the face of broad unrest and with additional concerns about filibusterers, a more robust militia was quickly fitted up.⁶⁹ Although neither of these matters bore directly on the issue of popular entertainment, it undoubtedly bred caution about the potential for trouble when large crowds gathered for a circus or other shows.

As the volume and variety of entertainers passing through the islands increased, it also revealed splits about within respectable society. Pierre Bourdieu has theorized that judgments of taste are related to social position and much of the debate in Honolulu took on this color.⁷⁰ During the fall of 1858, a star actress named Annette Ince performed for a season at the Royal Hawaiian Theatre, but proved unable to draw anything but slim houses in the face of competition from the California Minstrels, who occupied a large tent opposite the Commercial Hotel.⁷¹ The editor of the *Polynesian* complained,

When night after night, we only notice a half dozen or less of the ‘beauty and fashion’ of the city in the front row or the reserved seats; and when, were it no for the seafaring, transient population, all the encouragement given by the citizens proper would not pay for the lights—we would be apt to look upon our community as a practical, plodding, probably pious community, did we not so often notice how negro-caricatures and India-rubber-men, whatever is bizarre and outré, draw away from the Theatre not only the Pit, the vulgar mobile, but also the Boxes, the aristocratic fixtures and conventional indices of ton and taste.⁷²

⁶⁸ *Polynesian*, November 13 and 20, 1852; Briton Cooper Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do for Me: The American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994): 173-92.

⁶⁹ Andrew F. Rolle, “California Filibustering and the Hawaiian Kingdom,” *The Pacific Historical Review* 19, no. 3 (1950): 251-63; Daws, 137-49.

⁷⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). For a variation of this argument grounded more firmly in nineteenth-century U.S. cultural history, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

⁷¹ On Ince, see Koon, 91.

⁷² *Polynesian*, December 18, 1858

This article was simultaneously an attack on the lower-class of sailors, laborers, and Kanaka Maoli derisively labeled the “vulgar mobile” and an indictment of ostensibly more respectable society in Honolulu for its defective aesthetic judgment.⁷³

Whatever the internal struggles among the theatre-going public, a more pressing issue was the very future of popular entertainment in Honolulu, which was again called into question in 1857 as missionaries mounted a renewed push. Although the ostensible target were the “dancing houses” along the waterfront, it morphed into a broader-based effort to ban the hula that in turn had a chilling effect on touring entertainers.⁷⁴ While the Royal Hawaiian Theatre was not officially shut down, between March and November no professionals performed there, though there were a smattering of local concerts and benefits at a few other venues.

Towards the end of a long and dull season, the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* weighed in with an editorial on the state of affairs that began with the following premise:

This being the first season for many years that Honolulu has not had a theatre, circus, or both, nor public dance houses, and as those things have been looked upon and cried down by many as unmitigated sources of evil and sinks of perdition, it would perhaps be instructive to learn what improvement, if any, has been effected in the morality of the town by their absence or suppression.

The piece then cited statistics demonstrating that the result was actually an increase in crime and expressed skepticism that “moral evils” could be corrected by “legislative enactments.” In conclusion it was noted,

It may be that the outward perception of an existing evil has been rendered less obtrusive and glaring, but as far as the patient is concerned, it seems like

⁷³ On the continuing debates about taste and entertainment in Honolulu, see Sammie Choy, “The Opera House and the Orpheum: Elite and Popular Theater in Early 20th-Century Hawai’i,” *Hawaiian Journal of History* 36 (2002): 79-103.

⁷⁴ Noenoe K. Silva, “He Kanawai E Ho’opau I Na Hula Kuolo Hawai’i: The Political Economy of Banning the Hula” *Hawaiian Journal of History* 34 (2000): 30-45.

to us curing an eruption of the skin by driving the disease inwards. And even as far as outward appearances go, it is a question of how far the crowds at a circus, theatre, or a public dance house, on particular premises and under the special surveillance of police, were more obnoxious than the nightly throng, noise and rowdyism which have characterized some of the principal throughfares this season.⁷⁵

Arguing that the repressive efforts of the missionaries had actually backfired, the editorial outlined a surprisingly astute analysis of the social role of popular amusements. It also highlighted the way in which commercial amusements, for all of the controversy they had created in Honolulu, were become an accepted part of the local landscape, despite persistent opposition of some missionaries.

As it turned out, the seemingly volatile situation was resolved of its own accord the following week when the arrival of the “Risley Troupe” was “hailed with pleasure” in Honolulu. Professor Richard Risley was a world-famous acrobat whose impeccable credentials essentially foreclosed any objections from those who wished to preserve the ban on popular amusements. The troupe consisted of Risley, two apprentices (listed as “sons”), and an Italian contortionist billed as Mons. Devani, the “India Rubber Man.” An autograph book that included signatures from several American presidents and the crowned heads of Europe was proffered to the public and invitations to the inaugural performance were extended to the royal family and other prominent citizens. The reviews were rapturous in praising the “superior character of the performances” and noted that Risley had “exhibited before one of the most select audiences that ever assembled to witness a performance of any kind in Honolulu.”⁷⁶ A satin souvenir playbill in the Harvard Theatre Collection for a “special command” performance for Kamehameha IV and Queen Emma also serves as a good indicator of just how popular and successful

⁷⁵ *Polynesian*, November 21, 1857.

⁷⁶ *Polynesian*, November 28 and December 3, 1857; *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, December 10, 1857.

Risley's visit to Honolulu was, particularly after the prolonged lull. The troupe remained in Honolulu for six weeks, and their fortuitous arrival and sensational success essentially swept away any possibility that popular entertainments could or should be discouraged in the Hawaiian Kingdom.

Colonialism's Popular Culture

Perhaps the clearest point that emerges from an overview of touring entertainers in Honolulu during the 1850s was their obvious popularity with Kanaka Maoli of all classes. It was also clear that American missionaries, merchants, and government officials were pursuing complex and variable agendas that cumulatively could be described as colonialism. The question thus hinges on how these two developments intersected and what role American entertainers played in an ongoing colonial project in the Hawaiian Islands. How did the cultural interactions and negotiations at the heart of these performances play out and what, ultimately, was their significance?

One of the most obvious dynamics was the way that Kanaka Maoli embraced touring entertainers as a rejection of missionary teachings and influence. The clearest example of this dynamic was Alexander Liholiho who came into power as King Kamehameha IV in 1855. In a letter to a friend, longtime adviser G. P. Judd observed that: "The King, educated by the Mission, most of all things dislikes the Mission. Having been compelled to be good when a boy, he is determined not to be good as a man."⁷⁷ In this context, his well-known love of commercial entertainments was a richly symbolic rebuff of the teachings of the Protestant missionaries. Every time the city was plastered with bills announcing a command performance or visitors like the Backus Minstrels were

⁷⁷ Gerrit P. Judd to Rufus Anderson, May 1, 1861, quoted in Kuykendall, vol. 2, 35.

invited to party at the palace, Liholiho undermined missionary influence in the islands. A playbill in the Hawai'i State Archives indicates that he even took the stage at one point, appearing in a stage adaption of Sir Walter Scott's poem, "The Lady of the Lake," at the Royal Hawaiian Theatre with other members of the royal family and a group of local amateur and professional actors.⁷⁸ Given the esteem with which the ali'i nui were held, this sort of very public flouting of missionary teachings undoubtedly eroded their value for many maka'āinana.

Of course, from a certain point of view the idea of the Hawaiian royal family performing in a play by a famous Scottish poet was itself an example of colonialism at work. A common conceit of colonizers, though, was to accept superficial markers as evidence of cultural assimilation or conversion as the triumph of Christianity in the islands supposed by many missionaries demonstrated. Clearly, Liholiho and other ali'i who attended the "Chiefs' Children's School" were taught American values and practices at the expense of traditional ones, but as Liholiho's nights out drinking at Honolulu's varied places of amusement showed, things did not always turn out as planned.

More importantly, the ostensible American colonizers articulated a variety of discourses about the putative role and desirability and dangers of popular entertainment. When the *Honolulu Times* welcomed Rowe's circus in the belief that "exhibitions like this tend more towards civilizing and humanizing a semi-barbarous people than all the most thrilling pulpit eloquence," it was expressing a competing discourse, one that held that amusements could enlighten Kanaka Maoli. Whether or not it was necessarily true, nineteenth-century touring performers often presented their entertainments as edifying and culturally enriching—and this certainly dovetailed well with the colonial project.

⁷⁸ "The Lady of the Lake," July 7, [1853], Broadside Collection, Hawai'i State Archives.

American entertainment, in whatever form, was seen as civilizing in a way that the presumably debased native forms were not. In this context, Kanaka Maoli patronage and enjoyment of shows at the Royal Hawaiian Theatre could be framed as an indicator of colonial progress and modernization. In recalling his performance there, Charles Mathews observed,

The whole thing was like nothing but a midsummer night's dream. And was it nothing to see a pit full of Kanakas, black, brown, and whitey-brown (till lately cannibals), showing their white teeth, grinning and enjoying 'Platter v. Clatter' as much as a few years ago they would have enjoyed the roasting of a missionary or the baking of a baby? It was certainly a page in one's life never to be forgotten.⁷⁹

The obvious racism and exaggeration in the passage notwithstanding, Mathews does clearly articulate the idea that the ability of Kanaka Maoli to appreciate the humor of "Platter v. Clatter" represented a rapid leap of progress.

While appreciation of Western-style entertainment was deemed a marker of progress, the appropriation of a distinctly American cultural form, namely blackface minstrelsy, engendered much more ambivalent reactions. Although Kanaka Maoli were undoubtedly reworking minstrel songs and dances in vernacular contexts at sea and in the islands long before its commercial debut, it was not until 1862 that what seems to have been the first formal Hawaiian minstrel show was staged in Honolulu. The show was a syncretic mix of indigenous hula and introduced minstrel material, and it was hosted by Charles Derby, the enterprising manager of the Royal Hawaiian Theatre. Something of the kind had of course already occurred as far back as 1855 at Kahili, when Kamehameha IV hosted the Backus Minstrels and a hula troupe for an evening of singing and dancing. Much like the theatre he owned and operated, Derby himself served mediator between

⁷⁹ Charles James Mathews, *The Life of Charles James Mathews, Chiefly Autobiographical, with Selections from His Correspondence and Speeches*, ed. Charles Dickens (London: Macmillan, 1879), 228.

cultures in Honolulu. Given that he had performed professionally as a minstrel and spoke Hawaiian well, it seems likely that Derby played a significant role in organizing the “Hawaiian Minstrels” entertainment. Although the editor did not see the performance, the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* harshly condemned the event in an article entitled “Shameful Exhibition,” which read in part,

On Saturday evening last an exhibition of the *hula* dance was given at the Theatre—the first of the kind ever publicly attempted here. After the dancing, some amateur minstrels sang, who are said to have performed very well. But the exhibition of the licentious native dance was about as beastly a performance as could be got up. We pity those who are so far lost to reason and humanity as to resort to such a public exhibition for a livelihood, and trust the public will frown upon every attempt to popularize performances which no man or woman can witness without shame, or permit their children to witness.⁸⁰

While commercial hula performances had clearly long been part of life along the waterfront, apparently its presence on the stage at the Royal Hawaiian Theatre could not be countenanced.⁸¹ Interestingly enough, despite the hullabaloo, the Hawaiian Minstrels performed again the following week, though the paper noted that “We are told that no Hula will accompany the performance.”⁸² Minstrelsy it seems was seen as a preferable alternative to hula as the century wore on and “Keaka Nika,” which roughly translated means “black theatre,” flourished.⁸³ Kanaka Maoli thus consumed and in some cases adapted blackface minstrelsy for their own purposes, and it positioned them relatively ambivalent space in terms of an American racial imaginary that fixated on a binary distinction between black and white. Given the dearth of evidence it seems impossible to evaluate the precise terms by which Kanaka Maoli adopted minstrelsy, but clearly the

⁸⁰ *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, September 25, 1862.

⁸¹ On the evolving form of hula exhibitions in the islands see Barrère, et. al.

⁸² *Polynesian*, October 4, 1862.

⁸³ On later iterations of Hawaiian minstrelsy in the 1870s and 1880s, see Carr, 277-305.

syncretic cultural form that emerged was a negotiation more than an imposition.

Another key aspect of American entertainers in the islands centers on the question of their role in merging culture and capitalism. As the earlier quoted passage from Elizabeth Buck observed, part of the colonial process embedded in Western forms of entertainment lay in how they changed traditional cultural relationships into market relations.⁸⁴ The locus of these debates in a Hawaiian context has been the hula, which existed in both traditionally communal and commercial forms in the 1850s. In 1862, the indefatigable Charles Derby elected to take a hula troupe to California for a tour.⁸⁵ An extant playbill from the venture was headlined “KANAKA! DANCING GIRLS” with “HULA!HULA!” and “Ladies Prohibited” inscribed just underneath, which was something clearly intended to titillate.⁸⁶ What the troupe actually delivered was a very traditional program of chants and dancing, culminating with a hula ki’i or puppet show.

The playbill in a sense encapsulated the disjuncture between the traditional practice of the hula and its uneasy fit into a new commercial context, the results of which were more or less disastrous. The women, for one, dressed modestly and the vitriolic response this engendered suggested how disruptive the presence of real Hawaiians could be to an American imagination already saturated with sexualized understandings of the hula. In an article reprinted in the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, the troupe travails in

⁸⁴ Buck argues that the hula, which was a communal cultural form, was gradually transformed into a debased commercial commodity. Yet this kind of absolutist stance ignores both the extent of a relatively unbroken tradition of hula continued in the islands despite the spread of capitalism and the way in which the commercialization created opportunities for Kanaka Maolis. Buck, 106-7; Amy K. Stillman "Globalizing Hula," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 31, (1999): 57-66.

⁸⁵ The group apparently consisted of Derby and five Hawaiians. Although the playbill lists two “wahines or dancing girls” and five “kanaka drummers and chanters,” the shipping list in San Francisco lists only five names other than Derby. It’s possible the others traveled separately or were already in California. The names on the passenger list were: Kaamoku, Kanaan, Newa, Kerheua and wife, Naehinihini. *Daily Evening Bulletin*, March 25, 1862.

⁸⁶ “KANAKA! DANCING GIRLS,” n.d., Broadside Collection, Hawai’i State Archives.

Grass Valley, California were detailed:

The performance...came off to an audience tolerably large; and, in accordance with announcement posters, ladies were prohibited and “boys” predominated. The performance is pronounced extremely ludicrous, but not as obscene as some spectators anticipated to find it; hence, perhaps, the dissatisfaction of many who demanded money back. Eggs were thrown...the crowd became pacified upon receiving the following liberal treat from the manager of the show—Three kegs beer, one keg of brandy, one keg of sherry, five dozen bottles of crook, eight boxes of cigars, and twenty dollars in cash—the latter being distributed judiciously.⁸⁷

Derby later related to Stoddard tales about “the gypsy life they led in the interior of the state” and the abuse they received from “the civilized whites, who like wild beasts fell upon them, and finally succeeded in demoralizing and disbanding the troupe.”⁸⁸ The failure of the tour only temporarily forestalled the commercialization of the mainland, although a combination of sailors and tourists willing to pay for the privilege ensured that the process continued apace in the islands.⁸⁹ The introduction of Western entertainment engendered a transformation in cultural practices that turned performances into a commodities and audiences into consumers, but this process was never totalizing nor irredeemable. While the most destructive impact of these changes would not be realized until later in the nineteenth century, Kanaka Maoli engagements with commercial popular culture during this time reflected an ongoing attempt to grapple with its implications.

Another dynamic that merits mention was the way that touring entertainers helped haole residents accept the Hawaiian Kingdom as “home.” While many visitors and residents prior to the 1840s were transitory figures, after that time it became clear that many foreigners who lived in Honolulu were intent on staying, and in a sense the

⁸⁷ *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, September 11, 1862.

⁸⁸ Stoddard, 208.

⁸⁹ Adria L. Imada, “Hawaiians on Tour: Hula Circuits through the American Empire” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2004): 111-49.

establishment of the Royal Hawaiian Theatre and other institutions was a reflection of this newfound sense of permanence. The ability to see a Shakespearean play or Verdi opera and enjoy a star performer in the islands helped turn the city into something more settled and familiar. When the great Irish opera diva Catherine Hayes sang in Honolulu on her way from San Francisco to Australia, it prompted the following reverie from in the *Polynesian*:

Although situated in mid ocean two-thousand miles from our nearest neighbors recent events clearly indicate that the Sandwich Islands are not altogether without the pale of civilization, or of those influences of refinement so abundantly enjoyed in the great world, where they have hitherto been monopolized. Commerce, religion, and letters have opened the way for other influences...But who, in this wildest dreams of progression would have dared to predict twenty years ago that our streets would be placarded with the name of an artist who has delighted the fastidious tasted of European Courts, and the equally appreciating assemblages of the more modern Republic of America? And yet as impossible as it might have appeared, the citizens of Honolulu have enjoyed the privilege during the past week. Our eyes have seen the seen the name Catherine Hayes, and our ears have heard her charming voice.⁹⁰

The American Consul David L. Gregg wrote in his diary that, “The performance was very entertaining, and seemed to afford entire satisfaction to the whole audience...The house was worth about \$900, as something like 300 tickets were sold at \$3.00 each.”

Although Hayes only performed a single concert, it was clearly a very profitable one and her presence was portrayed as marker of the Hawaiian Kingdom’s progress and served as a kind of cultural refreshment for haole society, which could comfort themselves with the best of their old world in what was becoming their new home. As happened elsewhere, touring entertainers thus served as a kind of imperial thread connecting together disparate colonial publics to their metropolitan roots.

⁹⁰ *Polynesian*, July 29, 1854; Gregg, 172-73.

Conclusion

If in one scholar's estimation the 1860s marked the beginning of a "Golden Age of Entertainment" in Honolulu, it was largely due to the fact that supporters had managed the cultural struggles over the previous years so successfully.⁹¹ Honolulu continued to play an important role as a stop-over point for entertainers on the Pacific circuit as the Hawaiian Kingdom's domestic politics and foreign relations were reshaped by the rise of "King Sugar" and William Seward's renewed efforts to push American empire across the Pacific.⁹² This chapter underscores the ways in which those touring entertainers illuminated ongoing struggles for political and cultural authority in the islands among its various constituent groups and contributed to an ongoing, if not always forthrightly acknowledged, U.S. colonial project in Hawai'i. But what the minstrels, circuses, and other performers also revealed was a more complex relationship between the putative colonized and colonizer than many historians have assumed.

Simply put, U.S. colonialism was not monolithic, but proceeded through a variety of different channels and agents with often competing agendas. As the public debates over the proper place and role of popular amusements demonstrated, there was little consensus amongst even the haole community about the direction of the island kingdom. For Kanaka Maoli, who variously enjoyed, appropriated and resisted an encroaching Western culture, the struggle over popular entertainment became one dimension of an ongoing effort maintain the integrity of Hawaiian culture and Hawaiian sovereignty in the face of U.S. imperialism. Colonialism's popular culture was not something simply

⁹¹ Thelma Coile Brown, "A History of the Theater in Honolulu During the Reign of Kamehameha V, 1863-1872" (Master's thesis, University of Hawaii, 1942).

⁹² Ernest N. Paolino, *The Foundations of the American Empire; William Henry Seward and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

imposed, but was contested and mediated by a shifting power relations between a diverse set of Kanaka Maoli and haole actors.

The performers that passed through the islands during the 1850s tread across culturally complex terrain, and the history of popular amusements in Honolulu provides a good example of the way in which local developments intersected with the broader transnational touring circuit. For itinerant entertainers, Honolulu was just another city, albeit a pleasant one, in which they could perform, and hopefully profit. But their performances often provoked debates and had ramifications long after they had departed. And as the often contentious cultural politics that surround the contemporary Hawaiian sovereignty movement demonstrate, the complicated agency and effects of colonialism's popular culture continues to this day.

Chapter Four

Around the World with the General Tom Thumb Company

On December 18, 1869, General Tom Thumb and his suite arrived in Hong Kong aboard the American steamer *Venus* after a transpacific voyage from San Francisco to Japan, where the party offered the initial overseas performances of a planned world tour. The *China Mail* predicted that the company of diminutive entertainers would “astonish the natives of the Asiatic nations,” and opined that it was “unnecessary to draw attention to the intended exhibition, which is familiar in name at least to all our readers and will, we doubt not, be extensively patronized.” The paper was correct on both counts as the party proved the toast of the city and delighted both Chinese and European audiences in the course of their weeklong stay in the city.¹ That Tom Thumb needed no introduction was a testament to his popularity, and the success of this visit to the rather remote colonial enclave of Hong Kong was an impressive confirmation of both his drawing power and the increasingly global reach of the American culture industry. As new cultural markets took shape around the Pacific in the 1860s beyond the reliably profitable Australian colonies, American performers duly expanded their itineraries and the largely desultory efforts of earlier troupers gradually gave way to a more organized and extensive entertainment circuit. The 1869 tour by Tom Thumb’s company took advantage

¹ *China Mail* (Hong Kong), December 20, 22, and 24, 1869.

of these changes and heralded the development of a global cultural economy in which the United States assumed a more and more prominent role.

This chapter focuses on General Tom Thumb as a representative figure in the development of the mid-nineteenth century U.S. culture industry and a harbinger of its expansion overseas, particularly in terms of the Pacific market. Ultimately, the genesis of the world tour rested on parallel developments at home and abroad. In this vein, the first part of the chapter looks at how Tom Thumb's early career and instrumental association with P. T. Barnum intersected with the growth and commercialization of the entertainment industry in the United States and its gradual expansion overseas. The success of cultural exports was predicated upon a robust domestic market, which allowed entrepreneurs like Barnum to develop the strategies and accumulate the capital that made the American amusement business such a dynamic force around the globe. With his unique endowment and under Barnum's able management, Tom Thumb became one of the most prominent and profitable entertainers of the nineteenth century and his success illustrates some of the broad changes in the realm of commercial popular culture that paved the way for the eventual tour around the world.

The second part of the chapter turns to developments in the Pacific and the progressively more expansive and organized cultural circuit that evolved during the 1860s. This circuit was part and parcel of the larger process of cultural interpenetration that intensified as the disparate peoples of the Pacific were drawn into a more integrated relationship with the rest of the world via Western imperialism, trade, technology, and

migration.² The regularization of steamship service, the proliferation of newspapers, and the rise of powerful theatrical entrepreneurs such as Tom Maguire in San Francisco and George Coppin in Melbourne facilitated show business activity and made touring the Pacific an increasingly attractive option for American entertainers. While Charles Backus, W. H. Foley, and many other early entertainers remained active in the region, tours by luminaries such as the Scottish magician Professor Anderson, the American actor Joseph Jefferson, and John Wilson's substantial "Great World Circus" demonstrated the ongoing maturation of the Pacific circuit. One of the more interesting characters of this era was Richard Risley Carlisle or Professor Risley as he was known, an American acrobat and circus manager who settled briefly in Japan before organizing a troupe of Japanese performers for a hugely successful overseas tour in 1867. While Risley's extraordinary mobility was characteristic of many American performers, his story also shows that the cultural traffic in the Pacific was more than simply a one-way street. All of this activity underscored how the expanding scope and improved organization of the circuit enriched entertainers during the 1860s and brought the potential of the Pacific market to the attention of the American culture industry.

The apogee of these intertwined historical and cultural developments was the profitable Pacific leg of Tom Thumb's world tour, which departed from New York City in June 1869 and concluded there almost exactly three years later. Soon after their heavily publicized tour, manager Sylvester Bleeker published a detailed, if somewhat

² On the notion of increasing global "interconnectedness" during the latter half of the nineteenth century, see C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

sensationalized, account of the company's time abroad.³ The tour began with a journey west along the newly opened transcontinental railroad, and the party spent several months on the Pacific Coast before embarking on a transpacific steamer for Japan and China. After visits to major Southeast Asian ports like Singapore and Penang, the company undertook an extended and remunerative eight-month-long tour of the Australian colonies. By early 1871, the group was in India and then skirted through the Near East before traveling through the recently opened Suez Canal to Europe. The company ended with a triumphant year-long farewell tour through the British Isles and by the time General Tom Thumb entered New York harbor on June 22, 1872, the party had, by Bleeker's tally, traveled over 50,000 miles.⁴ While the direct proceeds from the tour were considerable, the publicity it generated was invaluable and confirmed Tom Thumb's status as one of the era's most celebrated and successful American entertainers.

Tom Thumb was not the first professional performer to circle the globe. As the previous chapter demonstrated, by the mid-nineteenth century there was a vibrant mix of itinerant entertainers circulating internationally, albeit most often in a very ad hoc manner. The lure of the California and Victoria gold rushes during the 1850s ensured that numerous European and American performers traveled around the world in the course of their careers. What separated Tom Thumb from these contemporaries was not only the unprecedented scope and speed of the tour, but also the planning and publicity that accompanied it. The one real antecedent was a "Grand Globe Tour" from 1858 to 1862 embarked upon by John Henry Anderson, a famous Scottish magician known as "The

³ Though Bleeker's pamphlet was a piece of calculated publicity and some of the anecdotes and observations were undoubtedly fanciful, I have found it to be remarkably accurate in terms of the essential particulars of the tour. Sylvester Bleeker, *Gen. Tom Thumb's Three Years' Tour Around the World: Accompanied by His Wife, Lavinia Warren Stratton, Commodore Nutt, Miss Minnie Warren, and Party* (New York: S. Booth, 1872).

⁴ Bleeker, 143.

Great Wizard of the North.” Much like Barnum, Anderson was a tireless self-promoter who well understood the value of advertising and the venture was a calculated attempt to generate publicity and exploit the lucrative opportunities opened up by the gold rushes.

The proposed world tour was boldly advertised in the British theatrical newspaper *The Era*, and Anderson stayed in the public eye back home through regular dispatches chronicling his adventures published by the *Aberdeen Herald*.⁵ The first leg of the tour in Australia proved profitable, and during the six-month stint in California that followed Anderson reportedly banked an impressive sum of twenty-five thousand dollars. Heady with success, Anderson gave a “Valedictory to California” in which he announced plans for a global entertainment enterprise headquartered in New York City that might serve as an international exchange for performers with branch establishments in London and San Francisco. Although the outbreak of war and Anderson’s associated financial troubles derailed these ambitious plans, they stand as an indicator of the way in which forward-thinking cultural entrepreneurs were beginning to grasp the global dimensions of commercial entertainment.⁶ This larger process will be explored as we shall see, but Anderson’s “Grand Globe Tour” essentially created the template that Tom Thumb’s company would successfully exploit a decade later.

By the time of his tour around the world, General Tom Thumb was a veteran performer of over twenty-five years and one of the most famous Americans of his time. Born Charles Sherwood Stratton on January 4, 1838, he was raised in a very modest household in Bridgeport, Connecticut by his father Sherwood, a carpenter by trade, and

⁵ *The Era* (London), September 20, 1857; Constance Pole Bayer, *The Great Wizard of the North, John Henry Anderson* (Watertown, MA: R. Goulet, 1990).

⁶ Milbourne Christopher, *The Illustrated History of Magic* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1973), 124; *Daily Alta California*, May 5, 1860; Charles Pecor, *The Magician on the American Stage: 1752-1874* (Washington: Emerson and West, 1977), 205.

his mother Cynthia. Although the three other Stratton children were of normal size, Charlie (as he was known to his family) stopped growing at the age of six months due to a pituitary gland problem. Significantly, he had a form proportionate dwarfism, which meant that although of extremely small stature, he otherwise looked like a “normal” person.⁷ In late 1842, just before his fifth birthday, Charlie was introduced to P.T. Barnum, who reported that he was “not two feet in height, and weighed less than sixteen pounds.”⁸ Enamored with the “bright-eyed little fellow” and alert to his money-making potential, Barnum quickly prepped young Charlie for the stage, endowed him with the moniker “General Tom Thumb,” and debuted his “dwarf experiment” at the American Museum in early December 1842.⁹

From the start, Tom Thumb’s remarkable smallness and cheery disposition endeared him to the public, and after a profitable if unspectacular year in the United States, Barnum and his protégé left for a sensational tour of Europe that catapulted them

⁷ In contrast to this the most common form of dwarfism is achondroplasia, a bone growth disorder that results in disproportionately short limbs. Stratton’s rare condition is now medically known as ateliotic dwarfism or panhypopituitarism and it was caused by a defective recessive gene: Victor A. McKusick and David L. Rimoin, “General Tom Thumb and Other Midgets,” *Scientific America*, July 1967, 103-110; Joan Ablon, *Little People in America: The Social Dimension of Dwarfism* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1984).

⁸ Reliable information about Stratton’s size is difficult to come by and for obvious reasons Barnum is not the most trustworthy source, but early publicity and sources indicate that through the 1840s, at least, he was around twenty-five inches tall and fifteen pounds in weight. He did grow slowly over the course of his career and experienced something of a growth spurt during his later years, which often happens in cases of ateliotic dwarfism. A prompt script dated to the late 1850s at the New York Historical Society describes him as being thirty-one inches tall and weighing twenty-five pounds. According to the *New York Times* obituary, his height and weight at the time of his death were forty inches and seventy-five pounds respectively. For Barnum’s account of their initial encounter, see *The Life of P. T. Barnum* (New York City: Redfield, 1855), 243-44. On Tom Thumb’s physical development, see A. H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 123-28 and 367n39; *New York Times*, July 16, 1883.

⁹ Although often described as a “midget,” the use of that particular term is both historically inaccurate and offensive to many in the short-statured community today. The Oxford English Dictionary (New Edition) credits Harriet Beecher Stowe with first using the term to describe “a person who is exceptionally small” in *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (1854), but it was not commonly used to describe a dwarf in the amusement business until the 1880s. Barnum and other contemporaries invariably described Tom Thumb as a “dwarf” during his lifetime. Moreover, the Little People of America, an organization that provides support for those with dwarfism, notes that the term “has fallen into disfavor” because of its “freak show” associations and considers it “unacceptable today” (<http://www.lpaonline.org>). As such, the term “dwarf” is preferred here throughout.

both to lasting fame and fortune. The plaudits garnered abroad ensured a triumphant return home in early 1847 and thereafter a combination of relentless touring and steady publicity ensured that Tom Thumb maintained a prominent and profitable place in the evolving American entertainment industry. As Barnum turned to other pursuits he left management duties to a succession of trusted associates, but still toured with his flagship attraction whenever wanderlust or financial necessity demanded it. Tom Thumb's 1863 wedding to fellow dwarf Lavinia Warren created a sensation and the spate of publicity reinvigorated his career and ultimately paved the way for the world tour. Though he performed less often as he grew progressively older and larger, he remained active in semi-retirement during the 1870s notwithstanding his failing health. By all accounts Barnum and Stratton were close friends despite occasional tensions and their remunerative association continued until the latter's untimely death in 1883. Tom Thumb's passing was mourned across the country, and obituaries celebrated the "prettiness, brightness, and grace" of the diminutive performer that had become an American icon.¹⁰

In person, in print, and in images Tom Thumb permeated mid-nineteenth-century American culture, but his exceptional career has nevertheless escaped the notice of most historians. The best study of his life and significance to date can be found within A. H. Saxon's meticulous biography of P. T. Barnum, although there are several popular biographical works of varying quality.¹¹ In addition, Neil Harris offers some helpful if

¹⁰ "Tom Thumb," *Harpers Weekly*, July 28, 1883; *New York Sun*, July 20, 1883.

¹¹ Although it contains a great deal of fictionalized dialogue, Alice Curtis Desmond's biography is based on solid historical research and remains a useful introduction: *Barnum Presents General Tom Thumb* (New York: Macmillan, 1954). Mertie L. Romaine, who knew Lavinia Warren (Mrs. Tom Thumb), and collected Tom Thumb material for the Middleborough Historical Society, also published a short book that warrants mention for its inclusion of rare photographs, objects, and letters that provide a glimpse into his personal and married life. *General Tom Thumb and His Lady* (Taunton, MA; William S. Sullwold, 1976).

limited commentary on Tom Thumb in his own notable study of Barnum, and a well-researched account of the initial European tour by Raymund Fitzsimons remains invaluable.¹² While all of these works are important, the overall historiography regarding Tom Thumb continues to be both underdeveloped and inconsistent. The major hindrances have been twofold: an ongoing inclination to dismiss him as a mere curiosity unworthy of serious study and an overreliance on Barnum's assorted accounts of Stratton's career.¹³ Though the former tendency has diminished in recent years, particularly with the expanding literature on so-called "freakery," the latter issue remains a problem inasmuch as it effectively effaces Stratton's agency and uncritically recites Barnum's at times questionable narrative of events.¹⁴ Despite a very limited amount of extant personal

¹² In a footnote, Harris freely admits that, there is "room for more work on this extraordinarily popular nineteenth-century phenomenon." *Humbug: the Art of P. T. Barnum*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 309n.14. Raymund Fitzsimons, *Barnum in London* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970). For some useful context see also, Alvin Goldfarb, "Gigantic and Miniscule Actors on the Nineteenth-Century American Stage," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 10, no. 2 (1976): 267-79.

¹³ To cite just one recent example, the seemingly comprehensive three-volume *Cambridge History of the American Theatre* edited by Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (1998-2001) only mentions Tom Thumb once in passing. Barnum's shifty writings offer several somewhat different versions of the Tom Thumb story. The earliest of these derived from letters he wrote to the *New York Atlas* known collectively as the *European Correspondence* during the initial British and Continental tour (1844-46), which have been edited and republished by James W. Cook along with some useful promotional material: *The Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005). Barnum's 1855 autobiography offered a fuller account of the same period: *Life of Barnum*, 243-295. Finally, his sprawling *Struggles and Triumphs* was first published in 1869 and subsequently had a complicated bibliographic history as both abridged and expanded versions appeared until Barnum's death in 1891. This first edition of *Struggles and Triumphs* enlarged the account of his early years with Tom Thumb and included updated material on his doings, most notably a substantial section on his 1863 wedding to Lavinia Warren. Unless otherwise noted, all references to this text refer to the version edited by George S. Bryan, which Barnum biographer A. H. Saxon regards as the best modern edition. *Struggles and Triumphs, or the Life of Barnum, Written by Himself*, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927).

¹⁴ The notion of "freakery" derives from an important collection edited by Rosemarie Garland Thomson that has done much to advance the academic study of "abnormal" attractions: *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). For the seminal study in the field, see Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). For older but still useful studies in this tradition, see Frederick Drimmer, *Very Special People; the Struggles, Loves, and Triumphs of Human Oddities* (New York: Amjon Publishers, 1973) and Leslie A. Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978). From the more recent wave of work, see Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird & Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before*

documents, the wealth of promotional material and widespread newspaper coverage that Tom Thumb generated has afforded opportunities for developing a more nuanced understanding of his success.¹⁵ In this vein, Michael Chemers' fine analyses of Stratton's public reception undermine prejudicial cultural distinctions about his performances and demonstrate that contemporaries were able to look beyond his size and at his abilities, even if many historians have not followed suit.¹⁶ In sum, although Tom Thumb's prominence has generally been acknowledged, specific studies of his career are sorely lacking and he stands as one of the most underappreciated figures of nineteenth-century American cultural history.

Before attempting a fuller assessment of Stratton's career though, two areas of contention need to be cleared up. The first of these centers on whether or not Tom Thumb should be considered a "freak" and, moreover, what exactly such a perspective offers analytically. The burgeoning field of what some of its practitioners term "Freak Studies" focuses on "the intentional performance of constructed abnormality as entertainment"

Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Benjamin Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum's America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Linda Frost, *Never One Nation: Freaks, Savages, and Whiteness in U.S. Popular Culture, 1850-1877* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Marlene Tromp, ed., *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Saxon notes that Stratton only rarely put pen to paper and what few writings exist he describes as "unrevealing (130)." On the other hand, public fascination has ensured that many of Tom Thumb's material possessions have been preserved in collections and museums around the country. For a description of these various artifacts, which include miniature coaches, clothes, furniture, pipes, and other souvenirs, see Romaine, 71-82.

¹⁶ Michael Chemers, "On the Boards of Brobdignag: Performing Tom Thumb," *New England Theatre Journal* 12 (2001): 79-104; "Jumpin' Tom Thumb: Charles Stratton Onstage at the American Museum," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 31, no. 2 (2004): 16-27; *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

and, following Robert Bogdan, broadly understands the freak as a social construction.¹⁷ As Bogdan points out “being extremely tall is a matter of physiology—being a giant involves something more,” and his work highlighted how the “freak” was not an inherent condition but one manufactured through particular practices and “modes of presentation.”¹⁸ While this framework and Bogdan’s explication of the “aggrandized” mode of presentation offers an important avenue for understanding Tom Thumb’s success, the overall orientation of freak studies creates problems in other respects. For one, freaks were usually understood as “others” that engendered responses ranging from revulsion to fascination, but the crux of the performance rested on a notion of fundamental difference that reinforced the normalcy of the audience’s cultural self vis-à-vis the staged abnormality of the freak. The presentation of Tom Thumb was rather different and centered on demonstrating his propriety and, excepting his small stature, essential similarity with the audience. Held up as a “perfect man in miniature” and buoyed by Stratton’s charisma, “crowds identified with him, rather than against him.”¹⁹ Of course part of his appeal was the way Tom Thumb personified a juxtaposition of the familiar and the strange, and his size was always a major part of his success.²⁰ But his unique performance and exceptional popularity defy easy categorization and, as Michael

¹⁷ On Freak Studies, see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s foreword in Tromp and the special editions on “Freakery” from the *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 3-4 (2005). Quote is from Chemers’s introduction to the latter collection, “Staging Stigma: A Freak Studies Manifesto.”

¹⁸ Bogdan, 3, 20.

¹⁹ Harris, 49.

²⁰ A perceptive notice after his death captured this peculiar dynamic, lauding Tom Thumb’s “ability to check us for a moment in our humdrum lines of thought and shock us into taking new standards for our measurement, not only of the inches of men, but of their minds. We are too apt to think that all men are run in the same mould, and that anything odd in the physical development makes a man a monster. Tom Thumb was so different in body, yet so truly one with men in mind that he forced them to broaden their conceptions and reduce their prejudices. It was by giving people this new thought that he gained his footing in their recollections and their sympathies.” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, July 17, 1883.

Chemers eloquently puts it, “the label of ‘freak’ disintegrates when it touches Stratton.”²¹ Given all of this, the term “freak” will be eschewed here insomuch as it seems to obscure as much as it reveals, and it seems important to recognize Tom Thumb first and foremost as a performer.²²

The other major issue centers on the question of exploitation. Given that he was regularly performing by the tender age of five, it seems clear that both Barnum and his parents were to some extent taking advantage of Charles. Although he was ostensibly well cared for, Lavinia Warren revealed in her autobiography that later in life he complained that he “never had any childhood, any boy-life” because of the constant work, and his wife ruefully observed that the only education he ever received “fitted him to fill the role he was expected to play.”²³ Much of this debate thus revolves around how much credit (or blame) Barnum deserves for manufacturing “General Tom Thumb” as an attraction, and how the process affected Charles Stratton as a person. Historian David Gerber, for one, sees him as a “tragic” figure and “a prisoner of conditions over which he, as a dwarf, had little control and that both profited and humiliated him.”²⁴ Most other scholars have either found the issue unproblematic or skirted it, though whether from discomfort or lack of evidence remains unclear.

²¹ Chemers, *Staging Stigma*, 55.

²² It seems important to note in this context that neither Barnum nor any of the voluminous promotional material surrounding him described Tom Thumb as a “freak,” although newspapers would occasionally characterize him as a “freak of nature.” It was not until later in the nineteenth century that “freaks” and “freak shows” became part of show business parlance.

²³ In the course of researching her biography of Stratton, Alice Curtis Desmond discovered a manuscript written by M. Lavinia Magri (Mrs. Tom Thumb) detailing her life. Although the “autobiography” borrowed extensively from Bleeker’s narrative of the tour around the world and cribbed from various other sources, the original sections offer some insight into the couple’s private life. Desmond donated the manuscript to the New York Historical Society and it was subsequently edited and published by A. H. Saxon as *The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979), 115-16.

²⁴ David A. Gerber, “The ‘Careers’ of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 51.

My own sense is that while Stratton's public persona and private life were obviously intertwined, he was much more than a lucrative but unhappy creation of Barnum. Unfortunately, the promotional orientation of available historical sources and the reliance on Barnum's writings lead to a focus on "Tom Thumb" the performer in a way that effaces Stratton's agency in the endeavor and generally ignores the life and interests he developed beyond the stage.²⁵ Beyond such personal matters, the financial particulars show that despite some initially unequal terms, by 1845 the Strattons were splitting the proceeds in partnership with Barnum, who counted on clearing an impressive \$25,000 that year.²⁶ From a purely financial perspective, it seems difficult to argue that Tom Thumb was exploited when Stratton, his parents, and Barnum made fortunes through their association.²⁷ Overall, Tom Thumb's career is perhaps best understood as a

²⁵ A. H. Saxon, perhaps the most informed scholar on both principals, essentially punts on the question by citing the lack of material about Stratton's personal life. He suggests that "it is virtually impossible to distinguish the real Charles Stratton from the General Tom Thumb of Barnum's creation," and goes on to ask, "Was 'Tom Thumb' an early example of an almost totally manufactured personality – a personality that, taking hold when he was only four years old, prevented the real Charles Stratton from developing an individuality of his own? An interesting problem for a psychologists, perhaps, and possibly for some future biographer." Saxon, 130.

²⁶ The Strattons were paid \$3 a week during Charlie's first stint at the American Museum. Realizing the money-making potential of his new attraction, Barnum quickly secured a year-long contract that paid the family \$7 a week plus expenses in late December 1842, though this was later increased to \$25 a week (Thanks to Fred Pfening, III for providing me with a copy of the original December 22, 1842 contract from his collection). The 1844 contract covering the initial year of the European tour was for \$50 a week plus expenses, but Barnum still had the best of it, for after Tom Thumb's famous visit to Buckingham Palace in March, receipts at the Egyptian Hall in London averaged \$500 a day. All that money apparently strained relations between Barnum and the Strattons because although they received equal terms in 1845, Barnum petulantly ridiculed Sherwood and Cynthia in his public and private correspondence: Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*; Saxon, 140-45. On the 1845 contract and Barnum's hostility, see his January 30, 1845 letter to Moses Kimball reprinted in *Selected Letters of P. T. Barnum*, ed. A. H. Saxon (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 30-31.

²⁷ Without condoning Stratton's situation, it should be noted that most nineteenth-century performers worked under rather exploitative conditions. It does seem telling though that when Barnum went bankrupt due to some bad investments in 1856, it was largely through the efforts of Tom Thumb, who undertook a return tour through Europe with Barnum, that he was able to get back on his feet. The precise terms of their financial relationship varied over time and remain somewhat obscure due to the few extant records. A ledger for "General Tom Thumb & Co." in the Hertzberg Circus Collection kept by manager George Wells for the 1860-61 season indicates that Barnum was receiving forty percent of the profits while the remainder went to Stratton, who also retained all of the proceeds from the sale of the pamphlets and other souvenirs sold at shows. While it is hard to say for certain, it seems likely that this mid-career arrangement was about

joint venture of Stratton and Barnum whose benefits were shared but whose elusive costs were borne solely by the performer.

Contemporary concerns about terminology and ethics aside, Tom Thumb's incontrovertible success reshaped the entertainment business in the United States, and the technologies and techniques that launched Stratton to stardom also fueled the expansion of the American culture industry during the mid-nineteenth century. The trajectory of Tom Thumb's career thus offers a useful example through which to grasp ongoing changes in the production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture in the United States and around the world.

General Tom Thumb and the Antebellum Culture Industry

On the evening of July 11, 1843, the Whig politician Philip Hone took his daughter to the American Museum to see New York's newest sensation, despite confessing "a repugnance to see human monsters, abortions, and distortions." As he entered the exhibition room, Tom Thumb sauntered up, extended a hand, and cheerfully greeted him with a, "How d'ye do, Mr. Hone?" Hone was instantly charmed and gushed in his diary that Tom Thumb was a "handsome, well-formed, and well-proportioned little gentlemen, lively, agreeable, sprightly, and talkative" and pronounced him "the greatest *little* mortal who has ever been exhibited."²⁸ That a patrician such as Hone was enjoying this sort of entertainment was notable and underscored Stratton's auspicious arrival at a time when popular amusements were gradually overcoming the problem of respectability.

par for the course. In 1876, Barnum resigned his interest in the General Tom Thumb Company, but the two continued to collaborate as the General toured with the debut edition of Barnum & Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth" in 1881. *Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*, 166-67. "Ledger book of General Tom Thumb & Co.," 1860, Box 3A44, Tom Thumb Collection, Hertzberg Circus Collection, Witte Museum.

²⁸ Philip Hone, *The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851*, ed. Allan Nevins, vol. 2 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1927), 664.

Although the rise of the entertainment business in the United States is often traced to Barnum's acquisition of the American Museum in December 1841, it was unquestionably a development that started much earlier in the century, and one that numerous scholars have related to changes engendered by the ongoing "market revolution" in the United States.²⁹ Even so, Barnum's American Museum does serve as a useful marker for the broadening acceptance of commercial amusements as a respectable and desirable form of entertainment, and the enterprising efforts of cultural entrepreneurs to capitalize on this shift.³⁰ By offering a wide array of attractions at a cheap price and advertising them in a way that combined an emphasis on the propriety and educational value of amusements with his more typical sensationalism, Barnum cut across class and cultural lines to stimulate broad public interest and attract the widest possible audience to his institution.³¹

The promotional scheme that Barnum used with General Tom Thumb echoed the mix of seamliness and sensationalism that proved so successful with the American Museum. Although Barnum employed a variety of techniques to "puff" his performer, perhaps the best distillation of the strategy was a promotional pamphlet rather ponderously entitled "Sketch of the life, personal appearance, character, and manners, of Charles S. Stratton, the American man in miniature, known as General Tom Thumb," which was first printed in 1844 and thereafter went through dozens of editions over the

²⁹ On the show trade in the United States before 1840, see Lhamon, *Raising Cain*; Cook, *Arts of Deception*; Paul E. Johnson, *Sam Patch, the Famous Jumper* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*; Peter Buckley, "To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820-1860" (PhD diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1984); Faye E. Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

³⁰ Bruce A. McConachie, "Museum Theatre and the Problem of Respectability for Mid-Century Urban Americans," in *The American Stage*, ed. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 65-80.

³¹ On Barnum's cultivation of "respectable" patronage, whether middle or working-class, see Adams, 75-115.

course of his career.³² The primary aim of the pamphlet was to overcome the reservations of those like Philip Hone who found the established Western tradition of exhibiting *lusus naturae* or human curiosities distasteful. In this vein, the text dwells at length on Tom Thumb's physical appearance, noting that "unlike many dwarfs," the General was "exquisitely proportioned," "of the proper symmetry," and "beautifully developed." The pamphlet also expounded on his intelligence in an attempt to rebut the prevailing view that dwarfs were mentally deficient and included numerous testimonies attesting to Tom Thumb's vitality and "gentlemanly" disposition. Another notable feature was that much of the pamphlet was devoted to describing the audiences that came to see him, whether it was enumerating their size and deportment or simply listing the many prominent people that he had regaled. Particular attention was paid to Tom Thumb's popularity with "ladies," some of whom were purportedly so enchanted by his "extremely winning manners" and "strange beauty" that they became "daily visitors."³³ By establishing the respectability of the audience and underscoring Tom Thumb's polite appearance and

³² The first edition, which was actually entitled "An Account of the Life..." was printed in London by J. Mitchell in April 1844 and alludes to the fact that since it was in type, Tom Thumb had appeared before Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace as several newspaper accounts were hastily tacked on. A somewhat revised edition and the first bearing the title "Sketch of the Life" appeared two years later (London: T. Brettell, 1846) and featured the same text but included a fuller the account of his audiences with Queen Victoria and some of Tom Thumb's adventures on the continent. The first American edition of the pamphlet was simply a copy of this later British version (New York: Van Borden and Amerman, 1847) with an additional eight pages of lyrics to songs Tom Thumb performed. Among the many variations printed around this time were two translations, one in French (Paris: De Wittersheum, 1845) and the other in Spanish (Nueva Orleans: La Patria, 1848), which were sold on the Continental (1845-46) and Caribbean (1848) tours. During the 1850s, the text was altered slightly every few years to account for Stratton's development and to update the press notices at the back, but the text was essentially unchanged until his marriage to Lavinia Warren in 1863. At that point, a longer version of the "Sketch of the Life" pamphlet was produced (New York: Wynkoop and Hallenbeck, 1863) that abridged the early text in favor of an extended account and illustrations of their courtship and marriage. This version was reprinted several times (1868, 1869, 1874), but never again updated.

³³ Michael Chemers detects a sexual undercurrent to this adulation and postulates that his lady admirers saw Tom Thumb as "an object of erotic desire." The pamphlet at one point suggestively compares him to Don Juan and boasts that the General had kissed over a million women in the course of his career. Chemers, *Staging Stigma*, 42.

manners, the pamphlet assuaged public concern about its propriety, and Barnum successfully attracted crowds of unusual size and diversity to the entertainments.³⁴

The “Sketch of the Life” pamphlet was just one part of a much broader promotional effort surrounding Tom Thumb, one that took full advantage of the multifold opportunities engendered by the nineteenth-century print revolution. One outgrowth of this burgeoning of print culture was the rise of the popular press, which roughly paralleled Barnum’s early career in show business.³⁵ Newspapers offered an easy way to promote attractions to a wide public, and Barnum garnered coverage by employing a creative combination of bombast and guile that amused some and angered others, but nearly always brought in the crowds.³⁶ The early press on Tom Thumb was a mix of superlative-laden advertising and friendly news reports from editors charmed by the charismatic prodigy or bought off by Barnum. Following his successful debut at the American Museum and the attendant publicity, enthusiastic if often exaggerated accounts of Tom Thumb’s doings and diminutiveness appeared in newspapers around the country. As the popular press transformed the kind of news that was reported and delivered to an ever-wider audience, those like Tom Thumb that captured the public imagination quickly

³⁴ All quotes from the first American edition of “Sketch of the Life” (New York: Van Borden and Amerman, 1847). Of course, Barnum’s promotional efforts did not convince everyone, particularly those of a more patrician bent. A letter from the American historian Francis Parkman to an acquaintance belittled a performance in London with a description that read in part: “the little wretch was singing Yankee Doodle with a voice like a smothered mouse.” Parkman also expressed disdain at the “great crowd of cockneys and gentlemen and ladies were contemplating his evolutions. Parkman’s letter quoted in Henry Dwight Sedgwick, *Francis Parkman* (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1904), 111-12.

³⁵ On the print revolution and the popular press, see James L. Crouthamel, *Bennett's New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1989); Zboray, *A Fictive People*; Andie Tucher, *Froth & Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); William Huntzicker, *The Popular Press, 1833-1865* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999); Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 15-59.

³⁶ For an analysis of some of Barnum’s earliest and most controversial promotional schemes, see Cook, *Arts of Deception*.

achieved an unprecedented level of notoriety, one that ultimately translated into profits at the ticket counter.

Another dimension of the flourishing print culture that was instrumental to Tom Thumb's success were technological advances that enabled the mass reproduction of images. These cheap methods of illustration, lithography, and eventually photography were part and parcel of the expanding market economy and led to an explosion of visual material that historian Daniel Boorstin usefully labels the "Graphic Revolution."³⁸ In his correspondence with Moses Kimball leading up to Tom Thumb's debut at the Boston Museum, Barnum exhorted that "you must *drive* business when you get him, & to assist in that, I shall send you some *lithographs* to distribute about your whole city, especially in all public show windows – hotels, P. Office, &c.," and went on to note that "I have practiced [this] strong in Philadelphia, and I think with *great effect*."³⁹ While illustrated posters in show business were not an innovation of Barnum's, he does seem to have understood better than most other showman that profligate spending on advertising paid dividends at the box office.⁴⁰ Although lithographs were a relatively new technology, the steam press meant that traditional woodblock engravings and drawings could also be reproduced on a mass scale, and images of Tom Thumb multiplied and circulated via

³⁸ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

³⁹ Barnum to Moses Kimball, February 5, 1843, in *Selected Letters*, 15. On the proliferation of advertising in public spaces, see David M. Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁴⁰ Barnum once quipped that: "without printer's ink, I should have been no bigger than Tom Thumb" (*Struggles and Triumphs*, 1892 edition, 753). For some fine examples of Tom Thumb lithographs produced by Nathaniel Currier (and later in partnership with James Merritt Ives) at different stages of his career, see Cook, *The Colossal P. T. Barnum Reader*, 158, 167, and 178. Amongst the voluminous promotional material in the Ransom Center at the University of Texas are several interesting lithographs produced in Paris and Berlin during the European tours that underscore the popularity of the practice. The 1860-61 touring ledger shows manager George Wells ordering thousands of lithographs at a cost of .15 cents each as the tour progressed through New England and New York, even though Tom Thumb was undoubtedly a household name at that point in his career. "Ledger book of General Tom Thumb & Co.," 1860, Box 3A44, Tom Thumb Collection, Hertzberg Circus Collection, Witte Museum.

advertisements and in the pages of popular illustrated magazines. These sorts of pictures almost invariably traded on his small stature and often portrayed him in contrast to various “normal” sized objects or otherwise attempted to both amuse and advertise. Although numerous daguerreotypes of Tom Thumb were also made in the 1840s, it was not until the carte-de-visite craze of the late 1850s that photographic images of him were widely available.⁴¹ Overall, the public was much more likely to encounter images in print, and their sheer volume made Tom Thumb an instantly recognizable icon of the early American culture industry.

While the plethora of press, advertising, and images certainly bolstered business, arguably the most significant event in the careers of both Barnum and Tom Thumb was their March 1844 visit to Buckingham Palace. One technique Barnum regularly employed to drum up publicity was to call on prominent citizens with Tom Thumb in tow and thereby associate him with fashionable society. The logical culmination of this practice was a royal audience, and after enlisting the aid of the American Minister to Great Britain Edward Everett and charming Charles Murray, the Master of the Queen’s household, Tom Thumb received a royal command to entertain the court. The evening was an unqualified success as Queen Victoria was delighted with the “little dwarf” and later recorded in her journal that Tom Thumb was “very nice, lively & funny, dancing & singing wonderfully.”⁴² Barnum was almost beside himself with excitement, which must

⁴¹ For some excellent reproductions of early print and photographic images of General Tom Thumb, see Kunhardt et. al., *P.T. Barnum: America's Greatest Showman* (New York: Knopf, 1995). On developments in photography, see Floyd Reinhart and Marion Reinhart, *The American Daguerreotype* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981); William Culp Darrah, *Cartes de Visite in Nineteenth[sic] Century Photography* (Gettysburg: W.C. Darrah, 1981); William Welling, *Photography in America: The Formative Years, 1839-1900* (New York: Crowell, 1977); Barbara McCandless, "The Portrait Studio and the Celebrity: Promoting the Art," in Martha A. Sandweiss, ed., *Photography in Nineteenth Century America* (New York and Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1991), 48-75.

⁴² Queen Victoria’s journal quoted in Saxon, 132.

have become even more pronounced when he was given the opportunity to shape the official record of the evening in the “Court Journal.”⁴³ The account that emerged portrayed Tom Thumb as a pleasing and insouciant figure that enchanted the royal party and included several mirthful anecdotes about the evening, most famously his mock battle with the Queen’s poodle.⁴⁴ The success of the evening led to several subsequent royal audiences, but the first visit alone was the publicity coup of a lifetime and the press on both sides of the Atlantic gave the story wide circulation.⁴⁵ The immediate effect was of course to legitimate General Tom Thumb as a reputable attraction, and Barnum reported that receipts at the Egyptian Hall averaged a rather fabulous total of five hundred dollars a day, but there were also more lasting and significant legacies for both men.

While he was a successful if morally questionable showman up to this point in time, the visit to the court enhanced Barnum’s standing and essentially validated his amusement enterprises in the eyes of the public on both sides of the Atlantic. Barnum reaped an incredible amount of money and publicity from the event, but perhaps the most important thing he took from it was a newfound sense of legitimacy. For Tom Thumb, the audience with the Queen was a critical part of his transformation into a celebrity.

⁴³ “I was anxious that the ‘Court Journal’ of the ensuing day should contain more than a mere line in relation to the General’s interview with the Queen, and, on inquiry, I learned that the gentleman who had charge of that portion of the daily papers was then in the Palace. He was sent for by my solicitation, and promptly acceded to my request for such a notice as would attract attention. He even generously desired me to give him an outline of what I sought, and I was pleased to see, afterwards, that he had inserted my notice *verbatim*.” *Life of Barnum*, 259-60.

⁴⁴ Beyond the “Court Journal,” Barnum’s earliest account of these events were his May 5 and June 9 letters from the *European Correspondence*. Cook, *The Colossal P. T. Barnum Reader*, 62-63 and 65-68. Though expanded upon, the episode was not significantly altered in subsequent retellings: *Life of Barnum* (255-61) and *Struggles and Triumphs* (250-57).

⁴⁵ The American papers printed the story as soon as the first steamers arrived from Liverpool: *The Daily Atlas* (Boston), April 22, 1844; *The New York Herald*, April 23, 1844. New York’s leading theatrical and sporting weekly, *The Spirit of the Times*, exulted that “the little fellow, his transatlantic admirers will be glad to learn, has excited in the modern Babylon, amongst the nobility and gentry of the first city of the world, a degree of interest and of wonder, unequalled, if possible, in his own country, and which has even penetrated into the palaces of royalty” and proudly noted that he was taking in over £480 a week: April 27, 1844.

Numerous historians have pointed out that during the mid-nineteenth century there was a shift in the way the American public related to its most famous citizens and, indeed, exactly who these people were.⁴⁷ As a more democratic and commercial public sphere took shape in the United States, it created opportunities for new kinds of people to achieve an unprecedented level of renown in relatively rapid fashion. Unsurprisingly, impresarios and entertainers proved particularly adept at exploiting the print and graphic revolutions to further their careers by “selling” themselves.

In this vein, scholars have called attention to the way in which the term “celebrity” went from describing a personal condition to the designation of a particular type a person during the 1840s, a development that encompasses two novel ideas.⁴⁸ The first centers on Daniel Boorstin’s oft-quoted definition of a celebrity as “a person who is known for his well-knownness,” a notion that aptly captures the way that fame in this period was decoupled from a traditional basis in heredity or accomplishment. The second was the rise of the “celebrity-as-commodity” in which an individual’s fame became an asset that could be used to generate money.⁴⁹ With the pamphlets, carte-de-visites, and other souvenirs Tom Thumb quite literally sold himself at shows and the celebrity status he enjoyed ensured that he drew on this reputation even if the quality of his performance

⁴⁷ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame & Its History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Thomas Nelson Baker, *Sentiment & Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001); Renée M. Sentilles, *Performing Menken: Adah Isaacs Menken and the Birth of American Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David Haven Blake, *Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁴⁸ The etymology of “celebrity” to designate a person remains somewhat unclear. The OED and Boorstin credit Emerson writing of “the celebrities of wealth and fashion” in 1848, though Peter Buckley finds it in earlier references to the Fanny Elssler tours of 1840-42. Bluford Adams and others have tended to regard Jenny Lind as the archetypical modern celebrity. Boorstin, 57; Buckley, 501; Adams, 41-74. The first reference I have found that refers to Tom Thumb as a celebrity (as opposed to having celebrity) is an 1845 report about his doings in France. *Daily Atlas*, May 1, 1845.

⁴⁹ On celebrity-as-commodity in particular, see Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London: Sage, 2004); Rojek, 101-41.

declined. While the desires for fame and fortune were of course not new, the “celebrity” as such was a modern phenomenon created and sustained by a public that accorded entertainers like Tom Thumb a heretofore uncommon level of renown, respect, and remuneration.

Leo Braudy’s *Frenzy of Renown* perceptively observes that during General Tom Thumb’s initial British and Continental tour, “Barnum taught the world about the fame of America as a nation as well as how fame was being created in America.”⁵⁰ Barnum refined the strategies and technologies that he had developed in the United States, and his efforts abroad ensured that Tom Thumb became his most well-known and successful promotion (other than perhaps himself). The Barnum-driven publicity from his audience with the Queen was a critical part of this process, and Barnum furthered the campaign with some new wrinkles, most notably with a miniature coach for Tom Thumb that he accurately predicted would “*kill the public dead*. They can’t survive it! It will be the greatest hit in the universe, see if it ain’t!”⁵¹ The promotional campaign that accompanied Tom Thumb’s career progressed through ever-wider publics, from the local in New York City to the national with his 1843 circuit through the United States and then expanding to a transatlantic audience with the European and Caribbean tours. In this sense, the 1869 tour around the world was a culmination of long-developing cultural and economic forces, and its success showed that General Tom Thumb was a global celebrity whose extraordinary reach and appeal demonstrated the extent to which the U.S. culture industry had developed over the course of Barnum’s career.

⁵⁰ Braudy, 502.

⁵¹ Though the *Sketch of the Life* (1847) pamphlet states that the carriage was presented by Queen Victoria, Saxon notes that it was actually paid for by Barnum: Saxon, 133; Barnum to Moses Kimball, August 18, 1844, in *Selected Letters*, 30.

While the promotional apparatus that accompanied Tom Thumb played a considerable role in his ascendancy, it has also overshadowed his real ability as a performer. Over and over, Barnum and other showmen tried to replicate Stratton's success with other dwarfs, but none of them even approached a comparable level of success. Despite this, many commentators have continued to exclusively credit Barnum exclusively and portray Tom Thumb as little more than a puppet bereft of any kind of agency or talent. Such scholarship largely ignores his reception, which shows that many contemporary critics respected his ability as a performer.⁵² One a reviewer in a contemporary French newspaper, for example, described Tom Thumb as "looking at you with a knowing and almost mocking air," which suggested a degree of reflexivity in Stratton's performance that has too often escaped notice. This blindness to his skill also hampers efforts to explain his appeal beyond generalized suppositions about his size or the effectiveness of his publicity. The conventional explanation for Tom Thumb's popularity rests on the way he blurred the boundaries between young and old and rendered the familiar strange with his diminutive appearance and "cute" antics.⁵³ Such a perspective mitigates his obvious charisma and locates his appeal solely in his physical appearance, offers little explanation why audiences responded so favorably to him, and understates his charisma as a performer.

⁵² Beyond his levees, Tom Thumb received many plaudits for his acting ability. While in Paris, he appeared at the Vaudeville Theatre in a play called *Petit Poucet* and was esteemed enough to be elected a member of the French Dramatic Society. On their return to London, Barnum's friend Albert Smith adapted the play for an English audience, and *Hop o' my Thumb* was a hit on both sides of the Atlantic. In commenting on his performance in that vehicle, Joseph Ireland observed that Tom Thumb: "displayed considerable dramatic ability, and played with a great deal of spirit, appearing to fully enter into and enjoy the humor of his parts." *Records of the New York Stage, from 1750 to 1860* (New York: T. H. Morrell, 1866), 528. For more on Stratton's quality as an actor, see Chemers, "On the Boards in Brobdignag" and "Jumpin' Tom Thumb."

⁵³ Lori Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple" in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 185-203.

Tom Thumb's entertainments were crafted performances, and though the format evolved over the years, many of the acts remained constant.⁵⁴ A host (originally referred to as a "tutor," later simply "Doctor") facilitated the show and introduced the various acts while engaging in a running dialogue with Tom Thumb. Perhaps the most famous routines were his impersonations of historical figures like Napoleon and Frederick the Great and his characterizations of assorted national types—an American tar, an Oxford student, a Highlander, etc.⁵⁵ These were often accompanied by a song or dance, which were otherwise interspersed throughout the program.⁵⁶ Although reviewers often praised the General's agility in dancing a polka or the highland fling, his voice was apparently much less pleasing to most. Despite this, he featured a wide repertoire of songs that included minstrel tunes like "Lucy Long" and "Dandy Jim," sentimental fare such as "Life on the Ocean Wave," several operatic selections, and a number of specialties written for or about him. The performance incorporated numerous miniature props ranging from furniture to a tiny snuff box that underscored his small size. There was also regular interaction with the audience, as children were brought on stage by way of contrast, and kisses were famously and liberally delivered to the ladies at hand. Tom Thumb hawked his pamphlets and photographs and otherwise engaged the audience with his quick wit as the show was brought to a close. The final act in these early years was a display of "Grecian statuary" in which he donned a tight body suit that highlighted his proportional physique and appeared in a variety of poses portraying Cupid, Samson,

⁵⁴ In Barnum's continuing efforts to make the dwarf respectable, he usually referred to Tom Thumb's show as a "levee," which was a formal reception associated with royal courts.

⁵⁵ The possibilities were almost limitless and at one time or another, he also appeared as a Yankee, an English Fox Hunter, a French marquis, a Minuteman, a "dandy," and a Bowery B'hoj. He even appeared in drag to sing a popular tune, "My Mary Ann."

⁵⁶ Although a pianist was employed for accompaniment, Stratton eventually learned to play both piano and violin and at least on occasion played the latter in his performances. His violin can be found in the Hertzberg Circus Collection at the Witte Museum.

Hercules, and a variety of other classical figures.⁵⁷ In sum, Tom Thumb performed what was in effect an hour and a half long solo stage show.

One final aspect of Tom Thumb's career that merits fleshing out was the way it intersected with national cultural politics, particularly between the United States and Britain. Relations between the two nations soured in the 1840s amidst an upsurge in American nationalism and the perception that the British simply did not respect their American "cousins." The vitriolic reaction to Charles Dickens' disparaging characterizations in *American Notes* (1842) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44) and the rivalry between actors Edwin Forrest and William Macready that climaxed in the Astor Place Riot (1849) were but two cultural markers of these ongoing tensions. In this charged context, General Tom Thumb's achievements were celebrated with pride in the United States by those that saw this as a victory over British conceit.⁵⁸ Reports that he rather impudently sang "Yankee Doodle" at court and informed Victoria that, "We have no Queens in America!" (something "very unmusical to the ears of crowned heads") were clearly relished by the American papers.⁵⁹ Despite opposition in some quarters, both his enthusiasts and detractors seemed to agree that with all of his confidence and enterprise, Tom Thumb was an apt emblem of the Yankee nation. As Raymund Fitzsimmons wryly observed, "for better or for worse," the triumphant tour signaled that "the

⁵⁷ So-called "living statuary" or "poses plastiques" were related to the tableaux vivant tradition and became a popular form of entertainment in the mid-nineteenth century. Inasmuch as such displays tended to focus on the female body, they were at times controversial: Jack W. McCullough, *Living Pictures on the New York Stage* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983); Bernard Sobel, *A Pictorial History of Burlesque* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1956).

⁵⁸ A number of U.S. entertainers were "coining money" in England around this time. Perhaps the most conspicuous Americans were the minstrels, who, building upon T. D. Rice's earlier success, were taking England by storm. The Hutchinson Family Singers, actress Charlotte Cushman, and Professor Risley, amongst others, were also popular attractions in England during the 1840s.

⁵⁹ *North American and Daily Advertiser*, May 20, 1844.

Americanisation of Britain had begun.”⁶⁰ With the Yankee motto “Go ahead!” emblazoned on his carriage, Tom Thumb became a symbol of the nascent power of the United States in general and a harbinger of the spread of the American brand of commercial popular culture abroad.

Tom Thumb’s career highlights the growth of the culture industry in the United States. An array of social and economic developments ranging from urbanization to innovations in transportation and communication allowed for the emergence of a more systemic and commercialized entertainment business during the 1840s. In this context, Tom Thumb catapulted himself to the forefront of this emergent transatlantic entertainment business and attained a remarkable level of fame and fortune that paved the way for his tour around the world twenty years later. The delay essentially stemmed from the fact that U.S. entertainers who headed abroad, particularly a star like Tom Thumb, required a certain degree of infrastructure (transportation, venues, printing, etc.) in order to operate efficiently and profitably. As we have seen, the Pacific was more or less undiscovered country until 1850, and although a number of entertainers prospered on the Pacific circuit over the subsequent decade, it was not until the late 1860s that conditions there demanded the attention of the larger U.S. culture industry, which boomed in the years after the Civil War. Barnum was still at the center of this business and ever alert for new opportunities so it hardly seems surprising that he was contemplating the rich possibilities that the Pacific held for Tom Thumb, who remained his flagship attraction. But before getting to the genesis of the world tour, it is necessary to chart some of the changes that made the Pacific market an increasingly attractive one for Barnum and other American impresarios.

⁶⁰ Fitzsimmons, 164.

The Pacific Circuit in the 1860s

The initial wave of U.S. entertainers touring the Pacific crested in the mid-1850s, but as the gold boom waned the pace of show business activity slackened. Nevertheless, the amusement business remained strong and the growing European and U.S. presence in the Pacific allowed a more organized market for touring professionals to take shape by the 1860s. An ever-expanding steamship network and the proliferation of printing businesses and theatrical venues eased some of the problems that earlier performers had faced. Melbourne and San Francisco flourished, consolidating their position as the dominant poles of the Pacific circuit, while new opportunities also opened up further afield in Asian ports like Hong Kong, Yokohama, and Singapore. In short, a number of interrelated developments allowed the Pacific circuit to grow both more integrated and extensive during the 1860s, a process that can perhaps best be illustrated by looking at the experiences of particular entertainers.

One of the reasons new arrivals tapered off stemmed from the fact that so many of the pioneering performers elected to stay abroad and crowded the field. This was particularly true with regards to minstrelsy, as the good fortune of the early touring troupes led many of their members to remain overseas. An amalgamated group of these veterans calling themselves the San Francisco Minstrels were a force for over a decade and in 1861 became the first professional troupe to tour through New Zealand.⁶¹ Other minstrels tried their luck in different lines. J. E. Kitts, a basso with the New York

⁶¹ This particular troupe was particularly big and often toured with a dozen or more performers, though in typical fashion there was a lot of turnover through the years. The stars of this party were Otto Burbank, Dave Carson, and G.W. Demerest. During a characteristically successful month-long stand at Sydney's Royal Hotel in 1860, the party claimed they sold 43,500 tickets. *Bell's Life in Sydney*, December 12, 1857; *Otago Witness* (Dunedin), June 22, 1861; *Argus* (Melbourne), September 17, 1860.

Serenaders, found a new career in opera, first as a vocalist and later as a business manager. J. C. Rainer worked as an agent in Australia for other visiting attractions and eventually found success as a manager of traveling dioramas. The story was much the same for the circus. W. H. Foley toured a mixed repertoire of circuses, menageries, and variety shows on the trans-Tasman circuit for over twenty-five years. Many of the performers that J. A. Rowe brought down for his amphitheatre in Melbourne stayed active in the Australian circus business. Charles Derby, an ex-circus performer, took over management of the Royal Hawaiian Theatre in 1854 and, owing to its strategic location, became an important player in the evolving circuit. The overall point to appreciate here is that there was a surfeit of talent spread around the Pacific as many of the early wave of U.S. entertainers established themselves abroad. Although their connections to the United States in some cases facilitated the flow of U.S. entertainers to the Pacific, it also made for a much more competitive environment for newcomers.

The experiences of J. A. Rowe and Charles Backus were instructive in this regard as both men made very successful Pacific tours, but found conditions much harsher on their return visits. Rowe made a fortune with his circus in Melbourne in the early 1850s and retired to a ranch outside of Los Angeles, but whether out of restlessness or financial necessity he brought a new and much larger circus across the Pacific in 1858. Although the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* described it as “the most talented circus company that ever visited the Pacific shores,” the show foundered when it arrived in Australia. In a letter back home, Rowe wrote that, “things is very different here to what they wore [sic] when I left this country” and the circus suffered from high costs and cheaper competition.

Although a reorganized show limped along for a while, it suffered heavy losses and by the time Rowe returned to San Francisco in 1861, he was broke.⁶⁶

Charles Backus followed his profitable tour of Australia with the Backus Minstrels (1855-56) with two separate and much less successful transpacific ventures. The first of these involved a tour of Australia with his wife Julia, a Master Backus (his son?), and a popular actress and dancer known as Miss Albertine, whose “indecent” dress stirred up some controversy in Melbourne. The show featured minstrel routines from Backus mixed in with singing and dancing from the ladies, and it met with indifferent reviews. Backus jettisoned Miss Albertine and teamed up with Billy Worrell, a celebrated American clown that had left Rowe’s struggling show, but “the life was too rough and the experiences too hard” and after a few months he returned to San Francisco “stone broke.”⁶⁷ In 1862, Backus organized a minstrel troupe for a tour of China that included Joe Taylor, whose memoirs offer a unique account of life as a touring minstrel. After a short stopover in Honolulu, the troupe opened at a barroom in Shanghai and, according to Taylor at least, did very good business. In Hong Kong, they performed at the Victoria Theatre, but unspecified troubles caused the troupe to disband. Despite a seemingly promising start, the abortive tour showed the precarious nature of such ventures and it was the last by Backus abroad, something no doubt buttressed by a near-death collision at

⁶⁶ In gold-mad Melbourne, Rowe charged 8s for the box seats and 3s for the pit, but when the show opened in Sydney, the prices were a much more modest 3s and 1s. *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 12, 1858; *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* (Honolulu), January, 28, 1858; Dressler, ed., *California's Pioneer Circus*, 97.

⁶⁷ *California Spirit of the Times*, May 28, 1859; *Argus* (Melbourne), August 23 and 24, 1859 and June, 6, 1860; *New York Clipper*, June 30, 1883. In a rather deplorable fashion, Miss Albertine (born Albertine Machester) was left stranded in Australia and she began drinking heavily, eventually going blind. In 1875, she was discovered by some theatrical people doing menial work in Ballarat and with their help was brought back to New York City. Koon, *Gold Rush Performers*, 5.

sea during the voyage home.⁶⁸ It also highlighted, however briefly, the growing opportunities for entertainers along the China coast, which began to appear on more and more itineraries during the 1860s.

The hardships that Backus and Rowe experienced were hardly unique as touring entertainers faced a variety of uncertainties and difficulties when taking their operations overseas. One of the ways to mitigate these issues was to contract with local managers, who relieved some of the burdens associated with coordination and promotion across unfamiliar territory. During the 1860s there were a number of agents in San Francisco and Melbourne specializing in this line, but the most important figures were theatrical entrepreneurs Thomas Maguire and George Coppin, who facilitated many of the most successful Pacific tours. Maguire was a New York City saloon-keeper and exemplar of the “sporting life” who joined the rush to San Francisco in 1849. In 1851, he opened an elegant two-thousand-seat theater known as the Jenny Lind and also began acquiring control of small gold town theaters in an attempt to monopolize the Pacific coast theatrical business. Like many impresarios, his fortunes ebbed and flowed, but he continued to expand his business with the addition of a minstrel hall (1852), a playhouse in Sacramento (1855) and a first-class Opera House (1856) in San Francisco.⁶⁹ Maguire had agents in New York City who secured talent, and with control over so many venues he was the dominant figure in the entertainment business of the American West. At the height of his career in the mid-1860s, he built the sumptuous Academy of Music at a cost

⁶⁸ *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, December 12, 1862; *North China Herald* (Shanghai) January 24, 1863; *New York Clipper*, June 13 and 25, 1863; *Daily Evening Bulletin*, June 2, 1863. Taylor, a talented banjoist, went to Singapore and spent almost a year kicking around the ports and bars of Asia as a solo performer before returning to San Francisco and his stories give a fascinating look at the drinking and carousing involved with the “sporting life” abroad. *Joe Taylor, Barnstormer: His Travels, Troubles and Triumphs* (New York: William R. Jenkins, 1913), 70-98.

⁶⁹ This was the eleventh and final establishment built by Maguire personally and his empire at the time included four theatres in San Francisco, two in Sacramento, one in Marysville and one in Virginia City.

of \$66,000, brought out Adah Isaacs Menken, Edwin Forrest, and Charles Kean, and helped launch Mark Twain's career as a lecturer. Maguire exerted a powerful influence on the Pacific circuit as any entertainer of merit arriving in San Francisco from the East or abroad had to deal with him, and after 1864 he regularly dispatched companies to Hawai'i, China, and Australia when their novelty in California wore off.⁷¹ In essence, Maguire facilitated show business by imposing order on the eastern end of the circuit and imported much of the talent that entertained around the Pacific in the 1860s.

An English comic actor named George Coppin (1819-1906) played a roughly comparable role as the foremost theatrical entrepreneur in Melbourne. Coppin arrived in the colonies in 1843 and had a moderately prosperous performing career, but he made his initial fortune by bringing the Irish actor G. V. Brooke to Australia in 1855. By the end of the decade, he held a controlling interest in both of the principal theatres in Melbourne and owned Astley's Amphitheatre, an amusement park called Cremorne Gardens modeled on the London attraction, and four hotels. He opened the Haymarket Theatre there in 1862, which was Australia's most spacious and well-appointed theatre to date. For the debut season, Coppin brought down the American actor Joseph Jefferson, famed for his characterization of Rip Van Winkle, and "he filled the theatre for record runs."⁷²

Coppin had to work constantly to find suitable attractions for his various venues, and he maintained relationships with several American agents and regularly did business with Maguire. His correspondence offers a revealing look at how engagements were sorted out from afar and the inevitable squabbles amongst managers, agents, and

⁷¹ Lois Foster Rodecape, "Tom Maguire, Napoleon of the Stage," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 20 (1941): 289-314; 21 (1942): 39-74, 141-82, 239-75. On Maguire's career, also see *San Francisco Theatre Research*, vol 2. (1938).

⁷² Alec Bagot, *Coppin the Great, Father of the Australian Theatre* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1965), 237; Joseph Jefferson, *The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson* (New York: The Century Co., 1890), 231-74.

performers over money.⁷³ For example, Coppin and one of his San Francisco-based agents, Andrew Birrell, settled on terms with the magician Robert Heller that included a \$1500 advance, half of the gross receipts, and covered all of his printing and travel costs for a visit to Australia in 1869, though most other performers received much less favorable terms.⁷⁴ The process was frustrated by slow communication, and Birrell constantly complained about trouble making arrangements without instructions, noting that, “stars do not like taking the trip from this county to Australia in sailing ships and would not leave this city [San Francisco] without engagements.”⁷⁵ The correspondence highlights the problems many entertainers faced when trying to coordinate tours over such vast distances based on limited knowledge and sketchy contracts. Although regular steamship service and the telegraph alleviated such difficulties in the 1870s, prior to that time touring the Pacific remained a somewhat risky proposition for all but the most prominent stars, who could secure agreeable terms in advance. As with Maguire in San Francisco, Coppin’s dominance in Melbourne brought a degree of organization to the cultural traffic traveling through the Pacific.

One of the most fascinating characters on the circuit in this era was Richard Risley Carlise, known professionally as Professor Risley. He was a talented athlete and acrobat who got his start in the circus business in the United States and made a name for

⁷³ This correspondence runs from the 1860s through the 1880s when he ceded his holdings to J. C. Williamson, an enterprising American actor that Coppin actually imported years earlier. The files consist of Coppin’s outgoing letters to Henry Edwards and Sheridan Corbyn (an agent for Maguire) and incoming letters from another agent named Andrew Birrell: George Selth Coppin Papers, State Library of Victoria.

⁷⁴ Birrell cautioned Coppin about Heller, writing that, “I have not had the least trouble with him in any way but from the account I have heard of him he always gets struck after some women and when he has money he spends it like dirt.” Andrew Birrell to Coppin, June 4, 1869, George Selth Coppin Papers, State Library of Victoria.

⁷⁵ Andrew Birrell to Coppin, November 3, 1869, George Selth Coppin Papers, State Library of Victoria.

himself in London around the same time as Tom Thumb.⁷⁶ The “Risley business” was an act that involved foot juggling various objects while lying on his back either on stage or on a horse, but the most famous turn was that one of his “sons” would roll up in a ball to be juggled. After a number of years abroad, he returned to the United States and eventually went out to California with a circus. In the fall of 1857, the “Risley Troupe” was entertaining Honolulu with their gymnastic feats and then headed to Australia via Tahiti and New Zealand.⁷⁷ Risley tried his hand at prospecting, but failing at that he put together a small circus for a tour through Australia and the major Asian ports. The circus, which consisted of eight horses and ten performers, visited Singapore, Manila, Hong Kong, and Shanghai and arrived at Yokohama in March 1864. After a few performances in Japan the circus disbanded, but Risley found life there amenable and built the “Royal Olympic Theatre.” He stayed in Japan for almost three years, and on occasion he staged exhibitions that featured Japanese performers. At some point Risley began to contemplate organizing a troupe for a tour of the United States and enlisted the aid of U.S. consul George S. Fisher to get the necessary permissions from government officials.⁷⁸ Eventually eighteen performers were issued the first-ever Japanese passports, and they embarked with Risley in December 1866 after receiving financial backing from an American trader named De Witt Clinton Brower. After a spectacular debut at his Academy of Music in San Francisco on January 7, 1867, Tom Maguire bought out

⁷⁶ A contemporary *Spirit of the Times* notice opined that it was “somewhat singular that the two most popular objects of attraction in England at the present moment are American...namely, the beautiful and classical performances of the Risley’s” and “the tiny but symmetrical and interesting Tom Thumb.” April 27, 1843.

⁷⁷ *Daily Southern Cross* (Auckland), May 11, 1858.

⁷⁸ *Japan Herald* (Yokohama), March 24, 1864; *Japan Times* (Yokohama), October 3, 1865; Aya Mihara and Stuart Thayer, “Richard Risley Carlisle, Man in Motion,” *Bandwagon* 41, no. 1 (1997): 12-14.

Brower's shares for \$25,000 and took over management of the company in cooperation with Risley.⁷⁹

Over the next two years, the Imperial Japanese Troupe captivated audiences in the United States and Europe, and the fortune being realized from the company by Maguire and Risley prompted an "international scramble" for Japanese performers.⁸⁰ This episode was remarkable on a number of levels. First and foremost, it demonstrated that the commercial cultural networks extending around the Pacific were not simply one-way streets. While the circuit allowed U.S. entertainers to flourish abroad, it was by no means unidirectional and created opportunities that foreign performers were able to capitalize upon as well. Secondly, it was a useful reminder of the way popular culture mediated relations between the United States and Japan. For the broader American public at least, these touring troupes were the most visible representatives of a rather mysterious people, and Japanese officials anxiously monitored how they shaped perceptions of Japan.⁸¹

⁷⁹ In March 1868, the consul George Fisher sued Tom Maguire in New York City and all of the financial arrangements for the tour were revealed in court. Brower put up \$10,000 to get the company going, after which it was divided into 32 shares. Brower received 16 shares, as manager Risley received 6, a translator named Edward Banks was given 5, the treasurer Scheidts got 3, and 2 shares were reserved for incidental costs. When the troupe arrived in San Francisco, Maguire bought 18 shares (Brower's 16 + the 2 reserved shares) for \$25,000 and from January 1867 through March 1868 the troupe traveled through the United States before heading to Europe where they performed at the World Exposition in Paris and other major capitals. In the lawsuit, Fisher argues that he was owed financial considerations for his help in convincing the government to allow the troupe to leave Japan and claims an 8-share cut of the proceeds or \$27,000, meaning the group had realized an impressive \$108,000 profit in just over 14 months. Fisher was Brower's brother-in-law, and it seems likely that the men had simply misjudged the windfall from the tour and regretted selling out their shares to Maguire so early on. The court ruled in Maguire's favor and Brower was forced to pay \$250 plus costs. *New York Herald*, March 12, 1868; *New York Clipper*, March 21, 1868; Rodecape, "Napoleon of the Stage," 21 (1942): 154-57. Thanks to Krystyn Moon for bringing this case to my attention.

⁸⁰ Aya Mihara has published a series of articles documenting the tour, including an interesting translation of a diary kept by one of the performers: "Professor Risley and Japanese Acrobats: Selections from the Diary of Hirohachi Takana," *Nineteenth Century Theatre* 18, no. 1-2 (1990) 62-74. On the "international scramble," see David C. Sissons, "Japanese Acrobatic Troupes Touring Australasia, 1867-1900," *Australasian Drama Studies* 35 (October 1999): 73-107.

⁸¹ On concerns from Japanese officials about "the advisability of allowing Americans to view lower-class entertainers as representatives of 'new Japan,'" see Donald Hata, *"Undesirables": Early Immigrants and the Anti-Japanese Movement in San Francisco, 1892-1893* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 26.

Finally, the alacrity with which agents were able to exploit this phenomenon and the amount of capital and organization involved indicated just how powerful and far-reaching the U.S. culture industry had become by the late 1860s. In a little over a decade and from a state of almost complete cultural isolation, Japan was “opened” and incorporated into the global entertainment business by performers in search of new markets and entrepreneurs looking for new attractions.

The timing of this was hardly coincidental as the entertainment industry in the United States boomed in the aftermath of the Civil War. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons American activity around the Pacific tapered off during the early part of the decade was due to the disruptions caused by the war, but despite some initial uncertainty the overall amusement business prospered throughout the conflict. Even though the South was closed off, for example, the circus business flourished as the number and size of shows increased and, according to William Slout, the 1863 season was to that point the best in history.⁸² Indeed, the industry was making so much money that the federal government targeted it as a source of revenue, imposing a licensing fee on theatres (\$100) and circuses (\$50) in addition to taxing 2% of their gross receipts.⁸³ In looking back on the period some years later, the *New York Clipper* rather grandiloquently summarized the situation as thus: “When five years ago, the drums beat to call men to arms, the people, rising as one, forgot their wonted pleasures in a sterner sense of duty,” and noted, “in those early days managers stood aghast.” But as the war persisted, losses mounted, and

⁸² In its new circus preview edition that debuted in 1863, the *New York Clipper* listed twenty-eight shows going out for the season. Sands, Nathan, and Co., which was an average-sized show in those days, employed 110 people and had 120 horses with daily expenses of around \$400. William Slout, *Clowns and Cannons: the American Circus during the Civil War* (San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1997).

⁸³ Sundry state and local fees had long been a part of the business, one that was often particularly onerous for touring shows that faced capricious or disapproving local authorities, but this was the first federal entertainment tax. Charles F. Estee, comp., *The Excise Tax Law* (New York: Fitch, Estee & Co., 1863), 45.

nerves frayed, the need to “laugh and cry” ensured the public returned and “sought the deserted halls of minstrelsy and the temples of dramatic art and all that sort of thing, and the erstwhile deserted seats became filled and the glum-looking manager found some cause for smiling.” Business thrived and when “our great land blossomed in peace, there came the fullness of success to the amusement-giving world,” and the paper marveled about how “truly immense has grown to be the business of amusing people.”⁸⁴

The celebratory tone of this account reflected the optimism and prosperity that characterized the amusement business in 1866 with the *New York Clipper* as one of its chief boosters. Although founded in 1853 as a sporting news weekly, by the end of the decade the *Clipper* had become the trade paper for the U.S. culture industry, and it stands as a good index of the industry’s expansion both at home and broad. Beginning in 1857, the paper published a “Theatrical Directory” that listed the whereabouts and doings of performers that quickly grew in both size and scope.⁸⁵ Many of these early amusement columns contained news from San Francisco and occasional items about Australia and Honolulu, but in the late 1860s this haphazard and delayed coverage gave way to a much more sustained and timely review of foreign show matters.⁸⁶ The advertising columns

⁸⁴ *New York Clipper*, October 10, 1866.

⁸⁵ The only significant American antecedent to the *Clipper* was the long-running *Spirit of the Times* (1831-1861), which offered a valuable, but elite-oriented look at theatrical and sporting matters. During the 1850s, much of the show news from the Pacific Coast that filtered back to New York came through its correspondents, which included Stephen Massett, one of the pioneering Anglo-American entertainers on the Pacific Circuit. Writing as “James Pipes,” Massett provided regular updates on theatrical and sporting news from San Francisco and around the Pacific: *Spirit of the Times*, December 14, 1850 – August 23, 1856. Another important resource for U.S. entertainers touring abroad was the *Era* (1838-1900), a London-based theatrical paper that was roughly analogous to the *Clipper*, though initially more advanced in its international coverage and during the 1860s it offered useful show business news and notes from around the British Empire. On these issues, see also Cook, “The Return of the Culture Industry,” 291-317.

⁸⁶ Ongoing developments in transportation and communication obviously shaped the ability of the *Clipper* editors to cover foreign news. The Australian items that appeared in the early 1856 amusement columns were often four-months old, but with the transcontinental telegraph (1861), transpacific steamers (1867), and the transcontinental railroad (1869), this lag decreased to about six weeks for the *Clipper*’s coverage of

registered this shift as well as announcements from managers, agents, and performers were progressively more global in orientation and as early as 1862, San Francisco agent Sheridan Corbyn, who worked with both Maguire and Coppin, was advertising for talent to tour the Pacific.⁸⁷ An instructive episode from this time was a conflict that broke out between two Anglo-American minstrel troupes over the rights to the “Christy Minstrels” name in that quarter of the globe. The rival managers made their respective cases in a series of letters to the *Clipper*, which demonstrated both its power as an arbiter of the amusement world and its ever-broadening circulation.⁸⁸ As Tom Thumb and company were preparing for their tour in May 1869, the paper moved into a new five-story, \$140,000 office building just off of Broadway that made it “the only weekly newspaper that had erected an edifice for individual occupation.”⁸⁹ As the increasing size, scope, and success of the *New York Clipper* demonstrates, the U.S. entertainment industry of the 1860s was growing by leaps and bounds.

While the *Clipper* offers a good index of the development and transnational trajectory of the U.S. culture industry, it was also much more than a passive reflection of economic expansion. As James Cook observes, “trade papers such as the *Era* and *Clipper* were themselves instrumental in building the very networks of commerce and discourse through which early acts...became visible across vast cultural geographies.”⁹⁰ Indeed, this was precisely the process at work in terms of the Pacific, where entertainers faced a persistent lack of information about how best to approach its far-flung cultural markets.

the Pacific leg of Tom Thumb’s tour. The extension of telegraph and steamship lines in the 1870s reduced this even further.

⁸⁷ *New York Clipper*, October 18, 1862.

⁸⁸ Anthony Nish headed one party while John Smith headed the other. For their back-and-forth, see *New York Clipper*, September 12, 1863 (Nish), October 24, 1863 (Smith), April 30, 1864 (Nish), May 21, 1864 (Smith), and August 13, 1864 (Nish).

⁸⁹ *New York Times*, June 2, 1869; *New York Clipper*, May 8, 1869.

⁹⁰ Cook, “The Return of the Culture Industry,” 301.

While the Australian gold fields were reliably profitable, the efforts of U.S. entertainers to tour more broadly were uneven and at times disastrous, and this certainly dampened the enthusiasm of many performers for trying their luck overseas, particularly given the risks and costs presented by the Pacific. What began to happen during the 1860s in the pages of the *Clipper* was a much more consistent accounting of the problems and potential of the Pacific market. Regular foreign coverage and correspondence on matters such as Backus's tribulations or Risley's activities painted a much more accurate picture of what was happening there and gave the ambitious agents and managers that perused the paper the intelligence they needed to take advantage of opportunities overseas. While the *Clipper* did not necessarily create the commercial cultural networks that crisscrossed the Pacific, it played a critical role in popularizing them amongst industry professionals.

One particularly relevant example in this regard was the Pacific tour of John Wilson's Great World Circus (1866-68), which proceeded from San Francisco to Sydney via Honolulu, Tahiti, and Auckland.⁹¹ After tours of each of the Australian colonies and New Zealand, Wilson headed back to the United States along the nascent "northern" route, traveling to Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Japan, and back to San Francisco on the recently opened transpacific steamer line. The tour was significant inasmuch as it was the largest show yet on the Pacific circuit and also toured much more extensively than many of the smaller circuses that preceded it. Wilson showed that the requisite

⁹¹ John Wilson was a native of Scotland and a butcher by trade who arrived in San Francisco during the gold rush and founded a successful business. He first entered the circus business in 1859 when he purchased two elephants and show equipment for \$20,000 back east and shipped everything to San Francisco. Wilson rather pragmatically if deceptively called his circus "Dan Rice's Great Show," as it toured the Pacific Coast and visited Honolulu from 1860-62. By 1863, Wilson was running two separate shows and accompanied the smaller unit on a tour along the Pacific coast of South America before returning to San Francisco and opening a large and successful hippodrome in 1865. When James Cooke, a clown and gymnast from an illustrious English circus family, and Ella Zoyara, a popular lady rider (actually played in drag by a man named Omar Kingsley) arrived in California, they joined forces with Wilson and embarked on the Pacific venture. Slout, *Olympians of the Sawdust Circle*.

infrastructure and population necessary to support a circus was in place, and perhaps most importantly, he generated a great deal of publicity while overseas, which filtered back to the United States and made its way into the *Clipper*.⁹² By way of contrast, although Risley had followed a somewhat similar route some years earlier, his group included but a few performers, and he did not receive any coverage from the *Clipper* until he turned up in San Francisco with his Japanese troupe in 1867. The cumulative effect of this coverage, and even things like the contentious Christy correspondence, was that it provided professionals in the United States with the knowledge they needed to approach the Pacific circuit with greater confidence. And it was precisely this sort of information that allowed Barnum and Bleeker to contemplate and coordinate an ambitious would tour for Tom Thumb that included a significant stretch through which only a few shows and even fewer stars had traveled.

The ascendant amusement business in the United States, coupled with what one historian characterized as “America’s outward thrust” after the Civil War, ensured a surge in show business activity abroad.⁹³ Escalating involvement in Pacific affairs was driven by a combination of the expansionist foreign policy of William Seward and business interests in overseas markets.⁹⁴ The *New York Herald* in 1868 declared,

The whole Pacific world is thus bound up with the growing prosperity of the United States...Ours is the favored position. We must stand between two worlds. We must benefit by—perhaps at last absorb—the wealth of both.⁹⁵

⁹² In 1866, the paper had a more or less regular Australian correspondent that checked in monthly so Wilson’s time there was well-covered. The more interesting development was the attention that his trip through the Asian ports received. *New York Clipper*, February 22, 1868 (China) and July 18, 1868 (Japan).

⁹³ Milton Plesur, *America's Outward Thrust; Approaches to Foreign Affairs, 1865-1890* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971).

⁹⁴ Paolino, *The Foundations of the American Empire*; LaFeber, *The New Empire*.

⁹⁵ *New York Herald*, May 16, 1868, quoted in Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Involvement*, 1-2.

This rhetoric and the policies that accompanied it placed the Pacific front and center on the United States agenda abroad, and, in this context, it was hardly surprising to see culture industry professionals taking notice of the new opportunities, particularly as the transcontinental railroad and steamship service made the whole much more accessible. While a whole host of conditions in the United States essentially laid the groundwork for the flood of entertainers during the late 1860s and into the 1870s, it was also dependent on developments overseas. The Pacific circuit traversed by Tom Thumb and company in 1869 was very different than the one that existed ten or fifteen years earlier, something perhaps best appreciated by turning to the tour itself.

Tom Thumb's Pacific Circuit

On the morning of June 21, 1869, the General Tom Thumb Company left New York City for San Francisco on the first leg of the tour around the world. The touring troupe included a dozen members plus an advance agent and carried with them almost two tons of property, including a miniature carriage and two ponies, a melodeon, scenery, wardrobes, and a large amount of paper and merchandise. The company had been touring through the Upper Midwest in May when Bleeker received a letter from Barnum that announced, "an idea has occurred to me in which I can see a 'Golden Gate' opening for the General Tom Thumb Company." Not coincidentally, the letter was dated May 10, which was the same day that the golden spike joining the Pacific Railroad was hammered into place, sparking celebrations throughout the country.⁹⁶ But Barnum was thinking

⁹⁶ The event has been portrayed as one of the first national "mass media" events as a telegraph line was actually wired to the rail so that the hammer strokes could be heard as clicks at stations around the country as the spike went in. David Howard Bain, *Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Viking, 1999).

about much more than just a transcontinental tour and after mentioning the steam route to Japan, China, and British India, he brought up what lured so many U.S. entertainers to the Pacific, Australian gold.⁹⁷ Despite worries about the risks involved with such an undertaking, and after much deliberation amongst the principals, the contracts were drawn up, and the company returned to New York City to prepare for their grandly publicized “Tour of the World.”

General Tom Thumb was then a twenty-five year veteran of the stage and remained a popular performer on both sides of Atlantic. In the late 1850s, he returned to Europe with Barnum in a successful effort to get his mentor back on his feet after some questionable investments left him bankrupt. It was also around this time that Stratton started maturing physically and upon returning to the United States in 1860, his touring schedule slackened. According to Barnum, he had “increased considerably in rotundity and had changed much in general appearance,” developments which left the showman casting about for a new dwarf with whom to create a splash. In late 1861, he heard of George Washington Nutt, then under the rather inexpert management of a showman named Lillie, and pitched a plan to a lawyer-neighbor of the family named B. P. Cilley to “have him *properly educated and trained* so that he shall become genteel, accomplished, and *attractive* little man, the same as I made Genl. Tom Thumb.”⁹⁸ Barnum secured a contract and, employing essentially the same promotional techniques as before, managed to make “Commodore” Nutt, as he was popularly known, a hit of the 1862 season.⁹⁹ That

⁹⁷ Bleeker, 10.

⁹⁸ For Barnum’s account of these matters, see *Struggles and Triumphs*, 531-36. For a much more accurate version of how things played out, see Saxon 206-8. Letter quoted from Saxon, 207.

⁹⁹ Given that much of this publicity campaign centered on contrasting Nutt with Tom Thumb, one is left wondering just how happy Stratton was with Barnum’s promotion of his new and smaller rival. *History of Commodore Nutt, the Smallest Man in Miniature in the Known World* (New York: Wynkoop, Haldenbeck & Thomas, 1862).

fall, Barnum made yet another fortuitous find when he engaged Mercy Lavinia Warren Bump, a pretty dwarf that worked the showboat circuit out west, for the American Museum, and she made her debut there in January 1863. In Barnum's telling, a rivalry for her affection ensued between Commodore Nutt and Tom Thumb, but the latter soon won out and Charles Stratton and Lavinia Warren were betrothed.¹⁰⁰

The impending nuptials stirred up much excitement, but engendered controversy as well as some thought the whole affair unseemly and suspected it was a humbug.¹⁰¹ When the so-called "Fairy Wedding" took place on February 10, 1863, crowds thronged the elaborate ceremony and reception as gifts and felicitations poured in from around the country.¹⁰² The wedding was the fashionable event of the season and created a media storm, temporarily displacing the war from the headlines and receiving notices in newspapers around the world. Mr. and Mrs. Tom Thumb were pictured in popular weeklies, and a proliferating multitude of photographs and lithographs ensured that images of the happy couple saturated the public. Tom Thumb's pamphlet was quickly rewritten to include Lavinia and an extended account of the wedding and illustrations

¹⁰⁰ For the brief spell with Barnum before she married, she was billed as simply "Miss Lavinia Warren." On the courtship and wedding, see Barnum, 541-64 and *Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*, 55-63.

¹⁰¹ The Episcopal Bishop Henry Codman Potter had to withdraw from officiating due to "outside pressure from some of the most squeamish of his clergy" while his replacement, Reverend Taylor of Grace Church, was forced to defend the integrity of the marriage from detractors. In a fairly typical piece of criticism, George William Curtis, the editor of *Harper's Monthly*, decried the wedding as a "prurient curiosity" and found the "very general public excitement" that prevailed both "ludicrous and humiliating," particularly during a time of war. Ironically, this did not prevent its popular sister publication *Harper's Weekly* from featuring an illustration of the couple on its February 21 cover along with an extended account of the proceedings. Barnum was of course delighted with what he regarded as the free advertising and additional "notoriety." On the clergy's troubles, see Barnum, 557-62; "Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's Monthly* 26 (April 1863): 706.

¹⁰² The cultural legacy of the wedding stretched well into the twentieth-century with the advent of what were known as "Tom Thumb weddings," which were wedding pageants staged with children as entertainments and fundraisers. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 117-25.

were added to exploit its promotional value.¹⁰³ During their “bridal tour,” President Lincoln held a reception for the newlyweds at the White House, and the attention was so overwhelming that they were mobbed and at times endangered whenever they appeared in public for months afterwards.¹⁰⁴ Although Tom Thumb was certainly already a celebrity, the marriage propelled him to an unprecedented level of renown, and the publicity and goodwill generated by the wedding reinvigorated his career and laid the foundation for the eventual tour around the world.

After a short respite, a new touring company consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Tom Thumb, Commodore Nutt, and Lavinia’s younger sister Minnie Warren was formed in the spring of 1863. The manager of this miniature quartette, billed as the Gen. Tom Thumb Company, was Sylvester Bleeker, an experienced Barnum hand and stage manager.¹⁰⁵ The troupe made a decided hit with an ensemble performance of songs, dances, and sketches, but the real draw was a simple desire to see the celebrated newlyweds together. Tom Thumb still went through his famous impersonations and sang duets with his wife. Commodore Nutt was the low comedian of the company and performed a variety of comic songs and dances, including a Jim Crow routine that

¹⁰³ This added sixteen pages and a dozen illustrations to the earlier “Sketch of the Life” pamphlet and this was the edition sold during their tour around the world and throughout the remainder of their performing career together. *Sketch of the life, personal appearance, character, and manners of Charles S. Stratton, the man in miniature, known as General Tom Thumb, and his wife, Lavinia Warren Stratton...* (New York : Wynkoop, Hallenbeck & Thomas, 1863).

¹⁰⁴ For an account of the evening, see William Hayes Ward, comp. *Abraham Lincoln: Tributes from His Associates, Reminiscences of Soldiers, Statesmen and Citizens* (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1895), 108-13; for Lavinia’s recollections, see *Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*, 60-61.

¹⁰⁵ Sylvester Groesbeck was born in Albany in 1824 and worked as an actor in New York City using the stage name Bleeker (sometimes also Bleecker) during the 1840s. He joined Barnum’s museum in 1849 and worked as the prompter in the lecture room and occasionally wrote or appeared in stage productions. Perhaps his most notable role was his turn as Shelby in H. J. Conway’s popular version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and in 1856 he actually appeared on stage with Stratton in an adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s second novel *Dred*. After Barnum’s bankruptcy, Bleeker worked as a stage manager and performer with a number of different minstrel troupes before taking over management of the Gen. Tom Thumb Company in 1863. George Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927-49); T. Alston Brown, *History of the American Stage* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1870); Slout, ed., *Burnt Cork and Tambourines*; *New York Times*, August 7, 1898.

garnered a lot of praise. Lavinia and Minnie Warren likewise appeared in a mix of songs and dances, though of a more elevated and sentimental character. Bleeker, who narrated the show and also wrote short dramatic pieces for the troupe, tied the whole together. It was essentially an ensemble version of Tom Thumb's traditional performance, and the company aped earlier promotional efforts with advertising that emphasized the respectability of the quartette and by traveling about in tiny carriages.¹⁰⁶ Buoyed by the publicity surrounding the wedding and under Bleeker's able management, the company charmed audiences and coined money as they traveled through the United States, Canada, and Europe over the next six years.

The genesis of the tour around the world rested on a number of related developments. For one, the company was undoubtedly experiencing some level of diminishing returns as audiences became familiar with the show, and it was forced to compete with an increasingly crowded field of attractions put forth by the booming amusement business in the United States. Moreover, as the renown provided by the wedding receded, the Gen. Tom Thumb Company needed to do something to reinvigorate its public image, and a world tour certainly promised to excite interest. Beyond the company itself, another issue was simple timing, as the very possibility of such an ambitious tour was only just coming into focus. Although the transpacific steam line was already in operation, it was only in combination with the completion of the transcontinental railroad and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 that a cheap, reliable, and comfortable means of circling the globe was in place. The expanding steam-powered

¹⁰⁶ One somewhat unsavory aspect of their publicity during this time were the frequent reports and even photographs that implied Tom Thumb and Lavinia had a baby daughter despite the fact that they never had any children. The "baby" was apparently an orphan but after she grew too big, a substitute was borrowed as the troupe moved from place to place. Although reports of a child and its supposed death circulated in American papers, this particular humbug seems to have been confined to the 1865-67 European tour. Saxon, 210; *Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*, 183n11.

transportation network over land and sea made travel much more efficient while the accompanying improvements in the flow of information alleviated some the difficulties concerning coordination. With this infrastructure in place, the central question was whether or not entertainers could make touring the maturing, but far-flung cultural markets around the Pacific pay. Despite the positive indications from several other U.S. entertainers in the late 1860s, the Pacific market beyond Australia remained largely unknown, though conditions proved promising enough for the Tom Thumb company to take that chance.

The motivating force behind the tour though was clearly P. T. Barnum. While many culture industry professionals in the United States recognized and exploited various transnational markets, Barnum's plan for a tour around the world to reap "spoils from all the nations of the globe" was typically advanced and ambitious.¹⁰⁷ In his influential study of globalization, Roland Robertson argues that the concept encompasses two central elements, a concrete increase in "interconnectivity" (steamships, railroads, telegraph, etc.) and a more abstract "consciousness of the global whole."¹⁰⁸ In her perceptive profile of Barnum in this period, Constance Rourke wrote, "Across the sea, over the land, around the world he went either by proxy or in person. The world was now a constant image in his speech."¹⁰⁹ In this respect then, Barnum stands as an apt example of this latter dimension of globalization and the new kind of consciousness about the world that dawned in the 1870s. Moreover, he possessed not only the imagination, but also an eminently suitable attraction for just such an enterprising venture. As a relatively small

¹⁰⁷ Bleeker, 8.

¹⁰⁸ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992).

¹⁰⁹ Constance Rourke, *Trumpets of Jubilee: Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lyman Beecher, Horace Greeley, P. T. Barnum* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1927), 424.

party, but with a widely famous star, the Tom Thumb Company had a proven ability to make even seemingly marginal markets pay, and this was something that would prove invaluable abroad. And even if the profits were not as great as hoped, Barnum was obviously aware of the value of the publicity that such a venture would receive. In effect, the Gen. Tom Thumb Company's tour around the world represented an effort to extend Barnum's brand of popular culture into a global context.

On June 21, 1869, the company left New York City for San Francisco by way of the new Pacific Railway, performing across the country as they went. There were a total of twelve people in the touring party: the quartette of performers, Bleeker and his wife, the treasurer B. S. Kellogg, pianist G. H. Richardson, general assistant C. E. Keeler and three other dwarfs, F. B. Nobbs, Rodnia Nutt, and George Cooper, who respectively served as the doorkeeper, coachman, and groom. In addition, Ned Davis worked as the advance agent, traveling ahead of the company to advertise and make arrangements for their performances. After a lucrative stand in San Francisco, the company toured up and down the Pacific Coast and finally embarked on the Pacific Mail steamship *America* for Japan on November 4, 1869.¹¹⁰

After a somewhat tumultuous voyage, they arrived in Yokohama on November 30 and that very evening "performed in a new Masonic Hall with great success."¹¹¹

Yokohama was then the center of Western commercial activity in Japan and home to about seven hundred foreign residents. Although what would come to be known as the Meiji Restoration had begun two years earlier and authorities were much more receptive

¹¹⁰ This was the inaugural transpacific steam line run by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, which started in 1867 and offered monthly service from San Francisco to Yokohama with connecting service to Shanghai and Hong Kong. Tate, E. Mowbray. *Transpacific Steam: The Story of Steam Navigation from the Pacific Coast of North America to the Far East and the Antipodes, 1867-1941* (New York: Cornwall Books, 1986)

¹¹¹ Bleeker, 58.

to Western influence, foreign visitors were still restricted to the appointed “treaty ports,” and the Tom Thumb company was thus only able to visit Yokohama, Hioga, and Nagasaki.¹¹² According to Bleeker, their brief tour was a success as the quartette “exhibited before the high officials (who were deeply interested in the little people), the Japanese ladies, and the few Europeans to be found in the empire.”¹¹³

Bleeker’s account also included some interesting observations about Japanese amusements known as *misemono*, an elastic term used to describe transient shows staged by street performers as well as exhibitions of freaks and novelties. In a description that has a certain resonance with contemporary American sideshows, historian Andrew Markus characterized these displays as “generally crude” and, in a more Barnumesque vein, as “liberally dosed with commercialism and rapacious hucksterism.” The *misemono* were part of the “developing leisure culture” of Japan that in many ways paralleled how urbanization and market forces drove the evolution of the American entertainment business.¹¹⁴ Bleeker observed several “wonderfully clever” shows of this type, but their unspecified “objectionable features” led him to hope that intercourse with other nations would teach the Japanese “to draw the distinctive line between that which is in appearance lewd and offensive, and that which is in strict accordance with propriety.”¹¹⁵ For Bleeker at least, the character of a nation’s popular amusements served as a marker of its morality, and in this context the essential respectability of General Tom Thumb’s performance confirmed the superiority of American ways.

¹¹² W. G. Beasley, *The Meiji Restoration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972); Hugh Cortazzi, *Victorians in Japan: In and Around the Treaty Ports* (London: Athlone Press, 1987); James Hoare, *Japan's Treaty Ports and Foreign Settlements: The Uninvited Guests, 1858-1899* (Folkestone, Kent: Japan Library, 1994).

¹¹³ Bleeker, 59.

¹¹⁴ Andrew L. Markus, “The Carnival of Edo: Misemono Spectacles From Contemporary Accounts,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45, no. 2 (1985): 499-501.

¹¹⁵ Bleeker, 60.

Following their brief tour of Japan, the company headed to Shanghai, one of the ports forced open by the unequal treaties that Britain imposed following the Anglo-Chinese or Opium Wars.¹¹⁶ The United States capitalized on the relative weakness of China after both conflicts by securing agreements that conceded similar economic privileges and established U.S. extraterritoriality. Commercial ties with China stretched back to the late eighteenth century, and the supposed richness of the trade, if never quite living up to expectations, was a motivating factor in U.S. foreign policy throughout the nineteenth century. Until 1842, the United States was restricted to Canton, but under the force of the unequal treaties a number of colonial enclaves emerged, and American activities concomitantly expanded along the China Coast.¹¹⁷ The preeminent Western power, though, was Britain, and China stands as a good example of how U.S. entertainers took advantage of the consolidation of European empires during their overseas tours. The multinational treaty ports reflected the diversity of imperial interests, and the Gen. Tom Thumb Company performed before a cosmopolitan mix of foreign and Chinese audiences during their month-long tour.

In Shanghai, the carriage and ponies were trotted about and created such excitement that local theatrical managers besieged Bleeker with offers. After several shows at the Lyceum Theatre located in the international settlement, arrangements were made for the

¹¹⁶ Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War, 1840-1842: Barbarians in the Celestial Empire in the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century and the War by Which They Forced Her Gates Ajar* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

¹¹⁷ On American foreign policy and trade with China, see John King Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842-1854* 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953); Michael H. Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Involvement*.

company to appear at a large Chinese theatre in the city proper.¹¹⁸ The venue was packed, and as the quartette took the stage, “a buzz of admiration emanated from the immense throng.” The particulars of the performance were communicated to the audience by means of large descriptive cards, and a pantomime was substituted for the usual farce to overcome the language barrier.¹¹⁹ The highlight of the show was a little boy who strutted about the stage with Minnie Warren, and Bleeker noted that the sight of “America and China clasping hands” was “an immense delight to all.”¹²⁰ The company next proceeded to the most significant Western settlement and commercial center in China, Hong Kong. As quoted previously, the local paper there felt that Tom Thumb’s fame was such that he needed no introduction and the company drew good crowds at the new City Hall during the week. The *China Mail* felt that “Commodore Nutt was the life and soul of the funny and grotesque entertainment,” and took note of the numerous receptions held for the company by the “fashionable society” of the city. On Christmas Day, the troupe traveled to the longstanding Portuguese colony at Macao and offered an evening exhibition and then returned to Hong Kong for a farewell performance before embarking on a steamer for Singapore.¹²¹

During the early weeks of 1870, the company traveled through the principal ports of Southeast Asia via the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company, stopping

¹¹⁸ The earliest entertainments in Shanghai were amateur affairs staged in whatever space was temporarily available. Although the New York Serenaders visited in 1856, they were the only professional entertainers to do so prior to 1860. In 1863, both the Backus Minstrels and Professor Risley performed in Shanghai and touring entertainers were common enough to warrant the construction of a proper theatre in 1867: J. H. Haan, “Thalia and Terpsichore on the Yangtze: Foreign Theatre and Music in Shanghai, 1850-1865: A Survey and a Calendar of Performances,” *The Sino-Western Miscellany* 1 (1988): 181-83; *North China Herald* (Shanghai), December 11, 1869.

¹¹⁹ For an advertising poster in Chinese script from these Shanghai shows, see San Antonio Public Library, *Circusana: A Guide Book for the Harry Hertzberg Circus Collection* (San Antonio: San Antonio Public Library, 1943), 32.

¹²⁰ Bleeker, 69-71; *Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*, 123-24.

¹²¹ *China Mail* (Hong Kong), December 22, 24, and 27, 1869.

over at Singapore, Penang, and Pointe de Galle in short order.¹²² The troupe gave a few performances and visited with local dignitaries at each place and at long last arrived in Melbourne on February 16. In Barnum's initial proposal for the tour around the world, he had advised Bleeker to "tell the General that in Australia alone he will make more money than a horse can draw," and if anything he underestimated their take.¹²³ Over the next eight months, the company caused a "furore" throughout the colonies, and an admiring Australian public filled the streets and theatres everywhere they went.

In Melbourne, the *Argus* welcomed the arrival of "the far-famed General Tom Thumb, who has come to Australia to try his fortune, and to exemplify that, even in the production of diminutive men, America is the 'tallest nation on airth.'"¹²⁴ As usual, much of the newspaper coverage focused on Tom Thumb's prior fame and included accounts of both his dalliances with the Queen and his illustrious wedding. When the company opened at Polytechnic Hall on February 21, the reviewer for the *Argus* suggested that patrons went "chiefly to see the persons of world-wide celebrity," and that "the performers, and not the performances, were the attraction." Despite this inclination, they came away impressed with the "pleasing voices" of the ladies and the comic talent of Commodore Nutt, who was described as the "life and soul" of the entertainment. The hall was so large that Bleeker installed a raised gangplank that ran from the stage to the back

¹²² On British steam routes, see Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 18-48; Boyd Cable, *A Hundred Year History of the P. & O., Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company* (London: I. Nicholson and Watson, 1937).

¹²³ Bleeker, 10.

¹²⁴ The phrase "tallest nation on airth" was a reference to Sam Slick, a satirical Yankee character created by the Canadian writer Thomas Chandler Haliburton in the 1830s. An ardent Tory, his popular sketches portrayed Americans as boastful and skewered the perceived excesses of Jacksonian democracy. Richard Davies, *Inventing Sam Slick: A Biography of Thomas Chandler Haliburton* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); *Argus* (Melbourne), February 17, 1870.

of the hall so that the little people could promenade during the performance and ensure that everyone in the house was given the opportunity to see them up close.¹²⁵

During the intermission and at the close of the performance, the quartette hawked biographies, photographs, lockets, and other mementos, a practice some found distasteful.¹²⁶ A critic for the *Australasian*, for example, complemented Commodore Nutt as “an artiste in his way,” but said that he “disillusions the audience when he makes his way among them, pushing the sale of this own portrait with a sharpness and pertinacity that Barnum may approve, but that exercises a repellent influence upon most of those who have previously enjoyed the miniature actor’s clever delineations of character.”¹²⁷ The commercial success of the company created other problems as well for in the absence of copyright protections Australian printers and photographers quickly copied the troupe’s materials to cash in on the craze and newspapers across Australia were awash with advertisements for Tom Thumb memorabilia.¹²⁸ Bleeker cautioned the public “against parties representing themselves to be sent in advance by the management to sell the photographs of the little people,” but such efforts seem to have done little to curb the trade.¹²⁹ One showman began promoting an “Australian Tom Thumb,” and another billed unsuspecting towns with posters promising Tom Thumb but delivering a “grand

¹²⁵ *Argus* (Melbourne), February 22, 1870; *Age* (Melbourne) February 22, 1870.

¹²⁶ The lockets were an interesting addition to the party’s merchandise. It was a tiny brass book (7/8” x 3/4”) with “Somebody’s Luggage” (a short story by Charles Dickens) embossed on the cover that unfolded like an accordion to reveal six small frames containing a dozen images of Tom Thumb, Lavinia, and their “baby.” Thanks to collector Chris Coenen for sharing details and images of this rare souvenir.

¹²⁷ *Australasian* (Melbourne), February 26, 1870. One of the reasons that the quartette were such persistent peddlers was that in all of the extant contracts the proceeds from these sales were reserved for the performers, and it was only the receipts that were divided with management. Their cartes-de-visites sold for 1s and 2s, which was equal to the price of admission and thus offered good value to the performers.

¹²⁸ The most popular version of the unauthorized pamphlet judging from the number of copies held by Australian libraries today was one produced by “Ferguson and Moore” in Melbourne that combined the text of the *Sketch of the Life* pamphlet with cartoons taken from another illustrated pamphlet, *Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Tom Thumb* (New York, 1863).

¹²⁹ *South Australian Advertiser* (Adelaide) August 8, 1870.

tableaux” of his “life and adventures,” much to the audience’s chagrin.¹³⁰ Although all of this certainly hurt the company’s business, it was also in its own way an oblique tribute to their pecuniary success.

After their sensational start in Melbourne, the Gen. Tom Thumb Company toured through Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, and New South Wales in succession over the next six months. Although railways connected some of the major cities, the company often traveled by coach, and this was actually the only time on the tour that their transportation was not powered by steam. Despite this slower pace, the venues were filled wherever they visited, and the intense public interest in the troupe was striking. As the *Bendigo Advertiser* observed, “royalty itself created hardly such an excitement as the Tom Thumb Party.”¹³¹ Perhaps the most considered explanation of their appeal appeared in the *Launceston Examiner* and it is worth quoting at length:

Tom Thumb’s party, more especially the General himself, enjoy a peculiar advantage in their colonial tour; they appeal in an almost equally strong degree to the sympathy of the old emigrant, and the native-born colonist. Few of the former but in years gone by, perhaps as long as twenty-five years, have witnessed General Tom Thumb during one or other of his European engagements, and the curiosity aroused by his visit to the Antipodes is sufficiently strong to induce them to go and see with their own eyes, and to hear with their own ears whether or not our little visitor is really and true the identical Tom Thumb who, under the guardianship of the wonderful showman, P. T. Barnum, a quarter of a century ago, took the sightseeing worlds of Europe and America by surprise. The other members of the party cannot date their celebrity so far back, but there must still be tens of thousands of people throughout Australia, to whom the appearance of Mrs. Stratton, Miss Warren, and Commodore Nutt, is as that of old and familiar friends, and who will crowd their *levee* if for no other reason than to gratify that craving which all old colonists feel to renew their acquaintance with faces familiarly known beyond the seas. To the young native-born colonists the names of the lilliputians have been from their earliest recollection familiar as household words, and the opportunity, probably the only one that can ever offer, to see what they have heard and read about, will not be thrown away

¹³⁰ *Argus* (Melbourne), March 15 and August 30, 1870.

¹³¹ *Bendigo Advertiser*, April 6, 1870.

even by the poorest.¹³²

The passage stands as a testament to Tom Thumb's enduring celebrity, but perhaps even more remarkable was the way it assumed an easy familiarity amongst the Australian public with the other members of the company.¹³³ The U.S. culture industry was clearly very effective at both generating and circulating publicity far beyond the United States. The other significant intimation was that part of the company's "peculiar" appeal derived from Australians' nostalgia for the old country. In an unfamiliar setting, Tom Thumb served as a reminder of home, but his presence also in a sense served as an indicator of the progress colonials made towards achieving a sense of permanence and a resemblance of home in Australia. He thus functioned as a kind of imperial thread connecting the colony and metropole and was an icon of the ongoing globalization of mass culture.

In this vein, the reactions from reviewers who had seen Tom Thumb earlier in his career were interesting. Commentators frequently noted his newfound corpulence and implied that the General had lost something of the "cute" aesthetic that defined his early career. Tom Thumb was also much less active in terms of his performance and generally only did his Napoleon impersonation and a song or sketch or two during a typical performance. As the *Bendigo Advertiser* bluntly put it, "To speak plainly, the General has become something of a 'bloated aristocrat' and except when disposing of his pictures or his lockets seems to carry a 'retired from business' air with him." Partly this was due to the fact that Tom Thumb now had supporting players to shoulder the load, and

¹³² *Launceston Examiner*, May 13, 1870.

¹³³ Lavinia tells a story about a visit to an orphan asylum in Ballarat where she finds its charges, somewhat to her surprise, to be very knowledgeable about the party. She concludes: "Even the smallest urchin in the orphan asylums of distant lands knew the name of General Tom Thumb and to our surprise were well informed as to our relationship and movements." *Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*, 142.

Commodore Nutt in particular took over many of the comic pieces that were his forte. In comparing them, one reviewer observed, “The General we can remember almost equally vivacious with the Commodore, but advancing years seem to have toned him down into a quite, grave, and sedate Benedict, enjoying his *otium cum dignitate* [leisure with dignity].” Yet, whenever he did take a more active role in a performance, it was clear he still had the talent and charisma to move an audience. A day after the rather harsh criticism from the *Bendigo Advertiser*, the paper qualified itself after a particularly good turn from Tom Thumb, noting that “without meaning anything uncomplimentary to the Commodore, we fancied the General displayed about as much comical power in his own as the ‘Nutt.’”¹³⁴ In short, Australian audiences saw a more mature and reserved Tom Thumb, and, if he was in some sense resting on his laurels, the overall company certainly still delivered.

As was the case in the United States and Britain, the sensational success of Tom Thumb’s company provoked debates about the propriety of popular amusements and bared an incipient cultural hierarchy in Australian society. Although obviously an established attraction, press and advertisements show that the troupe still worked hard to emphasize its essential respectability. The more troubling aspect for some commentators was not the company itself, but what its public favor said about Australian society and tastes. This issue came to a head in Sydney when the troupe performed opposite the opening of Lyster and Smith’s Royal Italian and English Opera Company.¹³⁵ In an archetypical clash of low versus high, the public gave the General Tom Thumb Company

¹³⁴ *Bendigo Advertiser*, April 6 and 7, 1870; *Launceston Examiner*, May 13, 1870.

¹³⁵ William Lyster (1827-1880) was an Irish actor and impresario who brought “the first full time opera group to Australia” in 1861 and thereafter was its primary promoter in the Antipodes. Eric Irvin, *Dictionary of the Australian Theatre, 1788-1914* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1985), 167.

a definitive victory, and the feebleness of the houses for the opera vis-à-vis the crowds going to see the quartette was disapprovingly noted.¹³⁶ In typically pugnacious fashion, the *Sydney Punch* mocked this turn of events with a cartoon that depicted throngs at the gates of General Tom Thumb's theatre next to the empty entrance of the Prince of Wales Theatre, where the solitary figure of Lyster stands glowering over the caption "Thy share thereof is small." The paper also published a poem entitled "Shame to the Playgoers" that satirized the "enlightened Sydney audience" for its inability to "aspire to anything higher" than lowbrow amusements like Tom Thumb.¹³⁷ This sort of debate was a characteristic one as cultural hierarchy became more pronounced in Europe and the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century, though Richard Waterhouse has argued that "the emerging gap between high and popular culture never became as wide" in Australia.¹³⁸ On the whole, such criticisms did little to undermine the company's appeal, and despite some reservations, most seemed to have agreed with the sentiment expressed by the *Ballarat Courier* that, "they are far more amusing and entertaining than many 'professional' people of larger growth and greater pretension."¹³⁹

The eight months that the Tom Thumb company spent in Australia was perhaps the most consistently profitable leg of the world tour as they never seemed to play before anything less than a full house. According to Bleeker, the troupe "traversed a distance of five thousand three hundred miles overland" and visited "one hundred and five different cities and towns."¹⁴⁰ When they performed in Sandhurst, the local paper reckoned that the

¹³⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 15 and 25, 1870.

¹³⁷ *Sydney Punch*, November 5 and 12, 1870.

¹³⁸ Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville*, 142. For a similar argument in a U.S. context that Waterhouse draws upon, see Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

¹³⁹ *Ballarat Courier*, May 4, 1870.

¹⁴⁰ Bleeker, 111.

troupe was taking in over £200 a day, and a benefit performance in Melbourne netted a similar sum of £180 for charity. If one assumes these sums were about par for the course, the company likely earned over £25,000 or around \$140,000 during their stay in Australia.¹⁴¹ At least some of this money was invested in new attractions for Barnum, as the *New York Clipper* reported that he received “two giant kangaroos, the largest ever brought to this country, sent by Tom Thumb from Australia.”¹⁴² Of course, some of the proceeds were eaten up by the company’s expenses, but with such a large sum of money coming in, they undoubtedly made a tidy profit, and on their final departure from Melbourne, the docks were crowded with well-wishers and “three cheers were given for the ‘little strangers’ as the S. S. Malta steamed away.”¹⁴³

The General Tom Thumb Company next toured India and passed through the Suez Canal in March 1871, arriving in London for the last part of what was there billed as their “Grand Farewell Tour of the World.”¹⁴⁴ The troupe made a complete circuit of Great Britain in a little over a year and returned to New York City June 22, 1872, almost three years to the day after their initial departure. All told, Bleeker reported that they traveled 55,487 miles (31,216 by sea) and gave 1,471 shows in 587 different locales “without losing a single day or missing a single performance.”¹⁴⁵ Lavinia remembered the trip as “healthful, pleasant, and profitable” and recalled that “I think our manager reported eighty thousand dollars to Mr. Barnum.”¹⁴⁶ As the exact financial terms of the tour remain unclear, it is difficult to say whether that was simply Barnum’s cut or the net

¹⁴¹ *Bendigo Advertiser*, April 8, 1870; *Argus* (Melbourne), September 3, 1870. According to Economic History Services (www.eh.net) the exchange rate for the dollar and was approximately \$5.60 to a pound in 1870.

¹⁴² *New York Clipper*, March 25, 1871.

¹⁴³ *Argus* (Melbourne), November 9, 1870.

¹⁴⁴ *Era* (London), May 7, 1871.

¹⁴⁵ Bleeker, 143.

¹⁴⁶ *Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*, 99.

profits from the tour.¹⁴⁷ Whatever the arrangements, it was clearly a profitable venture for all concerned, and the publicity it generated paid dividends for years to come. While Tom Thumb and Lavinia retired to Connecticut for a well-deserved rest, Bleeker wrote an account from “diaries” kept during the tour, and by the time the company resumed performing in October a 144-page illustrated pamphlet detailing the journey around the world was in print.¹⁴⁸ Lavinia recalled that the company performed in front of “immense audiences” on their fall tour, “our great three years tour being everywhere known and talked about.”¹⁴⁹ The Gen. Tom Thumb Company stayed together until 1875 when Commodore Nutt struck out on his own after a dispute over money and Minnie Warren married another dwarf performer named Major Newell, who toured with the troupe for a time before it finally dissolved in 1877.¹⁵⁰

Bleeker continued to work as manager for Tom Thumb and Lavinia, although they adopted a much more leisurely touring schedule. During a short winter tour, tragedy struck when the hotel in which the group was staying, the grand Newall House in Milwaukee, caught fire in the early morning hours of January 10, 1883. Tom Thumb and his wife were awoken by a police officer and escaped by a ladder raised to their third-story window, but Bleeker and his wife a floor above were not as lucky. They tied bed sheets together in a desperate attempt to escape to a lower balcony, but while descending

¹⁴⁷ My assumption is that this \$80,000 was Barnum’s cut of the net profits, not the total net profits from the tour. The Tom Thumb company gave 1500 shows over a three-year period and though their receipts obviously fluctuated, during their run in Australia they were bringing in over \$1000 a night. It seems reasonable to assume the company averaged \$200 a performance, meaning their gross profit would have been closer to \$300,000.

¹⁴⁸ *New York Clipper*, June 29, 1872; *New York Post*, July 12, 1872; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, October 22, 1872.

¹⁴⁹ *Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*, 166.

¹⁵⁰ Commodore Nutt, much like Stratton, experienced a growth spurt in his thirties and retired from the stage. In 1879, he married a woman named Lilian Elston and ran a concert saloon in New York City for a number of years: *New York Times*, May 26, 1881. Soon after her marriage to Major Newell, Minnie Warren became pregnant and tragically died in childbirth at her sister and Tom Thumb’s home in July 1878: *Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*, 168-69.

Mrs. Bleeker lost her hold and fell, sustaining fatal injuries.¹⁵¹ About ninety people died in the blaze, many of them jumping to their deaths as horrified spectators looked on. Lavinia wrote that “the General never recovered from the shock of that terrible ordeal,” and he had a stroke that summer and passed away at the age of forty-five.¹⁵²

Charles Stratton’s death prompted a wave of reminiscences and tributes from around the country, and over ten thousand mourners turned out for his funeral. A Boston paper expressed the common sentiment that Tom Thumb “was part of our American life that we had really learned to value,” and he was the most famous attraction in the “sight-seeing world” for some four decades.¹⁵³ Over his extraordinary life, Charles Stratton found fame and fortune, married happily, traveled around the world, and associated with most of the prominent personages of the era. He also deserves credit for the way his success helped emancipate dwarfs from the prevailing fear and disgust with which they were generally regarded.¹⁵⁴

Conclusion

When the General Tom Thumb Company crossed the Pacific in late 1869, it was a signature moment in the development of the Pacific circuit. Although U.S. performers were certainly actively touring its expanse in the 1860s, the success and publicity that attended Tom Thumb’s tour confirmed that the Pacific would “pay” and inaugurated a decade of American ascendancy in the entertainment business there. The tour serves as a

¹⁵¹ Julius Bleyer, *Burning of the Newhall House* (Milwaukee: Cramer, Aikens & Cramer, 1883), 16.

¹⁵² Lavinia continued to tour under Bleeker’s management and later remarried, though she would always advertise as “Mrs. Tom Thumb.” She retired from the stage in 1915 and died in 1919: *Mrs. Tom Thumb*, 19, 169.

¹⁵³ *Boston Daily Advertiser*, July 17, 1883; *New York Times*, July 16, 1883.

¹⁵⁴ Walter Bodin and Burnet Hershey, *It’s a Small World: All About Midgets* (New York: Howard-McCann, 1934), 257-58.

good index of the ongoing relationship between the burgeoning amusement business in the United States and the development of cultural markets and infrastructure around the Pacific, which in combination made it an increasingly accessible and profitable place to visit. While Charles Backus, Professor Risley, and others ensured a continued American presence, it was left to Tom Thumb to bring a new level of visibility to the Pacific market and inspire the new wave of American entertainers that arrived in the 1870s.

More broadly, one of the most frequently cited cultural markers of globalization has been Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873), a fictional adventure novel about a race around the world. Inasmuch as it was written a year earlier and documented an actual journey, Sylvester Bleeker's *Gen. Tom Thumb's Three Years' Tour Around the World* (1872) arguably offers a more relevant example of the new global connections and consciousness that characterized this moment.¹⁵⁵ The coincidence of their publication suggested something of the ongoing cultural shift that was being driven by the integrative processes of globalization. In this context, the increasingly capable U.S. culture industries, particularly in terms of technology and capital, were well positioned to take advantage of the opportunities opening up around the globe generally and in the Pacific in particular.

The Pacific circuit played an important part in the broadening circulation of U.S. popular culture and Tom Thumb's tour also reflected the more prominent role the United States was assuming in Pacific affairs. During his triumphant success years earlier in Britain, Tom Thumb became a symbol of the nascent power of the United States and a harbinger of the American brand of commercial popular culture in Britain. His world tour

¹⁵⁵ Jules Verne, *The Tour of the World in Eighty Days*. Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1873.

was in many ways an amplification of this dynamic on a much grander scale and his Pacific tour certainly augured the growing influence of the United States in the region. As Thomas Zeiler has observed, “aspects of globalization promoted American imperialism,” and the ability of U.S. culture industry to capitalize on the process ensured that U.S. entertainers played a formative and visible role in an expanding U.S. empire.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, the wave of U.S. entertainers that surged onto the Pacific circuit in the 1870s ensured that it would continue to develop in a fashion that served American interests.

¹⁵⁶ Thomas W. Zeiler, *Ambassadors in Pinstripes: The Spalding World Tour and the Birth of American Empire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), xiii.

Chapter Five

James Bailey, Harry Kellar, and the Ascendance of Pacific Circuit, 1873-1883

During January 1877, two of the more noteworthy figures of the late nineteenth century U.S. culture industry were showing opposite one another in Melbourne.¹ While the magician Harry Kellar was the star of the Royal Illusionists performing at St. George's Hall, James Bailey's massive circus, billed as "Cooper, Bailey, and Co.'s Great International Allied Shows," was set up just a few blocks away. The Cooper and Bailey Circus was the first large-scale American railroad circus to tour overseas, and the show was drawing in enormous crowds with its multifaceted attractions, which in addition to the circus included a full menagerie and sideshow. The business of the Royal Illusionists did not seem to have suffered, though, as they played in Melbourne for ten weeks with a show that featured Kellar performing magic tricks, an exposé of Spiritualism, and entr'actes such as sword-swallowing, fire-eating, and contortionism.² Although at this point still relatively early in their careers, Bailey and Kellar's success was a harbinger of things to come, and over the following decade both would ascend to the forefront of their respective professions; Kellar was celebrated as the "Dean of American Magicians" and Bailey as the man in charge of the "Greatest Show on Earth." Whatever their future

¹ *Argus* (Melbourne), January 29, 1877.

² The entr'actes were performed by two Hungarian brothers, Ferdinand and Louis Guter, who adopted Oriental dress used the stage names of "Ling Look" and "Yamadeva."

accomplishments, the presence of both men in Melbourne at this time was hardly coincidental; for as the ongoing globalization of the Pacific reached a new heights in the 1870s, Australia and other overseas markets were becoming both more attractive and ever-more for U.S. entertainers, particularly as the amusement business in the United States suffered in the face of economic depression.

The opening of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company's direct line between San Francisco and Sydney in 1875 provided much of the stimulus for this renewed wave. Regular and reliable steamship service made coordinating tours much easier, and the time it took to travel from the United States to Australia was reduced from potentially several months to around three weeks. The result was a flood of American entertainers, whether the Australian public necessarily desired it or not. The *South Australian Register*, for example, observed,

Since the opening of the direct mail route between Australia and California we have been indebted to 'our American cousins' for nearly all the 'show' talent which has been presented to the Australian public. A considerable amount of new business thus brought before us could with advantage have been spared altogether, whilst some again has been witnessed with both pleasure and profit.³

While Kellar and Bailey were presumably part of the latter category, the sardonic use of "indebted" reflected a pronounced ambivalence about the rising tide of Americanism in Australia.⁴ Whatever its quality, the increased volume of U.S. entertainers touring in the 1870s was undeniable, and, much like the early 1850s, it marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of the Pacific circuit.

³ *South Australian Register* (Adelaide), March 12, 1877.

⁴ On Australian responses to American influence, see Philip Bell and Roger J Bell, *Implicated: The United States in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993); Philip Bell and Roger Bell, eds., *Americanization and Australia: Australian Experience* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1998).

The first part of this chapter offers a general overview of the factors that drove this expansion in terms of both scope and volume, emphasizing the way that changes in the U.S. culture industry intersected with overlapping colonial, commercial, and technological developments around the Pacific that facilitated coordination and access to both emerging and existing cultural markets. One of the most interesting dynamics of the decade was the new life that blackface minstrelsy, which was on the decline in the United States, found on the Pacific circuit. A short section on its resurgence in Australia offers a glimpse into the broader movement of American talent across the Pacific and helps to provide a context for the two more specific case studies that follow.

The first of these centers on the Cooper and Bailey Circus, which left San Francisco in November 1876 and returned to New York City two years later following an extended tour that was concentrated in Australia, but also ranged more widely to the Dutch East Indies, New Zealand, and South America. The show was one of the large-scale railroad circuses that emerged in the 1870s, and the Cooper and Bailey Circus that headed abroad included a staff of sixty performers and support personnel, a full menagerie, dozens of horses, and tons of paper, properties, and equipment. The evolution of the circus towards these massive touring shows was, in Janet Davis's apt characterization, a "cultural metonym for national expansion," and certainly the Cooper and Bailey tour was similarly an expression of the growing power of the United States in the Pacific. The logistics and planning that were required were complicated and, although there were some setbacks, the size and efficiency of the operation consistently inspired awe, if not always admiration, among its disparate audiences. The Cooper and Bailey Circus was the first of the big American circuses to venture overseas, and the fact that it

did so on the Pacific circuit demonstrated the maturation of Pacific cultural markets and their increasing importance for the U.S. culture industry.

The second case study focuses on Harry Kellar, who embarked on two separate and extended tours through the Pacific in 1876-1877 and 1882-1884. His lively account of his doings, *A Magician's Tour* (1886), offers a vivid window into life on the Pacific circuit as an up and coming entertainer and also shows how he parleyed his experiences abroad into success at home.⁵ His varied performances included magic tricks and automatons, but the most popular feature of the show was an exposé of the infamous cabinet séance of the pseudo-Spiritualist Davenport Brothers. Although much more will be said about this in turn, the basic act centered on the performer's ability to escape from bonds tied by the audience while enclosed in a cabinet on a darkened stage, and, after various shenanigans, the lights would be brought up to reveal the performer still securely tied. While Kellar was undeniably an able and engaging performer, the real secret of Kellar's success was his business savvy and it was his advertising flair, ability to acquire new tricks, and willingness to explore new markets that made him so successful overseas. Ultimately, the speed and scope of his touring demonstrated the Pacific circuit's rapid development by the early 1880s, but it also suggests some of the ways in which this circuit was already being superseded. Kellar's second tour in particular was broadly illustrative of an ongoing shift from viewing Pacific tours as a largely regional enterprise into a more capacious conception that saw it as simply part of an evolving global market for American entertainment.

⁵ Harry Kellar, *A Magician's Tour Up and Down and Round About the Earth: Being the Life and Adventures of the American Nostradamus* (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons, 1886).

Globalization, the Pacific, and the U.S. Culture Industry

While globalization has become a major theme of recent historiography, the exact dimensions of the process and everything from its periodization to its analytical utility have been subject to much debate.⁶ Generally speaking, globalization is usually seen as primarily an economic process with diffuse cultural ramifications that began in earnest during the mid-nineteenth century.⁷ A good starting point for untangling the term is Charles Bright and Michael Geyer's definition of globalization as

A process—or set of overlapping processes—in which the flows of peoples, ideas, and things accelerate and the networks of worldwide interconnectivity become even denser, facilitated in part by the increasing speed of communication and ease of transportation.⁸

This particular conception is useful because it shifts the burden from focusing simply on the variety of ways in which connections were established to how their intensification inaugurated a fundamentally new level of global interaction.

In purely programmatic terms, the telegraph and steam transportation were the material markers and technological engines of globalization, and it was during the 1870s that they combined to link the Pacific together as never before. While the most prominent development in terms of transportation during this decade was the aforementioned

⁶ For a thoughtful overview of some of these difficulties, see Adam McKeown, "Periodizing Globalization," *History Workshop Journal* 63, no. 1 (2007): 218-30; A. G. Hopkins, ed., *Globalization in World History* (New York: Norton, 2002); C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004). For a Pacific perspective, see Stewart Firth, "The Pacific Islands and the Globalization Agenda" *The Contemporary Pacific*, 12, no. 1 (2000): 178-92.

⁷ On economics and globalization, see Kevin H. O'Rourke and Jeffrey G. Williamson, *Globalization and History: The Evolution of a Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Economy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999). On the cultural dimensions of globalization, see John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992).

⁸ Charles Bright and Michael Geyer, "Where in the World Is America? The History of the United States in a Global Age," in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 67.

southern steam route between San Francisco and Australia, expanding regional transportation networks that included both steamers and railroads also facilitated interconnectivity.⁹ Although a transpacific cable was not laid until the early twentieth century, Hong Kong (1871), Yokohama (1874), and other principal Pacific ports were connected to the global telegraph network via India in the 1870s, and the extensive intercolonial networks in Australia and New Zealand were connected to the outside world in 1875 and 1876 respectively.¹⁰ The depth and pace of these changes varied across the Pacific, but by the mid-1870s the essential connections between major markets were well established and it was through these that American entertainers moved in growing numbers.

This intensified interconnectivity was also in part driven by the more assertive character of American policy in the Pacific during the decade. The Pacific Mail Steamship Company, for example, was heavily subsidized by the United States government in a reflection of long-held hopes about the potential of transpacific trade. Beyond this ingrained commercial expansionsism, Secretary of State William Seward's purchase of Alaska demonstrated that territorial ambitions were percolating as well.¹¹ With the completion of the transcontinental railroad essentially marking the culmination of continental development, many expansionists agreed with Seward that the Pacific now represented the "chief theatre of events in the world's great hereafter" and that "coming events will ere long make it necessary for the United States to extend its territorial

⁹ The original northern route from San Francisco to Hong Kong via Yokohama began with monthly service in 1867. After a series of false starts, the southern route opened in November 1875 and went from San Francisco to Sydney via Honolulu, Levuka (Fiji), and Auckland. Tate, *Transpacific Steam*.

¹⁰ Peter J. Hugill, *Global Communications since 1844* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Ernest N. Paolino, *The Foundations of the American Empire; William Henry Seward and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); Milton Plesur, *America's Outward Thrust: Approaches to Foreign Affairs, 1865-1890* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971).

jurisdiction beyond the limits of the western continent.”¹² Revisionist diplomatic historians contend that new overseas markets and China in particular were the primary motivation for the more aggressive American foreign policy of this era. Whatever the case and despite the at times erratic moves towards establishing a “new empire,” the overall thrust of U.S. policy in the 1870s saw Americans become more involved generally in economic and political affairs around the Pacific.¹³

The increased cultural traffic was driven in part by the boom in the amusement business following the Civil War, although this was tempered by the Panic of 1873 and the ensuing recession. In many respects, the U.S. culture industry was an apt reflection of what Alan Trachtenberg has influentially described as the “incorporation of America” which highlights how industrialization and centralization were transforming American life in the Gilded Age.¹⁴ The emergence of the large-scale railroad circus in the mid-1870s was a good example of this dynamic in the entertainment business as it required an enormous amount of labor and capital and demanded a high degree of efficiency and organization.¹⁵ In 1872, a partnership of W.C. Coup, Dan Castello, and P.T. Barnum fielded the initial railroad circus, and it was the first operation to gross over a million

¹² Seward quoted in Dulles, *America in the Pacific*, 5. On the link between continental and overseas expansion, a recent survey concluded, “Continental expansion was but one aspect of an integrated expansionist thrust that by 1861 had spread throughout the Western hemisphere and laid the foundations of a US Pacific empire.” William Weeks, “American Expansion, 1815-1860,” in Robert D. Schulzinger, ed., *A Companion to American Foreign Relations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003), 76.

¹³ For the classic revisionist account of this period, see LaFeber, *The New Empire*. Even critics of the revisionist interpretation recognize the economic cast of much American policy. David Pletcher writes that “a kind of economic Manifest Destiny embraced the whole Pacific basin,” and that “economic expansion” quickly slid into “political involvement,” though policy was more improvised than revisionists often supposed. *Diplomacy of Involvement*, 1-8.

¹⁴ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

¹⁵ Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Fred Dahlinger, *Trains of the Circus, 1872 through 1956* (Hudson, WI: Iconograpix, Inc., 2000).

dollars in a single season.¹⁶ Their success bred imitators, but the economic downturn debilitated the industry. In a write-up at the end of the 1875 season, the *New York Mercury* offered an overview of the circus business that is worth quoting at length:

American circuses have attained world-wide renown for their size, for the number of persons and horses employed, for their magnificent equipments, and for the numerous auxiliary entertainments which follow in their trains... Each successive year witnesses the amalgamation of small organizations, as well as their frequent absorption by those of large capitalists.... The public benefit largely by this, as one admission fee enables them to enjoy a programme which ten years ago would have been deemed sufficient for half a dozen tent exhibitions. Consequently the total number of important circuses will not exceed twenty, against twenty-four during the past season. The summer of 1875 was not favorable to out-door amusement enterprises, and of the twenty-four circuses catalogued by the *Mercury* at the beginning of last spring, only sixteen were capable of fulfilling their allotted terms... By reference to the *Mercury's* correct and exclusive annual report, it will be ascertained that many new combinations have been arranged by veteran and reliable circus managers, and that these consolidated companies involve immense investment of capital. In point of novelty as regards the entertainments to be presented in the half dozen mammoth tents which constitute the modern circus, the inventive powers of the most expert caterers have been taxed to their utmost limit and a lavish outlay has been made in order to attract popular attention and insure general satisfaction.¹⁷

The passage highlights the way that corporate capitalism was reshaping the circus industry, resulting in ever-larger combinations and driving innovation as managers looked for new ways to prosper amidst the harsh economic climate. James Bailey's response to these tough conditions was to search out new markets overseas, and this contemporary assessment by the *Mercury* provides a useful context for appreciating why in 1876 he decided to take his show across the Pacific.

¹⁶ Stuart Thayer, *Grand Entrée: the Birth of the Greatest Show on Earth, 1870-1875* (San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1998).

¹⁷ "Spangles for 1876," *New York Mercury*, undated clipping, McCaddon Collection of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, Box 19, Scrapbook No.3, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

While the massive traveling circuses were the most spectacular example, the effects of corporate capitalism were evident across a variety of cultural forms, and although the economic downturn certainly dampened business, the U.S. culture industry continued to grow in the 1870s. The often glum assessments of the amusement business that appeared in the *New York Clipper* were belied by its expanding columns and advertisements, which indicated that although profits might be down, the number and variety of entertainments on offer was increasing. This state of affairs pushed many U.S. entertainers to look for less competitive and potentially prosperous markets overseas. A recent study of the globalization of American mass culture locates its origins in the completion of the transcontinental railroad, which created a nationwide market that enabled new forms of production, distribution, and consumption that in turn accelerated its movement abroad. While I think this is broadly accurate, what the analysis misses in its subsequent emphasis on the rise of American mass culture in Europe is the way in which the railroad drove the U.S. culture industries to expand across the Pacific.¹⁸

The Resurgence of Minstrelsy

With a population of almost two million in 1875, the Australian colonies remained the most important overall market in the Pacific circuit, though regular and reliable steamship service ensured that other locales made increasingly frequent appearances on entertainer's itineraries.¹⁹ During his first sixteen-month Pacific tour, for example, Kellar divided his time roughly equally between touring the Australian colonies

¹⁸ Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹⁹ The Australian population was approximately three times the size of California at the time. B. R. Mitchell, *International Historical Statistics: Africa, Asia & Oceania, 1750-2000*, 4th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

and major colonial ports like Batavia, Singapore, Manila, and Hong Kong. A confluence of demographic and economic factors also saw New Zealand emerge as a profitable market during this decade and it was relatively rapidly incorporated into the touring circuit.²⁰ In 1878, the Cooper and Bailey Circus duly made a profitable three-month tour through New Zealand on their way from Australia to South America, and Kellar too would visit the colony during his second circuit through the Pacific. Kellar and Bailey, though, were merely following in the steps of the wave of U.S. entertainers that re-energized the Pacific circuit in the 1870s and, as so often was the case, it was the minstrels who led the way.

The evolution of blackface minstrelsy vis-à-vis the Pacific circuit in this era was a particularly good example of how intertwined domestic and foreign developments pushed performers to tour overseas. Like other sectors of the culture industry, the minstrel business was reshaped in the decade after the Civil War by the influence of corporate capitalism and the effects of increased competition. The former tendency was manifest in the efforts by professional managers like J.H. Haverly who organized progressively larger companies that mounted expensive and spectacular stage shows accompanied by national tours and promotional campaigns.²¹ This was also in part a response to competition from other forms of popular stage entertainment, like musical comedies and, most notably, variety, which eventually subsumed blackface minstrelsy. As smaller troupes struggled and even established minstrel companies and stars ran into financial trouble, some American minstrels were able to find new life on the Pacific circuit, where

²⁰ Adrienne Simpson, "Putting Entertainment on the Map: the New Zealand Touring Circuits in 1874," *Australasian Drama Studies* 26 (April 1995): 153-76.

²¹ Robert C. Toll refers to this as the "grand transformation" of minstrelsy. *Blacking Up*, 124-59.

blackface entertainment remained popular and conditions suited traditionally smaller touring parties.

What Richard Waterhouse has described as the “American resurgence” in minstrelsy across the Pacific actually began in 1869, when Weston & Hussey Minstrels embarked from San Francisco for Australia.²² Frank Hussey, it will be remembered, was the whaler turned minstrel who first performed on the beaches of Honolulu almost twenty years before. The Weston & Hussey Minstrels proved so successful in Melbourne that they took over St. George’s Hall where they had been performing and refitted and reopened it as Weston’s Opera House, “devoted exclusively to Ethiopianism,” in June 1869. A reviewer for the *Australasian* at the opening night’s entertainment predicted, “Weston’s is going to hold in popular estimation.” But there were also clearly ongoing debates about the propriety of minstrelsy, as the review went on to attack critics who “sneered at nigger melodies” and opined that such people simply “did not know how laugh.”²³ The success of Weston’s over the next few years demonstrated that a minstrel hall could still prosper in the antipodes, even as a majority of minstrel halls and houses in the United States were either going out of business or turning to variety.

When regular steamship service along the southern route was seemingly set to commence in 1871, the *Australasian* reprinted a letter from California that suggested that arrangements had been made between Thomas Maguire, the San Francisco theatrical magnate, and “a well-known enterprising caterer” in Melbourne to forward along “any novelty that may be considered sufficiently attractive and remunerative to pay a tour through the Australian colonies,” and “the first consignment (to use a commercial term)

²² Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville*, 43-44.

²³ *Australasian* (Melbourne), June 5, 1869.

will...be the Emerson troupe of minstrels.”²⁴ The enterprising caterer was probably longtime Melbourne theatrical manager George Coppin, but the correspondence between Coppin and his San Francisco-based agent, Andrew Birrell, highlighted some of the difficulties that were involved with these sorts of transnational tours. Negotiations with Billy Emerson, a star minstrel performer, proved difficult as he demanded one thousand dollars a week to make the trip and then refused to depart San Francisco at the last moment after the contract was settled. After another round of negotiations due to the fact that Emerson had gambled away all of his money, the fifteen-member California Minstrels led by Emerson headed to Melbourne, touring through New Zealand for a month along the way.²⁵

When Emerson finally arrived in Melbourne, the minstrels opened to glowing reviews. Coppin confirmed that “they played to a good steady business,” but he complained to Birrell that “the salaries they charged were too high” and was apparently surprised by their numbers as he wondered, “why did you not send a list?” The letter also included a note for £114, which covered the twenty percent Birrell was owed as the booking agent.²⁶ The California Minstrels season in Melbourne lasted fourteen weeks and although the venture was not as profitable as Coppin hoped because of the high salaries, it did show that there was a strong market for minstrelsy in Melbourne, and Emerson would actually undertake two additional Pacific tours that touched there in later years. More significantly in the short run was that eight members of the California Minstrels, obviously sensing an opportunity, stayed abroad after Emerson returned,

²⁴ *Australasian*, May 27, 1871.

²⁵ Andrew Birrell to George Coppin, March 26, 1872 and May 23, 1872, George Selth Coppin Papers, State Library of Victoria.

²⁶ Coppin to Birrell, December 15, 1873. In another letter to a different agent, Coppin reported that the gross receipts were £3159 of which £2150 was paid to the minstrels and if that is the case, he was being dishonest with Birrell about the proceeds: George Selth Coppin Papers, State Library of Victoria.

forming a new troupe known as the U.S. Minstrels. For the next five years, the party was active in Australia and New Zealand and at one point toured as far as north as Shanghai.²⁷

As traditional minstrelsy continued to decline in the face of variety and the dominance of large touring companies in the United States, there was a veritable flood of minstrels to the Pacific. In 1876 and 1877 alone, at least six new minstrel troupes made the trip to Australia, including two rival African-American companies that laid claim to the Georgia Minstrels moniker. The first of these actually traveled on the same steamer as the Cooper and Bailey Circus and was organized by longtime San Francisco agent Sheridan Corbyn while the other was led by the African-American manager Charles Hicks. Amongst these troupes were the renowned Kelly and Leon Minstrels, who were forced to close their long-running theater in New York City after a several seasons but found new life in the antipodes. Even Kellar's manager, Al Hayman, got into the act and stayed in Sydney to open a minstrel hall when the magician moved on.²⁸ In the late 1870s and into the 1880s, Melbourne became a center of blackface entertainment, hosting multiple minstrel venues and serving as base for troupes to tour further afield. A performer named Tommy Hudson that first arrived in Australia with Emerson in 1873, for one, formed a long-running minstrel and variety company known as "Hudson's Surprise Party," that toured through Australia, New Zealand, India, China, and Japan for almost twenty years.²⁹

While Australia was clearly a magnet for American minstrel troupes in this era, the precise reasons for this were complicated. From a purely economic perspective, the

²⁷ *The Lorgnette* (Melbourne), January 14, 1881; Slout, ed., *Burnt Cork and Tambourines*, 109.

²⁸ *Bulletin* (Sydney), September 28, 1880.

²⁹ On the travels of "Hudson's Surprise Party, see the *Lorgnette* (Melbourne), December 12, 1879, October 3, 1881, June 11, 1888; May 10, 1890; October 1894.

decline of minstrelsy and intense competition in the United States pushed troupes to find more receptive markets. The ability of so many minstrels to find success in Australia in the 1870s also suggests that the market there had to some extent been underserved. In the fullest examination of this phenomenon, Richard Waterhouse suggests that the popularity of minstrel shows in Australia was because their “appeal crossed class” and reassured Australians “about the superiority of the ‘white’ race.”³⁰ While racial attitudes certainly hardened in the Australian colonies and among white settlers around more generally around the Pacific during the 1870s, the link between minstrelsy, racism, and imperialism remains vague.³¹ Taking a rather more sophisticated tack, Melissa Bellanta has argued that working-class Australians were attracted to the perceived social marginality of minstrels in a way that echoed back to its popularity among poor Irish immigrants in New York during the early years of minstrelsy.³² Whatever the case, blackface minstrelsy was back in vogue and much like the 1850s, it was American minstrels that dominated the field, but despite their numbers, the singular event of this era in entertainment was the Pacific tour of the Cooper and Bailey Circus.

The Cooper and Bailey Circus

The Cooper and Bailey Circus departed from San Francisco aboard the Pacific Mail Steamship Co.’s *City of Sydney* on November 8, 1876. The co-owner and manager

³⁰ Waterhouse, 102, 108.

³¹ On Australia, see Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations, 1788-1993* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1994). On the larger Pacific, see Gerald Horne, *The White Pacific: U.S. Imperialism and Black Slavery in the South Seas After the Civil War* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007). Michael Pickering argues that minstrels became more “brutally racist as the century wore on, reaching their most malicious pitch during the heyday of ‘high’ imperialism,” but says little about the specific dynamics. “Mock Blacks and Racial Mockery: the ‘Nigger’ Minstrel and British Imperialism,” in *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1790-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 180.

³² Melissa Bellanta, “Leary Kin: Australian Larrikins and the Blackface Minstrel Dandy.” *Journal of Social History* 42, no. 33 (2009): 677-95.

of the circus was the twenty-nine year old James Bailey, who had made a remarkably rapid rise through the ranks of the circus profession. Like many other circus people, James McGinnis, which was his real surname, was an orphan and he adopted the name Bailey after he began working as a billposter for Frederick H. Bailey, the advance man of the Robinson and Lake Circus, in the early 1860s.³³ After a short stint as a clerk during the Civil War, Bailey returned to the circus business to work as a purchasing agent and eventually earned enough capital to become a part owner of the Cooper and Bailey Circus, which debuted in 1875. After a modestly successful season, the show settled into winter quarters in St. Louis and this was where Bailey made the rather bold decision to take the circus across the Pacific.³⁴

The precise genesis of the idea for a Pacific tour remains somewhat unclear. While the circus business in the United States was slumping, Bailey had never even toured outside of the Midwest and it represented an unprecedented and seemingly risky venture, particularly for such a large show. More than anything, success required a great deal of planning. With the route for the 1876 season set to end in San Francisco, the show opened in St. Louis on April 17 and the coming Australian tour was already prominently featured in their advertising.³⁵ The circus toured through the Upper Midwest and then across the country via the transcontinental railroad, arriving in San Francisco in September.³⁶ Bailey there met with Signor Agrati, an advance agent with experience on

³³ Travel and Personal Diary of Master James Bailey, McCaddon Collection of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, Box 46, Folder 1-2; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

³⁴ Richard E. Conover, *The Affairs of James A. Bailey* (Xenia, OH: Self-published, 1957). The other owner, James Cooper, was a silent partner and did not travel with the circus during its time abroad.

³⁵ C. G. Sturtevant, "Foreign Tours of American Circuses," *Billboard*, July 27, 1922.

³⁶ W. G. Crowley, comp. *The Route of Cooper, Bailey & Co.'s Great International Ten Allied Show's in One During the Season of 1876* (San Francisco: Francis & Valentine, 1876).

the Pacific circuit with John Wilson's circus, and H. P. Lyons, an Australian showman who served as the advertising manager during the tour. Given the magnitude of the undertaking, there would seem to be little doubt that these two men had been employed to assess the situation in Australia and ensure that it was a viable undertaking. The tour was organized around separate visits to each of the five Australian colonies. Although the circus could travel between the major ports via steamer, there were concerns about the logistics and economics of touring inland over rail.³⁷ In this context, Bailey apparently decided to shed some excess weight, and a substantial amount of property was auctioned off in San Francisco prior to their departure.

Still, the circus that departed for Australia was a large one, and it reportedly cost Bailey \$17,000 to charter the steamer for the sixty personnel, hundreds of animals, and tons of equipment that made up the show. The four-week voyage to Sydney was broken only by brief stopovers in Honolulu and Kandavu, Fiji, to take on passengers and transship goods. In Honolulu, locals were able to buy tickets to come onboard and view the animals and among the visitors was the Hawaiian King, David Kalakaua. While the steamer was transshipping goods in Fiji, one of the clowns named Charley Seeley and several acrobats wandered onto shore and gave an impromptu performance to the "astonished" natives. When the steamer arrived in Sydney on December 6, the already extensively advertised show was greeted by massive crowds who stayed on to watch the unloading of the menagerie, a pattern that would be repeated whenever the circus

³⁷ Joseph T. McCaddon, Bailey's brother-in-law, was the wardrobe manager on the Australian tour and later wrote an unpublished biography about him that included some reminiscences about the tour. McCaddon ms., 14, Joseph T. McCaddon Collection, Bridgeport Public Library.

steamed into to a new port.³⁸ A characteristic scene in Adelaide was described by the local newspaper as follows:

The work of getting the plant and animals ashore was begun at once, and the smart way in which it was done is worthy of remark. Every man of the troupe knew his post, and they all appeared to act in concert with as much promptness and discipline as a well-drilled company artillery-men handling a gun...the same process repeated with celerity and exactness. The average time occupied in landing each animal was about 2 ½ minute, no bustle or noise accompanying the operation, but perfect order prevailing...In a few hours all the heavy *impedimenta* of the company was put ashore.³⁹

As in the United States, the logistical display of unloading and setting up the circus was part of the “show,” and the admiration it inspired for American organization and enterprise was a frequent refrain of local papers.⁴⁰ The highlight of the process for many was the unloading of the elephants, as they were hoisted off the deck with their trainers and dangled over the wharf before being lowered to the ground and marched to the grounds.

Although the circus did not open until two weeks after it arrived in Sydney, on December 18, the newspapers were filled with puff pieces about the show, and the city’s walls were “placarded with pictorial representations” in full color, a first for Australia. One of the main features of a proper railroad circus in the United States was a parade, and one was planned for the morning of the debut performance, but Sydney authorities apparently balked at the last minute over concerns about traffic and the animals. Despite this, all of the build up ensured that anticipation was at a fever pitch, and the debut performance was witnessed by a crowd of over six thousand people.⁴¹

³⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 8, 1876. The company’s press agent, W. G. Crowley, sent regular updates on the tour to the *New York Clipper* and he boasted in his first letter that ten thousand people came out to see the spectacle of the circus arrive and unload in Sydney: January 20, 1877.

³⁹ *South Australian Register* (Adelaide), March 10, 1877.

⁴⁰ Davis, 38.

⁴¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 19, 1876.

The show was divided into five separate tents. The main tent was three hundred feet long and one hundred and twenty feet across and featured two rings, which was a novelty in Australia, but some found that “the presence of two sets of performers makes it difficult at times to catch the excellencies thoroughly well.”⁴² In terms of seating, this tent had a dress circle with six hundred seats, stalls for eight hundred, and a pit that held five thousand more, so a full house included over six thousand people and the impressive size of the tent and the crowds was a frequent source of commentary:

We question if such a spectacle has ever before been witnessed in Launceston as the interior of the great circus pavilion then presented, with its sixteen tiers of seats filled with smiling faces. The size of this pavilion is rather staggering at first, as the greatest length of the oval is nearly 200 feet, and standing at one end it is impossible to distinguish even the feature of those on the crowded seats at the other end with the naked eye.⁴³

By way of comparison, the circus tents used twenty years earlier by J.A. Rowe and W.H. Foley were much smaller and able to accommodate only about five hundred people. The Cooper and Bailey Circus demonstrated just how big the circus business had become during the intervening twenty years, both in terms of the production and its audience.

The next largest tent housed the menagerie, which included three elephants, a hippopotamus, camels, a giraffe, a leopard, lions, monkeys, and sea lions. A third tent contained a “museum of curiosities” while another was used as a “concert” tent. The latter was open both before and after the circus proper and featured a variety show and a performance by the “Tennessee Minstrels,” but the fact that it cost an extra shilling was a frequent source of criticism from local papers. One indignant reviewer elevated it to matter of national honor with the declaration that

⁴² *Town and Country Journal* (Sydney), December 1, 1877

⁴³ *Launceston Examiner*, April 3, 1877

The English style of show is honest and without humbug. The American Cooper and Bailey style of exhibition (however good it is) is conducted in a 'smart' and offensive style, and we guarantee would never run a second time through these colonies. The concert that follows is a 'swindle' (at least decent English folk call it so) and we advise all readers of this paper never to pay a shilling in future for three poor songs and a couple of breakdowns, although a thousand Maryborough folk were induced to do so.⁴⁴

Although the paper was proved wrong about the show making a second run through the colonies, the comment showed how the circus prompted ongoing debates about the rising tide of Americanization and the desirability of American-style entertainment.

In the fifth and final tent, George Middleton operated a sideshow, which perhaps surprisingly proved to be an extremely popular feature. Although General Tom Thumb, Chang the Giant, and other individual curiosities had toured through Australia, the Cooper and Bailey sideshow was apparently the first of its kind. Among the listed attractions were Professor Mitchell, the "fire king," and Miss Ann E. Leak, the "armless lady," who fascinated audiences with exhibitions of embroidery and 'hand' writing.⁴⁵

The star performer of the show was James Robinson, "Champion Rider of the World," and one of the most famous equestrians of the nineteenth century. Robinson was a bareback rider of unusual grace, and an impressed reviewer in Melbourne observed,

[Robinson possessed] skills the like of which have never before been seen in Victoria. He appeared to be at perfect ease on the bare back of the horse, and amongst other feats he succeeded in throwing somersaults through paper balloons, alighting on the back of the animal, and in carrying his son, a plucky little fellow about seven years of age, upright on his head whilst the horse was cantering round. Both he and the boy were accorded hearty applause for his performance.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Maryborough Advertiser*, n.d., quoted in Mark St. Leon, "Cooper, Bailey & Co. Great International Allied Shows: The Australian Tours, 1873-78," *Bandwagon* 36, no. 5-6 (1992): 39.

⁴⁵ *Circus Memoirs: Reminiscences of George Middleton as Told to and Written by His Wife* (Los Angeles: G. Rice & Sonsa, 1913). Leak was married to another circus performer and apparently gave birth to a son in Hobart during the tour. *Hobart Mercury*, April 6, 1877.

⁴⁶ *The Lorgnette* (Melbourne), January 25, 1877.

Robinson was the highest paid performer in the show with a salary of \$500 a week, but for all his skill, this expensive contract and his prickly disposition soon became a problem for Bailey.

The other performer that particularly impressed was “Professor” George W. Johnston, an animal tamer who created a sensation when he entered the ring in a lion cage as that was pushed by the elephants. The rest of the roster reflected a typical mix of circus performers, including Pauline Lee, a lady equestrian and juggler; William Gorman, champion jockey rider; the Belmonts, trapeze artists; the Siegrist children, acrobats; Peter Conkling and Charles Seeley, clowns; Thomas and Clinton, brother somersault act; Cassim and Fritz, English acrobats; and a number of variety performers and vocalists who played the concert tent. Indeed, there were so many performers that one reviewer was lead to opine that “if any fault is to be found at all, it is simply in the quantity, not the quality of the programme.”⁴⁷

After a strong month-long debut in Sydney, the circus headed to Melbourne in January and there staged a grand parade before the debut performance. The parade certainly made an extraordinary impression, and one paper declared, “If Messrs Cooper, Bailey, and Co. do nothing else, they may take credit to themselves for having caused the congregations of one of the largest assemblages ever witnessed in the streets of Melbourne.” The paper went on to describe the procession, which led off with an elegant carriage drawn by ten grey horses that contained the proprietors. A bandwagon followed “discoursing sweet music,” ahead of a procession of the equestrian performers in colorful costumes “prancing along two abreast.” The menagerie came next, and the fact that someone of the big cats were trotted along only confined by chains, “excited considerable

⁴⁷ *Town and Country Journal* (Sydney), December 1, 1877

attention.” The highlight of the parade was next as “a large van drawn by three elephants in tandem” squeezed its way through the “ungovernable throng.” The final piece was a “mysterious looking steam piano, puffing away in a very unmusical manner.”⁴⁸ In his update, Crowley claimed the circus, which showed twice a day for four weeks, excepting Sundays, sold over a quarter of a million tickets in Melbourne and the cashbook for their stay shows daily receipts of around \$4,000.⁴⁹

In a letter back to the *Clipper*, Crowley wrote that “so far the visit has been a decided success,” but he was worried about whether the show was “too large for this country” and deemed it “questionable whether it will pay after leaving this city.”⁵⁰ Crowley did not mention such matters again so evidently the provincial tour through Victoria paid off, and the circus went to Adelaide in early March. There the circus continued to impress and newspaper reviewers were effusive in their praise:

The enterprising proprietors of this popular place of amusement advertised their grand combination as the greatest show *on earth* (the italics are ours). Whether they mean to imply that ever their efforts will be surpassed in a future state, we do not know and do not care; but this we may say, that the entertainment is the grandest of its class ever seen in Adelaide.⁵¹

Bailey had decided to raise prices in Adelaide, a move that might have suggested the financials had become a concern, but it passed without comment in the local paper and attendance seems to have been good so perhaps Bailey just saw an opportunity take advantage of the show’s drawing power.⁵²

⁴⁸ *Arugs* (Melbourne), January 19, 1877.

⁴⁹ *New York Clipper*, July 24, 1877. “Cash Book, Cooper & Bailey, Australia and South America Tours 1876-1877-1878.” McCaddon Collection of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, Box 45, Folder 8; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

⁵⁰ *New York Clipper*, July 24, 1877.

⁵¹ Undated clipping, McCaddon Collection of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, Page 1, Box 21; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

⁵² *South Australia Register* (Adelaide), March 10, 1877.

Tasmania was up next, with the circus visiting only Launceston and Hobart in quick succession, though there were some troubles at the latter locale. Crowley reported that a “rough element...showed its nature during the last performance, by cutting the canvas and doing other mean acts.”⁵³ Although such behavior was common in the United States, where brawls between locals and circus folk were commonplace, this was evidently the only time in Australia that the Cooper and Bailey show encountered such problems. From Hobart, the circus returned to Sydney, but lost one of its celebrated attractions en route when the giraffe was killed in rough weather, much to Bailey’s consternation.⁵⁴

The circus performed a three-week return engagement in Sydney where its initial promotional campaign had done much to ensure a profitable season. Perhaps the most widely-remarked upon feature of the show in the daily newspapers during this initial tour was actually the advertising. Not only had the Cooper and Bailey show introduced full color posters, they used multi-sheet posters as well, which were a novelty in Australia.⁵⁵ Crowley remarked in a letter to the *Clipper* that when they first appeared in Sydney, police had to clear the sidewalks of people who sat and stared.⁵⁶ The American style of circus advertising essentially followed the maxim that more was better, but local reactions were a mixture of admiration and condemnation of all the advertising as rank

⁵³ W. G. Crowley, ed., *The Australian Tour of the Cooper, Bailey, & Co.’s Great International Allied Shows* (Brisbane: Thorne & Greenwell, 1877).

⁵⁴ According to a later account: “A squall arose...began to roll, the animals being badly knocked about. The poor giraffe spread herself, trying to steady herself, got strangled, died in the night and was buried at sea at Mr. Bailey’s request. I was on board and saw the carcass thrown over. Mr. Bailey was dreadfully cut up, as he was very fond of the animal, which had cost him and Mr. Cooper (who never came to Australia) \$1500. “Mummer’s Memories,” *Sydney Sportsman*, August 12, 1908, quoted in St. Leon, “Cooper, Bailey & Co.,” 26.

⁵⁵ On posters and advertising, see Charles Philip Fox and Tom Parkinson, *Billers, Banners, and Bombast: The Story of Circus Advertising* (Pruett Pub. Co, 1985).

⁵⁶ *New York Clipper*, April 28, 1877.

commercialism. As one paper opined, “There is no doubt that our ‘American cousins’ are adepts in the art of advertising, and in this instance they have roused the public curiosity to the highest pitch and are now reaping the benefits.”⁵⁷ Although couched as a compliment, this comment seems to betray a certain anxiety about whether such the promotional extravagance was something to be celebrated or condemned.

Despite these complaints, the overall season in Australia was a success, and the circus traveled north to Queensland for the final stretch. According to the route book, the plan was to quarter the menagerie in Brisbane for the winter and take the remainder of the show along the northern coast of Queensland and then on through to India by way of Java and Singapore.⁵⁸ But there trouble was afoot between Bailey and his star rider James Robinson and after a fight between the two men, Robinson booked passage to England and Bailey headed back to the United States to find a replacement and more new talent for a second season abroad.⁵⁹ In the meantime, George Middleton, the sideshow manager, was left in charge and took a small version of the circus to the Dutch East Indies, visiting Samarang and Batavia, but the heat, illness, and poor business soon led him to close and return to Australia to await Bailey’s return.⁶⁰

Bailey triumphantly arrived in New York in August 1877 and took out a large ad in the *New York Clipper* trumpeting the success of the show in Australia and promising “long engagements guaranteed and fares advanced” for new talent.⁶¹ Four weeks later,

⁵⁷ *Inglewood Advertiser*, n.d., quoted in Mark St. Leon, “Cooper, Bailey & Co.,” 39.

⁵⁸ W. G. Crowley, comp. *The Australian Tour of Cooper, Bailey, & Co.’s Great International Allied Shows* (Brisbane: Thorne & Greenwell, 1877).

⁵⁹ James W. Shettel, “The Great International Circus in Australia,” *Circus Scrap Book* 11 (July 1931): 31-42.

⁶⁰ Middleton, 65-67. There are several extant bills in Dutch from this portion of the tour. McCaddon Collection of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, Box 20; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

⁶¹ *New York Clipper*, August 25, 1877.

the newspaper reported that Bailey sent a rhinoceros, 24 large bales of canvas, and 40 boxes of paper via fast freight to San Francisco, followed a few days later by two more carloads containing lithographs and a Mardi Gras wardrobe.⁶² On October 1, Bailey left New York with a group of a dozen or so performers in various lines and they met up with the remainder of the main show in Sydney in early November. The speed with which Bailey was able to travel from Australia to New York, purchase and ship tons of properties and paper, secure talent for the new season, and then return to Sydney was an impressive demonstration of the efficiency of the U.S. culture industry and the crucial role that rail and steam transportation networks played in facilitating its expansion.

For the second season, an even larger tent was constructed with a 150-foot main pole that allowed for some thrilling aerial feats from Mons. Loyal on the trapeze and Mademoiselle De Granville, the “Iron-Jawed Lady,” who bit down on a bar and then was slowly pulled some 100 feet the air, holding on only by her teeth.⁶³ Apparently with better knowledge of the market, the route during this second tour was limited to New South Wales, Tasmania, and Victoria. A New Zealand tour was also added and proved to be very successful as the gross receipts totaled an impressive \$75,000 after just six weeks in the colony.⁶⁴ In Auckland, Bailey chartered another a steamer to return across the Pacific and the company left on May 5, 1878 for Callao (i.e. Lima, Peru). Although the circus ran into some unspecified difficulties in South America, a trimmed down company toured the principal ports, and the company arrived in New York City in August 1878.

⁶² *New York Clipper*, September 29, 1877.

⁶³ *Town and Courier Journal*, December 1, 1877.

⁶⁴ “Cash Book, Cooper & Bailey, Australia and South America Tours 1876-1877-1878,” McCaddon Collection of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, Box 45, Folder 8: Princeton University Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

Bailey had spent a little less than two years overseas, but they were evidently very profitable as he quickly moved to buy Howe's Great London show for \$23,000 and the following season fielded one of the largest and best equipped shows in the country, complete with electric lights and advertising that puffed the show's adventures abroad.⁶⁵ Bailey's only real rival by 1880 was P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth, but after just one season of competition the two men elected to merge rather than compete and a circus institution was born.⁶⁶ Bailey's ascension to the top of the circus business was the direct result of his astute Australian adventure. The scale and sophistication of the Pacific tour by the Cooper and Bailey Circus and more importantly, the profitability, demonstrated that the Pacific circuit could bear the weight of even the biggest American shows, and a number of other large railroad circuses made the trip to Australia during the late nineteenth century, though none of them were as spectacularly successful.⁶⁷

Royal Illusionists

Like the Cooper and Bailey Circus and so many of the minstrels, Harry Kellar traveled from San Francisco on the newly established Pacific Mail Steamship Co.'s line to Sydney in 1876. Over the next sixteen months, Kellar divided his time roughly equally between touring Australia and major colonial ports like Batavia, Singapore, Manila, and Hong Kong. He returned for a second circuit along a similar route in 1882, though this time Japan and New Zealand were added to his itinerary. By 1885, Kellar had earned enough money to refit a Philadelphia theater in splendid fashion, and he settled in for an

⁶⁵ *New York Clipper*, August 17, 1878.

⁶⁶ William Slout, *A Royal Coupling: The Historic Marriage of Barnum and Bailey* (San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 2000). Bailey had such fond memories of Australia that he tried to convince Barnum to take the "Greatest Show on Earth" down to Australia in 1889.

⁶⁷ Mark St. Leon, *The American Century, 1851-1950*, vol. 3 of *The Circus in Australia* (Penshurst, NSW: Mark St. Leon, 2007), 215-38.

impressive run of over two hundred consecutive performances, generating the momentum that eventually led him to be the most renowned and respected magician in the United States during the late nineteenth century.

One of the most interesting aspects about Kellar's time in the Pacific was the way he used the capital and prestige garnered overseas to help set up his success at home. Upon his return to the United States, a more likely than not ghostwritten account of his adventures was published called *A Magician's Tour* (1886), which offers a fascinating, albeit self-serving, narrative of his life as an entertainer.⁶⁸ Although the primary onus of the work is to present Kellar as a worldly and cosmopolitan figure, it also illustrates the evolution of stage magic as a cultural forms and shows how Kellar tried to use his experiences abroad to inflect his performances in the United States.

Harry Kellar was born Heinrich Keller in Erie, Pennsylvania in 1849 to a German immigrant family, and his seemingly unhappy childhood coincided with the emergence of stage magic as a popular form of entertainment in the United States and Europe. Magic possesses a complex genealogy, and its use as commercial entertainment certainly preceded the mid-nineteenth century, but it is during this time that what is generally known as "modern magic" took shape. During the 1840s, seminal performers like Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin, Compars Hermann, and John Henry Anderson offered full-evening performances to respectable audiences with programs that portrayed magic as refined entertainment untainted by either superstition or criminality.⁶⁹ The same year

⁶⁸ The original edition of *A Magician's Tour* was published in 1886 and went through at least eight editions as Kellar sold it at his shows up until his retirement in 1907. Though clearly sensational at times, the essential narrative in terms of dates and places has proved accurate. It also contains occasional personal observations that are consistent with Kellar's correspondence so he certainly contributed to the work, even if he was not the main author.

⁶⁹ Although this point regarding the emergence of a new mode of magic performance is made in much of the specialized magic literature, for a more nuanced and historically situated account, see Cook, *Arts of*

Kellar was born, “Wyman the Wizard” was performing a full-evening stage show at Barnum’s Museum in New York, which historians generally credit as the first of its kind though there were earlier itinerant magicians.⁷⁰ During the 1850s and 1860s, a collection of mostly European magicians including Signor Blitz, Robert Heller, Compars Hermann, and John Henry Anderson mounted successful tours that helped establish stage magic as legitimate and profitable form of popular entertainment in the United States. It was this sort of magic that Kellar, who fled an unsettled home life, was first exposed to in New York City amidst the Civil War. Although he was taken in by a kindly clergyman and moved upstate, the posters and tricks he had seen in the city captured his imagination and it was not long before he found an opportunity to follow his dreams.⁷¹

In 1863, Kellar saw a show by a traveling magician called the “Fakir of Ava” and later related to Houdini that after the thrilling experience he “ became very restless, bought books on magic and finally left my friend and benefactor" to track down the Fakir, who eventually took him on an assistant.⁷² The so-called “Fakir of Ava” was actually a British magician named Isaiah Harris Hughes (1810-1891) who traded in a form of commercial Orientalism by smearing on greasepaint to brown his face and donning robes to perform as an Eastern “juggler.” The phenomenon of white magicians masquerading as Chinese or Indian performers was a regular feature of nineteenth-

Deception; Milbourne Christopher, *The Illustrated History of Magic* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1973); David Price, *Magic: A Pictorial History of Conjurers in the Theater* (New York: Cornwall Books, 1985).

⁷⁰ Charles Pecor charts the evolution of magic in the United States from its “paratheatrical” phase (fire-eating, ventriloquism, ledgerdemon) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to the more specialized magical entertainments of Wyman and others in *The Magician on the American Stage: 1752-1874* (Washington: Emerson and West, 1977).

⁷¹ While this all might sound rather romantic, the essential details of Kellar’s early life have been confirmed through some meticulous research by Phil Temple. See his introduction to a recent reissue of Kellar’s story. *A Magician’s Tour Revisited* (n.p.: Self-published, 2003).

⁷² Kellar to Houdini, quoted from Mike Caveney and Bill Meisel, *Kellar’s Wonders* (Pasadena: Magic Words, 2003).

century magic for this sort of cultural cross-dressing made their shows more exotic and appealing than standard presentations.⁷³ Magic was a particularly early and illustrative example of a globalized cultural form. Because, as Simon During has argued, magic shows generally required “few competencies to enjoy, they move easily across cultural and linguistic barriers,” and this “transportability” allowed magicians to become the first entertainers to regularly tour internationally.⁷⁴ During the 1830s, the United States was visited by several troupes of Indian jugglers and Chinese performers who were already a common sight in European theaters.⁷⁵ Conversely, European and American magicians like Robert Heller and Harry Kellar toured through India and the Pacific. The result was an unprecedented level of interaction among magicians and disparate audiences that fostered cultural exchanges and led many Western magicians to cultivate cosmopolitan personas to market their shows.

It was against this background that Kellar began his professional training under the Fakir of Ava as they toured around the United States during the 1860s. In 1867, Kellar started out on his own as a traveling and, initially at least, not very successful magician, performing in small towns in the Midwest. His early struggles were partially due to the intense competition in the amusement business, which was booming in the post-Civil War era. But perhaps a larger issue concerned the ongoing impact of corporate capitalism that was transforming magic performance from an itinerant artisan tradition to a more professional and business-oriented mode of production. In many ways, Kellar’s

⁷³ Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*; Jim Steinmeyer, *The Glorious Deception: The Double Life of William Robinson, aka Chung Ling Soo, the "Marvelous Chinese Conjuror"* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005); Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

⁷⁴ Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2.

⁷⁵ On Indian and Chinese magicians in the West, see Pecor, 63-69; During, 106-110.

career exemplified this shift as he was trained in the traditional manner as an apprentice but ultimately made his mark by mastering magic as a business enterprise.⁷⁶ Kellar was only eighteen when he began performing on his own, and with a limited repertoire and resources his nascent magical career was stillborn. But Kellar caught another lucky break in the summer of 1869 when he secured a position as an assistant with one of the most sensational and profitable acts then touring, the infamous Davenport Brothers.

William and Ira Davenport began performing in 1854, capitalizing on the Spiritualism craze that began in upstate New York with the Fox sisters.⁷⁷ The modern Spiritualist movement was variegated but essentially centered on a belief that so-called “mediums” possessed special abilities through which they were able to communicate with spirits.⁷⁸ This could take a variety of forms including rappings, séances, and slate writing, but the Davenports became famous for their “spirit cabinet.” The performance began with the brothers being securely tied up by a committee of audience members and then shut into a large cabinet. Almost immediately strange noises and movement was heard, but when it was opened the brothers were found still tied up and seated, which of course implied there were supernatural forces at work.⁷⁹ The Davenports cultivated a certain ambiguity and occupied a grey area between Spiritualism, which professed

⁷⁶ A good example of this was that when Kellar retired, he simply sold his entire show to Howard Thurston for a continuing share of the proceeds. In this sense, Kellar’s show was more or less a multi-million dollar company that Thurston simply takes over. Mike Caveney and Bill Meisel, *Kellar’s Wonders* (Pasadena: Magic Words, 2003).

⁷⁷ In 1848, Kate (1838-1892) and Margaretta (1836-1893) Fox became celebrities through their supposed ability to communicate with spirits via seemingly unexplainable rapping noises. Barbara Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004).

⁷⁸ Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003); Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁷⁹ The brothers introduced a number of variations and novelties to the routine over the years, but the essential act remained the same. For an interesting account of their early years from a man who knew something about fooling an audience, see P. T. Barnum, *Humbugs of the World* (New York: Carleton, 1865).

otherworldly powers, and stage magic, which emphasized science and skill over superstition.⁸⁰ Their performances stoked controversy wherever they traveled, and they were inevitably imitated and exposed, but nevertheless managed a successful career during which they toured around the globe.

Kellar crossed paths with the Davenports in Milwaukee during 1869 and finagled a position as an assistant with the show. Kellar worked as an understudy, learned the secrets of the performance, and eventually became the Davenports general manager, organizing tours through the United States and Canada during the early 1870s. He never got along very well with the brothers though, and after a blow up with William, Kellar left and convinced their longtime partner, William Fay, to join him in creating their own act. Despite the ostensibly rough ending to their relationship, Kellar clearly learned a lot about show business from his years with the Davenports, and, most importantly, he now knew the secret to one of the most successful acts running.⁸¹

Kellar and Fay presented a program that mixed magic tricks with the spirit cabinet routine, touring the southern United States, Mexico, and South America during the mid-1870s. This experience attuned Kellar to the importance of transnational markets where acts that were either played out or suffering from stiff competition in the United States and Europe might prove to be profitable novelties. Unfortunately for Fay and Kellar, a

⁸⁰ With regards to the Davenport brothers, Milbourne Christopher has suggested that William was a true believer in the Spiritualist cause while Ira viewed their show as simply entertainment. Harry Houdini tracked down and interviewed the latter, who supposedly confided to him their secrets and disavowed any belief in Spiritualism. This late account by Ira is rather self-serving though, for certainly while they were touring the two did little to dissuade the audience's belief in their supernatural abilities and, indeed, their act largely depended on it. Milbourne Christopher, *Mediums, Mystics, and the Occult* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1975); Harry Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1924).

⁸¹ The secret involved subtle moves by the performers to ensure there was slack on the rope, allowing escape from most any knot, however tightly it was tied. Kellar's appropriation was so successful that the technique became known to magicians as the "Kellar Rope Tie." Jim Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible and Learned to Disappear* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2003).

shipwreck at the Bay of Biscay in 1875 literally sunk their fortune, and Fay elected to return to the Davenports while Kellar pushed ahead on his own.

It was at this time that Kellar first visited London and visited what was then perhaps the most famous magic show in the world by John Nevil Maskelyne and George A. Cooke, who performed as the “Royal Illusionists.” Remarkably, this duo got their start doing an exposé of the Davenports, but now ran a profitable theater that presented sophisticated stage illusions using the latest technology.⁸² Kellar purchased a new trick called the “Vanishing Birdcage” for \$750 from Joseph Buatier de Kolta, a magician and technician then working at Egyptian Hall. He then returned to New York and traded the secret of the “Vanishing Birdcage” to a magic merchant named Henry Stone for some other new tricks and apparatus. Kellar recruited a new partner, A. Litherland Cunard, to replace Fay in the cabinet séance, and they began performing as the “Royal Illusionists” around the Caribbean.⁸³ In Panama, Kellar met and teamed up with Ferdinand and Louis Guter, two Hungarian brothers who performed in Oriental guise as Ling Look, a fire-eater and sword-swallower and Yamadeva, a contortionist. The group traveled to San Francisco, where Al Hayman joined as manager and they fine-tuned their act during a successful run in San Francisco during which they boldly billed themselves as the “Royal Illusionists from Egyptian Hall, London,” embarking for Sydney in July 1876.

Kellar seems to have been very aware and able to take advantage of the ongoing changes wrought by capitalism on what, by the 1860s and 1870s, could be described as a full-blown magic industry. The success of stage magic produced a proliferation of magicians, and this was accompanied by an explosion of magic-related businesses. Magic

⁸² George Arthur Jenness, *Maskelyne and Cooke: Egyptian Hall, London, 1873-1904* (Enfield: Self-published, 1967).

⁸³ Christopher, 206-208.

tricks were now patented and bought and sold as commodities by specialized emporiums in major cities.⁸⁴ Novelty consequently became a premium and increasingly large amounts of capital were required for magicians to distinguish themselves through the acquisition of new effects. The “Flying Cage” trick that Kellar purchased from Kolta for the relatively princely sum of \$750 proved to be a great investment as it was perhaps the only one in his repertoire that was a novelty for the more discerning audiences around the Pacific and as such invariably garnered publicity. While Kellar was a capable performer, he also excelled in the business side of the industry and proved particularly good at acquiring new effects and showing them in places where they were novelties.

The Royal Illusionists opened at the Victoria Theatre in Sydney on September 19, 1876 to warm if unspectacular reviews. The *Sydney Morning Herald* singled out Ling Look as “horribly sensational” and particularly enjoyed the exposé of the cabinet séance, nothing that, “It is of course nothing but a trick, and professes to be no more: but it is so well performed as to be thoroughly worth seeing.”⁸⁵ Kellar spent the next eight months touring the major Australian cities to consistently good reviews and profits. The Royal Illusionists were well billed, and Kellar also employed a variety of more or less Barnumesque techniques to generate publicity.⁸⁶ While performing the “Vanishing Birdcage” illusion in Sydney, for example, a letter was published in a local paper alleging that the trick actually killed the canary, stirring a public outcry that lasted until Kellar offered a private performance for prominent citizens to demonstrate that the bird was not

⁸⁴ By 1870, there were at least five major firms creating tricks and issuing catalogs in the United States: Yost (Philadelphia), Adams (Boston), Maurer, Hartz, and Judd (NYC). Burton S. Sperber, *A Checklist of Conjuring Catalogs: And Their Dealers or Magic Shops in English from 1843-2006* (Malibu: B.S. Sperber, 2007). On the magic business in the United States, also see Ricky Jay, *Many Mysteries Unraveled: Conjuring Literature in America, 1786-1874* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1990).

⁸⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 20, 1876

⁸⁶ *Argus* (Melbourne), December 27, 1876.

in fact harmed.⁸⁷ Another common ploy was to have a confederate challenge Kellar during the cabinet routine and boast that they could tie him in such a fashion as to make escape impossible. The particulars and Kellar's inevitable escape made good copy and variations of this story followed the group nearly everywhere they toured.⁸⁸

Although the program varied, the general format featured Kellar beginning the show with sleight-of-hand feats using handkerchiefs, coins, and cards. He would follow this up with more elaborate illusions, including the "Blooming Rose Bush," during which a seemingly endless number of flowers emerged from a single small container, and the first part of the show culminated with his best illusion, the "Vanishing Birdcage." For the middle acts Ling Look swallowed swords and performed fire-eating while Yamadeva went through his contortion routine. The third part of the program was the Davenport séance, which Kellar performed couched as a feat of skill rather than of supernatural powers. After doing the routine in the usual fashion with lights out, he and his partner (at this point manager Al Hayman's brother Dave) would reveal how it worked with the lights on and cabinet open. Coincidentally, the Davenport Brothers were also in Australia at this time, having opened in Melbourne while Kellar was in Sydney and their presence helped stir up controversy and undoubtedly helped business.⁸⁹ After seeing Kellar's exposure, a reviewer for the *Australasian* wrote: "The further exposure of the Davenport

⁸⁷ At least one local paper saw through the ruse: "The canary cage trick has caused a new sensation. A correspondent of the Herald, who, if not a friend of Mr. Keller's, has certainly done him and his show the greatest service possible, called attention in a letter the other day to the performance of the canary bird trick, and hinted that a fresh bird was killed on each occasion. No better advertisement could be desired. In justice to the illusionist his assertion that the canary never was injured was reported, and certificates to the same effect have since been published. Of course interest in the trick and consequently full houses are attracted," *Sydney Mail*, October 12, 1876.

⁸⁸ Of course, not all of the challengers were necessarily confederates, but the basic storyline appears often enough for it to be suspicious.

⁸⁹ The brothers were only able to tour for a short time as William Davenport fell ill and died in Sydney in early 1877. Melissa Bellanta, "The Davenport Brothers Down Under: Theatre, Belief, and Modernity in 1870s Australia," in *Vernacular Modernities in Australia, 1870s-1960s*, ed. Robert Dixon and Veronica Kelly (University of Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008), 171-183.

business is amusingly interesting. The only wonder is that for so long a time people believed it was anything but jugglery. If the Illusionists were to precede the Davenports in their several travels, the latter would not have much chance.”⁹⁰ The cabinet séance had a surprisingly long life and was still being performed by pseudo-Spiritualists and anti-Spiritualist magicians into the 1930s.⁹¹

When the Australian tour was complete, the Hayman brothers decided to stay in Australia. Al Hayman opened a minstrel hall in Sydney and served as an agent and manager for touring American acts while his brother married a wealthy Australian widow. Kellar, Yamadeva, and Ling Look sailed for Singapore. It seems clear that their consistent business allowed for a more extensive tour than Kellar had initially contemplated. In June 1877, he wrote to his father from Singapore, “I am making plenty of money where I am and in no particular hurry to return to the States.” Later that same month, they were performing in Batavia and despite competition from an Italian opera troupe and Middleton’s unit off the Cooper and Bailey Circus, Kellar reported that “our business continues good and everything is lovely.”⁹² Kellar had already performed for foreign audiences during his time in Mexico and South America. After a poor experience with an interpreter in Peru, he thereafter simply had his “patter” translated into the local language and memorized it. During this particular tour he apparently performed and advertised in at least five different languages: English, Spanish, Dutch, Chinese, and Hindi.⁹³ The Royal Illusionists toured via the steamship routes of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company, visiting Singapore, Manila, Shanghai, and Hong

⁹⁰ *Australasian* (Melbourne), February 3, 1877.

⁹¹ Mike Caveney, *Carter the Great* (Pasadena: Magic Words, 1995).

⁹² Harry Kellar to Franz Peter Keller, June 1877, both letters quoted in Caveney and Meisel, 67-68.

⁹³ There are bills for the Royal Illusionists in a wide variety of different languages in Mike Caveney’s Egyptian Hall Collection. Kellar claims competency in a number of different languages in *A Magician’s Tour* and later in his career stressed the importance of learning foreign languages to aspiring magicians.

Kong and played for about three weeks in each location before moving on. Kellar's narrative of these travels regales the reader with exotic tales like witnessing a fight between a tiger and elephant in Java and makes note of the various royalty and luminaries that he entertained. What these sorts of stories made clear was that he was trying to use his far-flung circulation not just to generate money, but as a way to construct an image of himself as an emblem of sophistication, success, and modernity.

Although the tour was largely limited to port cities, the party occasionally ventured further afield, and in Java, for example, they did a complete circuit around the island after opening in Batavia, visiting Semarang, Sourabaya, Soerakarta, and Pekalongan.⁹⁴ But the tour faltered after Ling Look developed a fever and died in Hong Kong in October 1877, though Yamadeva and Kellar pressed on and travelled to Manila for two months before returning to China. When they returned to Hong Kong, Yamadeva injured himself bowling and Kellar took on John Hodgkins as his new assistant for the Davenport business and added John Morris, a "quick-change" artist, to do the middle act in the show.⁹⁵ Kellar and company then slowly worked their way back to London through the British Empire, stopping in Bombay, Aden, Baghdad, Zanzibar, and Cape Town. While Kellar was in London during July 1878, he bought an entirely new "outfit" for twelve thousand pounds, an apt indicator of the financial success of the tour and the business-driven industry pressure to have the latest and greatest tricks and apparatuses.⁹⁶ Most significantly, he found a builder who knew the secret of Maskelyne's automaton

⁹⁴ Kellar, *A Magician's Tour*, 89-97.

⁹⁵ Yamadeva (Louis Guter) never recovered from the injury and died in Hong Kong. A quick-change artist was a performer who was able to rapidly alter his appearance to take on different characters (a soldier, a lady, etc.) behind a sheet or other prop as he moved around the stage.

⁹⁶ Christopher, 210.

“Psycho,” which was then creating a sensation at Egyptian Hall.⁹⁷ Seizing the opportunity, Kellar purchased his own version of Psycho plus three other new automatons that were produced by E. Le Mare & Son in Manchester.⁹⁸

When Kellar returned to the United States in the fall of 1878, he possessed an impressive outfit of fresh illusions and attractions with which he hoped to carve out a position in the competitive American amusement business. After a short vacation to see his family and rehearse the new act, Kellar, Hodgkins, and Morris, still billing themselves as the Royal Illusionists, debuted the new show in Philadelphia, but despite heavy advertising and the new attractions, the performance fell flat. Part of the problem was timing as the famous magician Robert Heller died in November while engaged at Philadelphia’s Concert Hall. When Kellar came to town soon after, the novelty of another magic show was obviously strained, but some papers also attacked Kellar for ostensibly profiting from Heller’s demise. The *New York Sun* opined that “Heller is scarcely dead before we read of Kellar the Wizard. Of course, Kellar aims to profit by the reputation that Heller left by adopting a close imitation of Heller's name.”⁹⁹ The bad press and business followed Kellar to Washington, and competition in the United States ultimately led him to close the show and revamp for another tour abroad.¹⁰⁰ Kellar wrote to his

⁹⁷ “Psycho” was really only a pseudo-automaton, which was worked by an assistant using a bellows and air power off stage. The figure was garbed in Eastern costume that sat on a clear pedestal and played whist (a card game) with audience members: John Gaughan and Jim Steinmeyer, *The Mystery of Psycho* (Los Angeles: John Gaughan and Associates, 1987).

⁹⁸ The other pseudo-automatons he acquired were Clio, a lady figure that drew pictures and two musical figures, Echo (cornet) and Phono (euphonium).

⁹⁹ Of course, Kellar was trading off of someone else’s name, only it was not Heller but Maskelyne and Cooke, the “real” Royal Illusionists. He actually changed his stage name from Keller to Kella to avoid being confused with Heller. The article also underscored just how little traction Kellar possessed with the American public. *New York Sun*, November 31, 1878.

¹⁰⁰ In Boston, Kellar complained that expenses ran to over one thousand dollars a week and seats were simply not filling at the comparatively expensive price of \$1.50. *A Magician’s Tour*, 35. Playbill, Royal Illusionists at Horticultural Hall, Boston, December 16, 1878, Kellar File, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

father that he was going to “make one more tour around the world after which I hope to be able to get some first class theatre in London or New York and settle down.”¹⁰¹

Kellar’s second tour took him back around the world, this time in the opposite direction and with a much larger show and more extensive itinerary. Without Yamadeva or Ling Look, the show centered more on Kellar’s presence and skills, although he used a few different variety performers to fill in between parts. The show was billed as “A Night in Dreamland” and began with “An Hour in Dreamland with Kellar,” during which he performed a sequence of rather typical magic tricks with cards, flowers, decanters, etc. The second part of the show featured the automatons, which, judging by newspaper accounts, represented the most sensational aspect of the show for the audience, who were able to participate by playing cards with Psycho or shouting out things for Clio to draw. The last part of the performance was still the Davenport Brothers cabinet séance (with Hodgkins assisting), an act that perhaps surprisingly continued to be both popular and controversial.

After visiting South America, South Africa, and India, the Pacific portion of the tour began with a series of performances on Java in early 1882. Kellar continued on to Australia where he again had a very successful run, and as before, the show visited major ports and capitals throughout the region for shorts stands but also branched out into newer markets with visits to Japan and New Zealand in 1883. Ultimately, the scope of his touring shows how rapidly the Pacific circuit expanded and integrated new markets during the 1870s and into the early 1880s. Yet, Kellar’s second tour in particular threw into bold relief the ways in which the Pacific circuit was no longer being viewed as a regional enterprise, but as part of an emergent global circuit by U.S. entertainers.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Caveney and Meisel, 82.

Kellar returned to the United States in September 1884 after having spent almost the entirety of the previous decade touring abroad. Determined to find success in the United States at last, he worked to parley his work and experiences overseas into a new show. Kellar invested the capital earned abroad into an entirely new and lavish set up, one that allowed him to present an attractive program featuring several high-priced and novel illusions. He also tried to exploit the promotional value of his wide-ranging travels, which he used to cultivate an air of worldliness that audiences clearly found appealing. Although *A Magician's Tour* was not published until 1886, Kellar carried a scrapbook filled with newspaper articles and playbills printed in a dozen languages from all over the globe that he made available to the press and generated a lot of positive publicity.¹⁰² The success of this particular strategy undoubtedly provided the impetus for Kellar to publish his book and make an account of his adventures more widely available. Indeed, this was a very common phenomenon among nineteenth-century magicians who found that crafting a cosmopolitan persona paid dividends at the ticket booth.¹⁰³

The new show was also inflected by Kellar's experiences travelling through the Pacific circuit and imperial networks around the globe as he often repackaged standard illusions with exotic props or stories drawn from his travels. To take just one example, he reworked a rather typical series of handkerchief tricks into a routine called the "Mikado's Handkerchief," that included patter about his travels through Japan and culminated with Kellar slicing the silk fabric apart with a samurai sword and then displaying the undamaged cloth to the audience. The show was a success from the start and Kellar

¹⁰² While the book was being prepared for publication, an early draft was released as a pamphlet. *Kellar's Aids in Arithmetical Calculations and Professional Tours Around the World* (Philadelphia: George C. Brotherton and Harry Kellar, 1885).

¹⁰³ Among numerous examples, see Antonio Blitz, *Life and Adventures of Signor Blitz* (Hartford, CT: T. Belknap, 1872); Robert Heller, *His Doings* (Glasgow: Hay Nisbet, 1875); H. J. Burlingame, *Around the World with a Magician and a Juggler* (Chicago: Clyde Publishing, 1891).

settled in to a theatre modeled after Maskelyne and Cooke's Egyptian Hall for an impressive run of over two hundred consecutive performances. This initial triumph generated the momentum Kellar needed make a name for himself in the United States and establish himself as the "Dean of American Magicians."¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

During the 1870s and into the 1880s, there was a marked expansion in American show business activity around the Pacific. Beyond those already considered, a number of significant future and contemporary figures in the U.S. culture industry toured the circuit at this time. Nate Salsbury, who would go on to fame as a partner in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, managed a musical comedy company known as Salsbury's Troubadours on a tour around the Pacific circuit in 1877. J.C. Williamson was an actor brought down to Melbourne by George Coppin who choose to stay in Australia and formed "The Firm" in 1879, which had a near monopoly on theatres across Australia and New Zealand well into the twentieth century.¹⁰⁵ Kellar's ex-manager Al Hayman made a fortune with his minstrel hall and as a manager for visiting American attractions in the 1880s before returning to the United States and helping to established the "Theatrical Syndicate."¹⁰⁶

There was thus a broad resurgence of U.S. entertainers and entrepreneurs on the Pacific circuit in the 1870s, and the new southern steam route ensured that the Australian colonies were inundated with minstrels, circuses, and magicians. The most spectacular of these was of course the Cooper and Bailey Circus. The size of the show and the logistics

¹⁰⁴ See Kellar's "Farewell Issue," *Magic-Unity-Might* 7, no. 56 (November 1917).

¹⁰⁵ Ian G. Dicker, *J. C. W.: A Short Biography of James Cassius Williamson* (Rose Bay, NSW: Elizabeth Tudor Press, 1974).

¹⁰⁶ Michael Bennett Leavitt, *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management* (New York: Broadway, 1912).

of the operation were staggering and provide a good indication of just how sophisticated the U.S. culture had become, particularly in regards to identifying and exploiting transnational markets. The success of the tour showed that the Australian market was able to support even the largest touring shows, and a succession of circuses made the journey across the Pacific in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, though none quite achieved a comparable level of success.¹⁰⁷

The speed, ease, and scope of Harry Kellar's Pacific tours demonstrated just how well-developed the circuit had become by the 1880s. While his first tour was more or less bounded by the Pacific Ocean, the second was in effect a global venture and an indication of the way the Pacific circuit was increasingly being subsumed by a global entertainment network. Bailey and Kellar were fundamentally good businessmen and they keenly exploited their Pacific ventures for both profits and publicity. Indeed, it is arguable that the basis for their successful careers was the ability to take full advantage of the opportunities the Pacific circuit presented, underscoring the significance of the transnational dimensions of the U.S. culture industry. Finally, percolating under this broad sweep of U.S. entertainers were localized debates about the relative value of the American style of commercial entertainment. This undercurrent shows how the "Empire of Culture" fabricated by the U.S. culture industry was necessarily a contested process that generated a range of responses and at times even resistance to what was perceived to be its shallowness and pernicious influence.

¹⁰⁷ Mark St. Leon, *The American Century, 1851-1950*, vol. 3 of *The Circus in Australia* (Penshurst, NSW: Mark St. Leon, 2007), 215-38.

Chapter Six

The “Big Black Boom” in Maoriland: African-American Entertainers and Colonial New Zealand

This rather artfully posed photograph of an African-American minstrel named Hosea Easton was taken in the town of Napier on the east coast of New Zealand’s North Island in late 1888. It is striking on a number of levels, from the extraordinary quality of the print to Easton’s dapper suit and elegant banjo, but more than that the image captures a moment in a larger story, namely the satisfaction and success that so many black entertainers found on the Pacific circuit during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Easton first arrived in New Zealand over a decade earlier with the Georgia Minstrels, led by the pioneering and indefatigable African-American manager Charles Hicks who piloted a succession of shows around Australasia and, like Easton, found the environs so appealing that he spent the remainder of his life abroad. Easton’s experience was hardly unique, and it offers a window into the important role that transnational markets like New Zealand played in the evolution of black popular culture. In the 1870s and 1880s, African-American performers took advantage of the opportunities opened up by an expansive U.S. culture industry and assumed a prominent and profitable position on the Pacific circuit. Within this larger context, the rather remote colony of New Zealand proved particularly attractive and afforded black entertainers a degree of commercial and artistic autonomy that was largely denied to them in the United States. Although trans-Atlantic concerns have dominated recent African-American historiography, this chapter



Figure 1. E. R. Williams Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand–Te Puna Matauranga o Aotearoa.¹

¹ The photo was taken by William Williams (1859-1948), a railroad employee whose hobbies not coincidentally included photography and the banjo. Another photo in the collection of his wife Lydia posed with a banjo in their front yard indicates that it was taken at the couple's home on Carlyle Street. They were known locally as Mr. and Mrs. "Banjo" Williams, and as Easton was a well-known instructor it seems likely that he was asked to come over to the house by the Williams while the Georgia Minstrels were touring through town in November 1888. Easton's instrument was produced by the noted American manufacturer S. S. Stewart and an endorsement from Easton was included in their catalog during the 1890s.

focuses on the corresponding cultural flows of the nineteenth-century Pacific and the black entertainers that utilized and enlivened them.

Why was the Pacific circuit so hospitable to African-American entertainers? How do their experiences shape our understanding of the historical relationship between race and popular culture? And what, in the end, does their story illuminate about the cultural history of the United States and New Zealand? After outlining the necessary background and introducing the relevant historiography, the first part of the chapter takes up these questions with an examination of the inaugural tour of the Georgia Minstrels, which began in Auckland in April 1877 and continued through the Antipodes over the next three years. While the success of this initial venture indicated that there was a strong market for black entertainers on the Pacific circuit, the move across racial systems also revealed some more problematic issues regarding the prevalence of denigrating stereotypes of African Americans and the intertwined racial and colonial discourses operating in New Zealand. The second part of the chapter charts the influx of African-American entertainers during the late 1880s when both a reconstituted version of the famed Fisk Jubilee Singers and an expanded edition of the Georgia Minstrels again under Hicks' direction embarked on extended tours through the colonies. The presence of so many African-American performers and their evident success was a complicated affair, but the overall phenomenon suggests a need to reassess the historiography of black entertainment in the late nineteenth century.

The central factor that determined the routes of touring professionals was the presence of profitable markets, and a confluence of demographic and economic trends made New Zealand an increasingly attractive market to U.S. entertainers. The 1860s were

a turbulent decade in New Zealand due to an ongoing series of conflicts between various Maori groups and colonial and British forces, but by 1870 the violence had largely abated and the colonial government began to implement an ambitious set of policies to promote continued colonization and growth.² The immediate result was that between 1871 and 1881 the settler population doubled to over half a million people through a massive influx of immigrants from Britain.³ Urban growth was particularly acute as the population of Wellington tripled during the decade to twenty five thousand, although Dunedin remained the largest city in the colony with around forty thousand inhabitants. Despite this demographic surge, New Zealand was still somewhat of a marginal market compared to San Francisco and the major Australian cities. While its total population was comparable to California, in terms of urban development Dunedin was dwarfed by the quarter million inhabitants of San Francisco and the almost half a million residents of Melbourne. The four major colonial centers, Dunedin, Auckland, Christchurch, and Wellington, would have ranked in the middle of the United States' hundred largest cities in 1880 along the likes of Nashville, Denver, and Grand Rapids.⁴ This demographic explosion helped fuel an economy already buoyed by gold rushes, profits from wool exports, and extravagant spending on public works, all of which effectively ensured there was sufficient level of prosperity to support visiting professionals.⁵

² The best overview of these complicated conflicts is James Belich, *New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1986).

³ Tony Simpson, *The Immigrants: The Great Migration from Britain to New Zealand, 1830-1890* (Auckland: Godwit, 1997).

⁴ G. T. Bloomfield, *New Zealand: A Handbook of Historical Statistics* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), 54; B. R. Mitchell, *International Historical Statistics: Africa, Asia & Oceania, 1750-2000*, 4th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1880," (<http://www.census.gov>).

⁵ James Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1996), 338-75; G. R. Hawke, *The Making of New Zealand: An Economic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Significantly, access from the United States was facilitated by the southern transpacific steamship route that touched at Auckland, and improvements in the intracolonial transportation system, particularly railroads, made for easier travel and reduced costs.⁶ Although the Georgia Minstrels and Fisk Jubilee Singers at different times did undertake “country” tours inland by horse-drawn coach, the majority of their travel was via steamship or railroad. Finally, the domestic telegraph service was supplemented with a trans-Tasman cable in 1876 that integrated New Zealand into an emerging global communication network, which simplified coordination and provided a means through which to generate the requisite publicity for a profitable tour.⁷ The planned tour by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, for example, garnered notices in colonial newspapers far in advance, and their already established fame ensured that an eager public awaited their arrival. Although American entertainers had been visiting New Zealand’s shores since at least 1854 when W. H. Foley arrived with his circus, the largely rural and relative remote colony was transformed by these interrelated developments in the intervening years into a much more accessible, populous, and potentially lucrative cultural market by 1877 when the Georgia Minstrels landed in Auckland.⁸

As the previous paragraphs might suggest, the primary draw for African-American entertainers was white Europeans or Pakeha and not, for the most part, indigenous New Zealanders or Maori. Terminology is obviously an issue here and raises some complicated questions about the relationship between language, race, and power in

⁶ E. Mowbray Tate, *Transpacific Steam: The Story of Steam Navigation from the Pacific Coast of North America to the Far East and the Antipodes, 1867-1941* (New York: Cornwall Books, 1986); Neill Atkinson, *Trainland: How Railways Made New Zealand* (Auckland: Random House New Zealand, 2007).

⁷ A. C. Wilson, *Wire and Wireless: A History of Telecommunications in New Zealand, 1860-1987* (Palmerston North: Dunmore, 1994).

⁸ Adrienne Simpson, “Putting Entertainment on the Map: the New Zealand Touring Circuits in 1874,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 26 (April 1995): 153-76.

a colonial context. Despite its problematic genealogy, I will use the term Maori in describing the indigenous peoples and cultures of New Zealand with the hope that the reader can recognize some of its limitations.⁹ Given that “Maori” was initially at least a designation used by Europeans, the use of “Pakeha,” an indigenous designation for foreigners, perhaps provides a bit of balance.¹⁰ Pakeha simply refers to European people and culture in New Zealand, though the distinction it draws vis-à-vis Maori should not be disguise the messiness and permeability of such categorizations. Overall, it was Pakeha who represented the principal audience for visiting African-American entertainers, something that reflects the shifting balance of power that by 1890 essentially relegated Maori to a subordinate position within New Zealand politics and society.¹¹ Despite this evident marginalization and popular contemporary notions about amalgamation and Maori as a “dying race,” M. P. K. Sorenson writes that “the most significant development in race relations in the second half of the nineteenth century was the survival of the Maori as a distinct ethnic and social group in New Zealand, co-existing with, but not rigidly

⁹ Though other designations were sometimes employed and the categories were by no means fixed or uncontested, contemporary colonial discourse essentially revolved around an opposition between “settlers” or “Europeans” and “natives” or “Maori.” This invidious distinction enabled and legitimized colonial rule, and although the term “Maori” has in a sense achieved a conventional and naturalized status in both historical and contemporary discourse, its problematic origin has led some scholars to eschew its usage. One alternative has simply involved being more precise about identifying the particular iwi, hapu, or whanua being discussed, these being the indigenous designations for social units. Others have taken to using “Tangata Whenua,” which roughly translates as “people of the land,” because it was the term used most often among indigenous peoples themselves, at least during much of the nineteenth century, and offers a clear separation between colonial and indigenous discourses.

¹⁰ The term “Pakeha” has its critics as well. While some European New Zealanders adopt it as an indicator of a distinct and local identity, there are also those who feel that the term is either derogatory or unfairly implies they are somehow outsiders or interlopers. Despite these misconceptions, the term is essentially descriptive and provides a convenient designation for the particular identity and culture of New Zealanders of European descent. In this vein, the eminent historian Judith Binney recently remarked: “I think it is the most simple and practical term. It is a name given to us by Maori. It has no pejorative associations like people think it does - it's a descriptive term. I think it's nice to have a name the people who live here gave you, because that's what I am.” *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), June 18, 2005.

¹¹ Simple numbers are perhaps the best illustration of this for although a rough demographic parity existed during the late 1850s, the 1881 census showed that Maori made up less than 10% of the total population; Bloomfield, 42.

segregated from, the Europeans.”¹² This resiliency allowed for some provocative cross-cultural exchanges and identification between some Maori and visiting African-American performers, even if it was the Pakeha presence and audience that predominated.

The reception of African-American entertainers received was bound up in the complicated and conflicted status of race-relations in colonial New Zealand. This topic has generated a great deal of discussion and study in recent years, with much of the work aimed at disturbing the complacent understanding of New Zealand as uniquely progressive and largely untroubled by racial issues. Perhaps the seminal work in this vein is Alan Ward’s *A Show of Justice* (1973), which showed that

The colonisation of New Zealand, notwithstanding the Treaty of Waitangi and humanitarian idealism, was substantially an imperial subjugation of a native people, for the benefit of the conquering race in which the notions of white supremacy and racial prejudice, familiar in other examples of nineteenth-century European imperialism were very much in evidence.¹³

Angela Ballara’s documentation of Pakeha ethnocentrism and James Belich’s revisionist history of the New Zealand Wars further demonstrate that contrary to the sanguine historiography, racism and prejudice were a central determinant of Pakeha perceptions and policies.¹⁴ The overall thrust of this literature underscores the extent to which ideas about race shaped the Victorian worldview (of which Pakeha society was a kind of subset), and the way that a generalized assumption of white racial superiority served as an ideological justification for colonial rule.

¹² M. P. K. Sorrenson, “Maori and Pakeha,” in *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. Geoffrey W. Rice (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1992), 166.

¹³ Alan Ward, *A Show of Justice: Racial “Amalgamation” in Nineteenth Century New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1995 rev. ed.), 308. For a useful discussion of race relations and New Zealand historiography, see, Tony Ballantyne and Brian Moloughney, eds., *Disputed Histories: Imagining New Zealand’s Pasts* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2006)

¹⁴ Angela Ballara, *Proud to be White? A Survey of Pakeha Prejudice in New Zealand* (Auckland: Heinemann, 1986); Belich, *New Zealand Wars*.

While Pakeha discourse about Maori tended to revolve around the problems and possibilities associated with “amalgamation,” as with any colonial situation, the putative colonizers and colonized were engaged in a complex struggle that involved a range of strategies and positions. Perhaps the dominant influence on Pakeha racial attitudes were prevailing scientific discourses that established taxonomies of race which validated European superiority and positioned the Maori as a ‘dying race.’ In a widely noted 1882 paper, Pakeha medical scholar Dr. A. K. Newman concluded that “they are dying out in a quick, easy way, and are being supplanted by a superior race,” and “the disappearance of the race is scarcely a subject for regret.”¹⁵ But if, as Damon Salesa argues, New Zealand was a “racialized state,” in practice it was a messy one in which “racial crossings” confounded neat categorizations and Maori continually challenged Pakeha assumptions.¹⁶ Although the dynamics of race in colonial New Zealand have most often been studied from a scientific or political angle, the focus here shifts to the cultural field and how the variegated responses to black entertainers thus reflected the conflicting racial ideologies and ambivalences of white settlers struggling to justify their status and superiority in an unsettled colonial situation.

Racial attitudes in New Zealand were articulated within a larger imperial network through which ideas about race, including those regarding African-Americans, already circulated. Clearly the most important influence on Pakeha perceptions of black Americans derived from the social and intellectual background of Victorian Britain, and within this broad framework the antislavery movement and minstrel shows were

¹⁵ John Stenhouse, “‘A Disappearing Race Before We Came Here’: Dr. Alfred Kingcome Newman, the Dying Maori and Victorian Scientific Racism,” *New Zealand Journal of History* 30, no.2 (1996): 123-40.

¹⁶ Damon Ieremia Salesa, *Racial Crossings: Victorian Britain, Colonial New Zealand, and the Problem of Races* (forthcoming).

particularly significant. The former used lectures, literature, and the press to articulate a powerful moral attack on slavery that effectively stimulated broad concern and condemnation regarding its practice with the British public. Unfortunately, the movement's representations of slaves, which were meant to provoke a combination of pity and outrage, tended to stereotype black Americans as basically dull and child-like.¹⁷ A competing representation came from blackface minstrelsy, which presented a generally derogatory but also exotic and entertaining version of African-Americans that proved popular throughout the British Empire, including New Zealand. These dual stereotypes were incorporated into and amplified by the sensational success of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).¹⁸ Topsy's comicalities and Uncle Tom's quiescence were essentially proxies for the dominant understandings of African-Americans, and, as Christine Bolt suggests, the book effectively fostered a "lofty, paternalistic and narrow" view of "American Negroes" amongst the British public.¹⁹ While there was broad sympathy for visiting African-American lecturers like Frederick Douglass and Henry "Box" Brown, this was tempered by the less flattering representations in circulation.²⁰ The reception of the Georgia Minstrels and Fisk Jubilee Singers in New Zealand was broadly shaped by the continuing influence of the racial representations popularized by the antislavery movement, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and blackface minstrelsy.

¹⁷ On the antislavery movement in Britain, see David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860*. (London: Routledge, 1991); Douglas Lorimer, *Colour, Class, and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978), 82-91.

¹⁸ Sarah Meer, *Uncle-Tom-Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 46.

²⁰ Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford, eds., *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass & Transatlantic Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999); Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

While minstrelsy certainly stamped a stereotype of African-Americans on British consciousness, it is less clear what impact this had on the broader contours of Victorian thinking about race and the dynamics of British imperialism.²¹ Douglas Lorimer has argued that the conventional interpretation of English racism as motivated by imperial experience obscures the ways in which the “domestic social context and popular culture” influenced racial ideology in Victorian Britain. Lorimer suggests that the “popular enthusiasm for the minstrel caricature” both reflected and reinforced the “growth of English racial conceit” and warped British perceptions of “blacks” throughout the empire.²² Similarly, Michael Pickering sees minstrelsy as promoting a fundamentally derogatory kind of “race-thinking” that contributed to an “ideological aggregation” of ideas and practices that effectively legitimized British imperialism.²³ While neither scholar suggests something like a simple cause and effect relationship between minstrelsy and racism or imperialism, what they do highlight is how this form of popular entertainment served as a vehicle for the dissemination of deprecatory racial notions and the valence it had in an imperial context. Yet if minstrelsy writ large was, as Pickering writes, “implicated in the discursive structures of colonialism and imperialism” of Victorian Britain, it remains to be seen how this all looked from the periphery.

Despite a general veneration for the “home” country, Pakeha were not simply mirrors of the British public, and their particular situation as colonists made for a rather more complicated experience with minstrelsy. E. J. Wakefield’s *Adventure in New Zealand* (1845) provides a first-hand account of the colonization efforts by the New

²¹ Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008).

²² Lorimer cites writings on the West Indies and Africa to show how minstrel stereotypes of African-American were applied to the broader imperial category of “black.” Lorimer, 89-91.

²³ Michael Pickering, “Mock Blacks and Racial Mockery: the ‘Nigger’ Minstrel and British Imperialism,” in *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1790-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 188-89.

Zealand Company and details an instructive episode that occurred during one of the initial encounters between the scout ship *Tory* and local Maori. As Wakefield describes it, upon arrival a “native” named “E Ware” took it upon himself to join the crew and “his activity and mirth, together with the rich humour which he displayed in executing some of the native dances, as well as in mimicking almost every one on board, earned for him the sobriquet of ‘Jim Crow.’”²⁴ The echo of minstrelsy in this early moment demonstrates that Europeans carried both the cultural form itself and the more elusive ideological baggage that accompanied it to New Zealand with them. While minstrel music at least was likely introduced in a casual way by whalers and traders earlier, it was the large-scale settlements that developed in the late 1840s that set the proverbial stage for more formalized entertainment.

In September 1850, what were perhaps the first commercial minstrel shows in New Zealand were presented by an amateur troupe in Auckland as a series of “Ethiopian Concerts” that garnered mixed reviews from the local press. While the rather staid *New Zealander* decried minstrelsy as “most vitiating in its influence on sound and healthy musical taste,” the more enthusiastic *Southern Cross* observed that, “the impersonations were good, the airs well executed and the audience in raptures.”²⁵ Throughout the 1850s, there were numerous local performances, but the first touring professionals were seemingly the San Francisco Minstrels, who arrived in the wake of the Otago gold rush in

²⁴ Edward Jerningham Wakefield, *Adventure in New Zealand* (London: John Murray, 1845), 32-33. Later Wakefield offers further details that seem to continue the conflation between minstrel stereotypes and Maori, noting that “Our friend Jim Crow found many old friends and relations at Pitone, and his audience was by no means the least numerous or attentive. Nothing can remind one more forcibly of the monkey who had seen the world, than a maori thus relating news. He is an incorrigible exaggerator, and swells each minute circumstance into an affair of state, taking delight in drawing repeated exclamations of amazement from the surrounding badauds, who admire and envy the red night-cap or trowsers with which he may be adorned, with quite as much zeal as they drink in his metaphors and amplifications (75).”

²⁵ *New Zealander* (Auckland), September 21, 1850; *Southern Cross* (Auckland), September 20, 1850. The former further noted that the group was made up of “five vocalists, habited and *got up* a la ‘Juba.’”

1861.²⁶ While touring troupes would become increasingly important as the century progressed, it was amateur performances by clubs and benefit shows that represented the most frequent manifestation of minstrelsy in colonial New Zealand. During the late-1860s in Wellington for example, there was a long-running local group called the Pitcairn Minstrels in addition to a variety of other ad-hoc outfits such as the “Antipodean Amateur Minstrels” that performed on occasions for various charitable causes.²⁷ Perhaps surprisingly, the initial wave of American minstrels that crossed the Pacific in the wake of the California and Victoria gold rushes simply skipped New Zealand, although W. H. Foley and several circuses did tour in the 1850s.

Although an ever-increasing number of minstrel parties subsequently toured the islands after 1861, the established literature on the cultural history of New Zealand has tended to ignore popular amusements in favor of more refined topics like the “legitimate” theatre and opera.²⁸ While Adrienne Simpson writes that minstrel shows were “enormously popular in New Zealand during this period” and represented “the only major entertainment genre in Australasia which did not originate in Europe,” scholars have typically acknowledged the presence of minstrelsy without really fleshing out its localized dynamics or significance.²⁹ In his seminal study of New Zealand entertainment, Maurice Hurst mentioned that minstrels were “very popular for a number of years” and

²⁶ For examples of local shows see, *Nelson Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle*, July 2, 1853; *Daily Southern Cross*, November 22, 1859. According to a notice in *Bell's Life in Sydney* (April 26, 1851), an American troupe called the “Ohio Serenaders” toured New Zealand in 1851, but I have not been able to locate any further information about them. On the San Francisco Minstrels, see Peter Downes, *Shadows on the Stage: Theatre in New Zealand—The First Seventy Years* (Dunedin: John McIndoe, 1975).

²⁷ The Pitcairn Minstrels, who were only described as “group of gentleman” from the city, performed anonymously: *Evening Post*, December 29, 1866. The Antipodean Amateurs Minstrels performance was to raise funds for the West Coast Frontier Relief Fund: *Evening Post*, October 10, 1868.

²⁸ Howard McNaughton, *New Zealand Drama* (Boston: Twayne, 1981); Adrienne Simpson, *Opera's Farthest Frontier: A History of Professional Opera in New Zealand* (Auckland: Reed, 1996).

²⁹ Adrienne Simpson, “Caterers to the Public Entertainment,” *Turnbull Library Record* 27 (1994): 13.

included a youthful reminiscence about a parade by some “genuine darkies,” but otherwise ignored the subject.³⁰ John Thomson devoted an entire chapter in the *Oxford History of New Zealand Music* to visiting artists, but only mentions minstrelsy in passing.³¹ The best source of information about popular amusements in colonial New Zealand remains Peter Downes’ *Shadows on the Stage*, which does offer some coverage of visiting minstrels.³²

Perhaps the strongest singular source in terms of detail is John Drummond’s study of the entertainment scene in Dunedin during the early 1860s amidst Otago Gold Rush, which focuses on the San Francisco Minstrels.³³ While Drummond provides a good deal of information about the troupe’s performances and the enthusiastic local response, he rather debatably concludes that

So far as New Zealand is concerned there is no evidence to suggest that Minstrel Shows had any effect upon European views of Maori people. The shows were always recognisably American, in accent, in dialect and in their reference to people and places, and New Zealanders at the time, of whatever race, do not seem to have made simplistic connections between Afro-American culture and Polynesian Maori culture.³⁴

³⁰ The full passage reads: “One minstrel show - eight in number, all genuine darkies - used to parade the streets every day at noon as an advertisement. They made a brave show, with their own band playing on board a gay waggonette drawn by four horses - the drum major out in front in gay uniform - and the rest of the company marching behind.” Given that this is an early recollection and that Hurst was born in 1887, it seems likely that this refers to one of the later colonial conglomerations of veterans from the Hicks’ tours. Maurice Hurst, *Music and the Stage in New Zealand: A Century of Entertainment, 1840-1943* (Auckland: Charles Begg & Co., 1944), 8.

³¹ John Mansfield Thomson, *The Oxford History of New Zealand Music* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1991).

³² Downes, 43-46

³³ This troupe was an aggregation of performers left over from two earlier American troupes, the Backus Minstrels and Rainer’s Serenaders that visited Australasia in the 1850s. They fortuitously arrived in New Zealand just as news of the gold discoveries broke: *New Zealand Spectator*, July 10, 1861.

³⁴ John D. Drummond, *Choirs and Clogs, Mr. Ballads and Mr. Bones: Musical and Other Entertainments in Dunedin, 1860-1862* (Dunedin: Hocken Library, 1991), 11-12.

Though this chapter demonstrates otherwise, Drummond's engagement with these larger issues represents a significant exception to the lacunae regarding minstrelsy in New Zealand historiography.

As it became a progressively more attractive and accessible market during the 1860s and 1870s, a veritable parade of minstrel troupes toured through New Zealand, including two major Anglo-American versions of the famed Christy Minstrels and visits from minstrel stars like Frank Weston (1869) and Billy Emerson (1874).³⁵ Smaller itinerant companies like the American Ironclads, who established themselves as a kind of resident troupe in Auckland during the summer of 1866, were even more common. In the recurring pattern for performers on the Pacific circuit, several members of this troupe resettled in Auckland where W. Reed opened a photography gallery, W. Miller owned a barbershop, and J. Clough became the leader of the orchestra at the theatre.³⁶ When these professional shows are combined with the plethora of amateur productions, it becomes evident that minstrelsy represented a significant part of the contemporary cultural scene in New Zealand, particularly in the larger towns and cities.

On their first evening in Auckland in April 1877, the Georgia Minstrels actually attended and, according to one report, "appeared to enjoy" a performance by the Chicago Minstrels, a white troupe they would soon displace at the Theatre Royal.³⁷ The Georgia

³⁵ The history of the various troupes that billed themselves as the Christy Minstrels is complicated by the fact that the moniker functioned as a catch-all label for minstrel troupes in Britain. While there were a number of imitators, the two main Christy parties in the Pacific were led by Joe Brown and Anthony Nish respectively and included several prominent American and British minstrels. Nish and Brown maintained an ongoing and informative quarrel over rights to the name and the relative merit of each troupe's performers. Frank Weston toured through New Zealand several times with various outfits before opening a minstrel hall in Melbourne. *Australasian*, June 5, 1869. Billy Emerson's California Minstrels embarked on a tour through New Zealand in 1874, capped by profitable run in Dunedin before traveling on to Australia. *Otago Daily Times*, August 28, 1874.

³⁶ *New York Clipper*, August 1, 1874.

³⁷ *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), April 21, 1877.

Minstrels encountered a public that was already very familiar with the standard minstrel tropes, music, and iconography as presented by white performers. As the first “genuine” black performers to visit New Zealand, they continually struggled to manage the expectations of an audience imbued with the conventions of white minstrelsy and the generally racist stereotypes of African-Americans that accompanied it. Before entering into a fuller discussion of their experience though, it is perhaps first necessary to sketch something of the Georgia’s prior history and to situate the group within the broader historiography on African-American performers in the nineteenth century.

Although there were some notable exceptions, the antebellum entertainment industry that developed in the United States largely excluded African-American performers. Paradoxically of course, the most successful cultural form of the time, minstrelsy, presented white interpretations and imitations of the very people it barred from the stage. Despite these barriers, a few talented performers like bandleader and bugler Francis Johnson, vocalist Elizabeth Greenfield, actor Ira Aldridge, and minstrel dancer William Henry Lane (aka Master Juba) were able to make their way onto the American stage.³⁸ More importantly, all of these performers found considerable success and fame in Europe over the course of their careers, something that presaged the similarly significant role that transnational markets played for the Georgia Minstrels and the Fisk Jubilee Singers later in the century. Despite these notable exceptions and a few transitory black minstrel groups, it was only in the aftermath of the Civil War that opportunities for African-Americans entertainers really opened up within the U.S. culture industry. The

³⁸ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); Bernth Lindfors, ed., *Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007); Marian Hannah Winter, "Juba and American Minstrelsy," in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* ed. Annemarie Bean, et. al. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England [for] Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 223-41.

most pronounced area in which this occurred as the theatrical color line faltered was minstrelsy. Black performers capitalized on white fascination by playing up their novelty as “genuine Negroes” and offering ostensibly authentic performances of plantation life in contrast to the “counterfeits” of white minstrels. This formula proved strikingly successful, and black minstrel troupes proliferated during the late 1860s despite an uneven and often acrimonious relationship with the white theatrical establishment.³⁹

Despite a burgeoning academic interest in African-American music and performance, these early decades of black minstrelsy have been mostly unexplored by scholars, particularly when contrasted with the avalanche of literature on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black entertainers.⁴⁰ The imbalance in part stems from the wider availability of source material for this later period, but also reflects a more nebulous notion that there was something unsavory about the way early black minstrels pandered to white audiences and seemed to reinforce damaging stereotypes of African-

³⁹ The most complete account of the rise of black minstrelsy can be found in Toll, *Blackening Up*, 195-233. Two other important works that deserve mention in this context are Henry T. Sampson’s useful but at times haphazard collections, *Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980) and *The Ghost Walks: a Chronological History of Blacks in Show Business, 1865-1910* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1988). More recently, James Hatch has written an overview of black minstrelsy that incorporates newer scholarship as part of a longer survey on African-American theater. Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African-American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For further studies that explore particular aspects of the black minstrel shows see Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994); Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Macmillan, 1968); Mark Knowles, *Tap Roots: The Early History of Tap Dancing* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2002).

⁴⁰ Thomas Laurence Riis, *Just Before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890-1915* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989); David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Lori Lynne Brooks, “The Negro in the New World: The Cultural Politics of Race, Nation and Empire, 1885-1911” (PhD. diss., Yale University, 2001); Annemarie Bean, “Black Minstrelsy and Double Inversion, Circa 1890,” in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader* ed. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and David Krasner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Barbara Webb, “‘The Real Character of the Negro on the Stage’: African American Theatre as Risk and Possibility, 1890-1908” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2003); Chude-Sokei, Louis Onuorah. *The Last "darker": Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

Americans.⁴¹ In his influential study of the Harlem Renaissance, Nathan Huggins outlined the broad contours of this ongoing debate by suggesting that when faced with overcoming the dominant and derogatory image of the “Stage Negro,” black entertainers essentially surrendered and played a “white creation rather than themselves.” Although Huggins acknowledged that black performers had little “commercial choice” in such matters and goes on to detail how various performers worked to subvert minstrel stereotypes, the overall argument emphasized the debilitating influence of black minstrelsy on the development of African-American culture.⁴² The subsequent historiography has tended to temper this kind of blanket condemnation with a more sympathetic stress on the constraints that confronted contemporary performers and a greater appreciation for the often subtle ways black entertainers undermined dominant stereotypes of African-Americans.⁴³ How this tension played out for African-American entertainers in New Zealand remains to be seen, but clearly there were both risks and rewards for those black performers willing to take on the challenge.

⁴¹ The historical issue of the opportunities and constraints that stereotypes in popular culture created was of course hardly a unique struggle for black entertainers. During the late nineteenth-century, Jewish comedians and so-called “show Indians,” amongst a host of others, were negotiating the costs and benefits of entering the entertainment industry in proscribed roles and challenging for control over how they were represented in popular culture. For example, see Harley Erdman, *Staging the Jew: The Performance of an American Ethnicity, 1860-1920* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.); Philip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

⁴² Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 250.

⁴³ The aforementioned studies by David Krasner and Karen Sotiropoulos certainly fit the “sympathetic” bill inasmuch as they concentrate on strategies black performers used to resist and critique racist stereotypes. On the other end of the spectrum, Sam Dennison authored a scathing attack on black minstrels and composers like Sam Lucas for perpetuating damaging white images of African-Americans for commercial gain: Sam Dennison, *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982).

The most important individual in the early development of black minstrelsy was Charles “Barney” Hicks.⁴⁴ Although Hicks was a capable performer, it was his management abilities and combative efforts to maintain independence from the white theatrical establishment that made him such a significant historical figure. Hicks was rather light-skinned and ironically seems to have gotten his start in the minstrel business by “passing” while appearing with several different white troupes in the early 1860s.⁴⁵ During the 1865-66 theatrical season, Hicks helped to organize the first nationally successful black minstrel troupe, Brooker and Clayton’s Georgia Minstrels. In what would become a recurring pattern in his career, he lost control of this group to Sam Hague, an English showman that took the core of the party with him to Britain in 1866.⁴⁶ Hicks apparently lacked the capital to compete with white managers and at times struggled to make bookings with theaters unwilling to deal with black managers.⁴⁷ Although he faced particular constraints, he was a resolutely independent figure and fielded a succession of black minstrel outfits during the late 1860s that featured rising stars like Bob Height and Horace Weston. Hicks would even later perform for a time with Hague’s British company and got a measure of revenge by convincing two of Hague’s stars, Aaron Banks and Japanese Tommy, to accompany him back to the United States.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ There are three basic sources on Charles Hicks: Toll, 210-15; Waterhouse, 61-96; Eileen Southern, “The Georgia Minstrels: The Early Years,” in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* ed. Annemarie Bean, et. al. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England [for] Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 163-75.

⁴⁵ *New York Clipper*, March 16, 1861 and July 16, 1864.

⁴⁶ On Hague’s success in Britain with a Georgia Minstrel troupe, see Harry Reynolds, *Minstrel Memories: The Story of Burnt Cork Minstrelsy in Great Britain from 1836 to 1927* (London: A. Rivers, 1928), 161-64.

⁴⁷ For an account of some of the particular struggles that black minstrels faced, see Ike Simond, *Old Slack’s Reminiscences and Pocket History of the Colored Profession from 1865 to 1891* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1974).

⁴⁸ *New York Clipper*, August 9, 1871.

Despite these achievements, it seems clear that Hicks found it increasingly difficult to operate as an independent African-American manager in the white-dominated entertainment industry. In March 1872, Hicks was forced to sell this troupe to a white manager named Charles Callender, but he remained on as the business manager while Callender's Georgia Minstrels established itself as the premier black minstrel outfit. In 1874, he organized yet another company on his own called the King Laughmakers, and though he was only able to tour with the troupe for one season before it passed into the hands of another white manager, most of these performers would eventually rejoin Hicks for the New Zealand tour.⁴⁹ During the 1876-77 season, this group with several new additions toured the Pacific Coast and made a sensational ten-week stand in San Francisco under the management of local impresario Tom Maguire and minstrel magnate J. H. Haverly.⁵⁰ Hicks meanwhile was working as a manager for a white-owned troupe back East called Sprague and Blodgett's Georgia Minstrels, but he quit at some point in early 1877 and made his way out to the Pacific Coast. A contemporary black minstrel named Ike Simond wrote that "Hicks was a dangerous man to all outside managers and they were afraid of him," and this was borne out when he somehow wrested control of the outfit from Haverly and Maguire.⁵¹ On March 28, 1877, the troupe boarded the *P.M.S.S. Australia* in San Francisco and embarked on a tour that introduced the Pacific world to professional African-American entertainment.

While it was certainly prominent, black minstrelsy was not the sole innovation or export in terms of African-American entertainment during the 1870s. The majority of

⁴⁹ That so many of those listed on this group's initial 1874 roster would rejoin Hicks almost three years later for a somewhat risky tour abroad is perhaps a good indicator of the amount of respect he commanded. The seven performers were Hosea Easton, J. R. Matlock, Charlie Crusoe, Billy Sanders, D. S. Bowman, Taylor Brown, and Jimmy Mills. *New York Clipper*, August 29, 1874.

⁵⁰ Lawrence Estavan, ed., *San Francisco Theatre Research*, vol. 18 (1939), 97-100.

⁵¹ Simond, 13.

black performers working in the American entertainment industry were undoubtedly associated with minstrelsy, but nothing matched the overall impact of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.⁵² The Fisk Singers were organized in 1871 by George L. White, the musical director at Fisk University, to raise funds for the school and, more generally, to support the cause of civil rights in the United States. The singers typically consisted of nine vocalists and a pianist, and their repertoire offered a mixture of so-called “negro spirituals” and standard concert music, although it was their renditions of the former that made them famous.⁵³ The Jubilee Singers became a national sensation in June 1872 following their performance at Patrick S. Gilmore’s Second World Peace Jubilee in Boston, and they went on to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars on tours through the United States and abroad, finding particular success in Great Britain.⁵⁴ An important part of the Fisk Jubilee Singers success was the way their performances were framed to appeal to the broadest possible public and draw in evangelicals and others that might not attend a

⁵² While Andrew Ward’s recent study provides a good summary of their history, the best singular source on the Fisk Jubilee Singers remains a contemporary account entitled *The Story of the Jubilee Singers*, which was first published in 1876. This particular edition is credited to J. B. T. Marsh, but it basically just combined the contents of two earlier pamphlets written by Rev. G. D. Pike about the initial Fisk campaigns in the United States and Great Britain. The narrative was supplemented by sheet music for over a hundred different spirituals, and it was this version that was reprinted and sold throughout the Fisk tour of Australasia from 1886-90. After their return, Frederick J. Loudin, the director of the group during the world tour, authored a supplement covering those events, which was added on and published 1892. All references herein are to the 1892 edition: *The Story of the Jubilee Singers by J.B.T. Marsh; with supplement containing an account of their six years’ tour around the world, and many new songs by F.J. Loudin* (Cleveland: Cleveland Print. & Pub. Co., 1892).

⁵³ The extensive literature on negro spirituals attests to their profound importance within the African-American community as well as their broader influence on American music and culture. On spirituals, see W. E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Shane White and Graham White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

⁵⁴ Andrew Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise: the Story of the Jubilee Singers, Who Introduced the World to the Music of Black America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000); Louis D. Silveri, “The Singing Tours of the Fisk Jubilee Singers: 1871-1874” in *Feel the Spirit: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Afro-American Music* ed. George R. Keck and Sherrill V. Martin (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 105-16; Doug Seroff, “The Fisk Jubilee Singers in England,” in *Under The Imperial Carpet: Essays in Black History 1780-1950*, ed. Rainer Lotz and Ian Pegg (Rabbit Press, 1986), 42-55.

regular theatrical entertainment. Their publicity emphasized their respectability (which was resolutely policed by White) and called attention to their benevolent mission while also portraying their music as a kind of “high art” in a way that the minstrelsy of Hicks and company manifestly was not. When George L. White decided to disband the group in 1882, a talented and ambitious bass singer named Frederick J. Loudin took over management and guided a reorganized version of the singers on a six-year-long tour around the world.⁵⁵ In December 1888 the Jubilee Singers actually crossed paths with Hicks’ Georgia Minstrels in Dunedin, a meeting that suggests something of both the popularity and extraordinary mobility of black entertainers at the time and which provides an entree into the last bit of historiography informing this chapter.

Paul Gilroy’s influential work on the Black Atlantic has generated a great deal of interest and stands at the center of an expanding literature about the transnational dynamics of African-American culture. In his chapter, “Jewel’s From Bondage: Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity,” Gilroy suggests how the experience of the Fisk Jubilee Singers abroad was representative of the ways in which black music was incorporated into the “popular-cultural industries,” demonstrating “distinctive patterns of cross-cultural circulation” within the context of the late nineteenth-century Atlantic world.⁵⁶ Adopting a similar but broader frame, Kennell Jackson has recently introduced

⁵⁵ For an excellent review of the Australasian portion of this tour that reproduces a good bit of contemporary newspaper coverage, see Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1895* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002).

⁵⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 88.

the notion of “black cultural traffic” to explore the complex issues raised by the historical fluidity and mobility of black popular culture.⁵⁷

While there are thus an increasing number of studies about the activities and influence of African-American entertainers and cultural forms abroad, comparatively little has been written about black popular culture in the context of the nineteenth-century Pacific.⁵⁸ Aside from simply filling in a glaring gap, the story of black entertainers in New Zealand also pushes this historiography in productive new directions. For one, it shows how the transnational “Black Atlantic” posited by scholars was hardly bounded by the Atlantic Ocean. A kind of parallel Anglo-American world developed in the Pacific, and, as the Fisk Jubilee Singers world tour demonstrated, people and culture often moved between the two, suggesting that the Atlantic world paradigm was more porous than has been supposed.⁵⁹ Focusing on New Zealand also affords a useful comparative context for understanding how African-American performers were able to carve out a new audience for black entertainment in a racial system which in its own way was very different from what existed in either the United States or Britain. Moreover, the indigenous presence of the Maori as consumers and the productive exchanges this engendered offers another wrinkle that has largely been ignored in an Atlantic context. Overall, the story of African-American entertainers in late nineteenth-century New Zealand highlights the

⁵⁷ Kennell Jackson, “Introduction: Traveling While Black,” in *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, ed. Harry J. Elam, Jr., and Kennell Jackson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 1-39.

⁵⁸ Although I have mentioned all three works previously, the important exceptions are the collections by Sampson (*The Ghost Walks*), Abbott and Seroff (*Out of Sight*), and Richard Waterhouse (*From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville*).

⁵⁹ The Fisk Jubilee Singers tour was more or less a progression through the entire Anglo-American world, including its colonial enclaves and settler societies. After a tour through the United States and Canada (1882-1883) the company spent two years in Great Britain and Ireland (1884-1885) before heading to Australia in early 1886. For whatever reason the Fisks elected not to stop in South Africa along the way, perhaps the one glaring exception. After almost four years in the Antipodes (1886-1889) they traveled back to the United States via Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, and the China Coast and arrived in San Francisco in April 1890 after eight years abroad.

extraordinary mobility of black popular culture and the particularities of its historical reception and influence. It also can be read as a story of freedom, one that captures the remarkable alacrity with which African-American performers were able to move beyond the racial constraints they faced in the United States and prosper abroad.

The Georgia Minstrels

As the Pacific Mail steamer arrived in Auckland on April 20, 1877, the *Evening Star* reported that “strains of music were heard from her decks, and as she came closer a score of dusky faces congregated on her deck, half of them blowing brass instruments, told that the long expected Georgia Minstrels had at length arrived.” Public anticipation was keen owing to a great deal of advance publicity in the form of newspaper notices, advertisements, and local billing. There was also an ongoing controversy in the papers over a rival party of Georgia Minstrels that appeared when management issues delayed the expected “original” outfit eventually taken over by Hicks.⁶⁰ Upon disembarking, the troupe’s twelve-member brass band marched up Queen Street in Auckland “playing lively and inspiring tunes, to the delight of large crowds that followed on each side of the street.” Amidst the general excitement, the *New Zealand Herald* expressed

⁶⁰ During the fall of 1876 while the Georgia Minstrels were in the midst of their successful run in San Francisco, Haverly and Maguire began planning a Pacific tour and dispatched an advance agent to make the necessary arrangements, something that was widely reported on by the colonial press. The party was originally scheduled to leave in November on the same steamer as Cooper and Bailey’s Circus, but they at length refused to go, apparently due to some machinations by Hicks. At this time an unscrupulous manager named Sheridan Corbyn attempted to capitalize on the opportunity by organizing his own party of black minstrels. When Corbyn’s Original Georgia Minstrels debuted in Sydney, the small and evidently unstandard outfit were pilloried by the press and denounced as frauds by those that expected the “original” troupe, which remained mired by management issues in California. As this troupe struggled on, their mediocrity and the controversy ensured that public anticipation for the “real” Georgia Minstrels remained strong. Though Corbyn was the manager, the leader of the party was R. B. Lewis and the performers were G. H. Carter, Frank Hewitt, Horace Copeland, O. T. Jackson, R. W. Perkins, R. Moore, and C. H. Lewis. *Australasian* (Melbourne), December 16, 1876 and January 20, 1877; *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 26 and 27, 1876.

Some bit of disappointment...that but a comparatively small number of the minstrels were fine, jet-black, and full-blooded negroes, the majority being mulattos or half-castes, whose lightness of complexion will render absolutely necessary the use of the much-abused burnt cork.

Despite these reservations, the Georgia Minstrels were the subject of much favorable coverage in the press leading up to their debut, with a particular emphasis on their advertised status as the “Great American Slave Troupe.” One paper feted the party as “true children of nature” and claimed their “unique and life-like performances are acted memories of long ago,” while another rather more crudely effused that “it will be something to see a real nigger as Bones and Tambourine.”⁶¹ When the Georgia Minstrels finally opened at the Theatre Royal to an overflowing house, they received an enthusiastic and no doubt heartening reception that augured well for a successful tour.

What the delighted Auckland audiences saw was in many ways a typical minstrel show, albeit with some differences in emphasis and accent from a standard white minstrel performance. As many commentators have noted, one function of the rise of black minstrelsy in the United States was that white minstrels increasingly left so-called “plantation material” to black performers who were presumed to offer more qualified and authentic delineations of Southern types. As publicity for the troupe suggested, plantation material represented a significant part of their repertoire, but a comparison of the Georgia Minstrels with the preceding Chicago Minstrels indicates that white and black minstrels had much in common.⁶² Indeed, Pakeha critics on occasion expressed disappointment upon “discovering that the entertainment was not, in a general sense, different to others

⁶¹ *Evening Star* (Auckland), April 20 and 23, 1877; *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), April 21 and 23, 1877.

⁶² The programmes for both troupes reflected a similar mix of nonracial ballads, minstrel melodies, clog dances and jigs, skits, etc. The only major difference between the two at least in terms of the printed programme was with the third part or afterpiece. The Chicago Minstrels ended with a send-up called “Le Miserables” whereas the Georgia Minstrels offered a plantation festival entitled “Alabama ‘Fore the War.” *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), April 18, 19, 23, and 24, 1877.

we have seen of the kind.”⁶³ Despite these complaints, the Georgia Minstrels did introduce some innovations beyond the obvious novelty of their race, and their fifteen-member roster was, for one, larger than a typical touring troupe in New Zealand.

The advance publicity was of the sort usually reserved for circuses as Hicks’ bombastic advertising style and the parades staged by the brass band proved an original and effective way to pique public interest in the show. In terms of the performance itself, the usual “chair business” of the first part was replaced by a more genteel “drawing room” scene that employed two performers each for the parts of Tambo and Bones.⁶⁴ One new item that perhaps surprisingly did not play well at their debut was the introduction of a “negro camp meeting hymn,” something that had become a regular feature of black minstrels in the wake of the success of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. According to the *Evening Star*, the song “bordered on the profane” and “evidently displeased many of the audience,” but despite this rebuke, jubilee music remained a part of the concluding plantation scene throughout the tour.⁶⁵

The Georgia Minstrels thus offered some new additions and alterations to the traditional minstrel format that contributed to their appeal, but their primary drawing card remained the simple fact that they were “real Ethiopians,” even if Hicks was on occasion mistaken for a white man.⁶⁶ In terms of personnel, Hicks was the clear leader of the group and in addition to his management duties, he served as the interlocutor, a solo vocalist, and occasionally acted in various sketches and afterpieces. Charles Crusoe was the treasurer and a comedian that played one of the Tambo parts, but he was more popularly

⁶³ *New Zealand Times* (Wellington), May 26, 1877

⁶⁴ The four end men seem to have been the only performers that actually “blacked-up” in full make-up for the show.

⁶⁵ *Evening Star* (Auckland), April 24, 1877; *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), April 25, 1877.

⁶⁶ *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), April 24 and 25, 1877.

known for his highly amusing stump speeches. The real star of the troupe was Billy Wilson, a comedian whose antics as Bones and entertaining song and dance turns were invariably celebrated by reviewers. Another favorite was Hosea Easton, a talented musician whose clever banjo solos riffed on popular airs and earned frequent encores. The remainder of the roster was filled out with various specialists: vocalists D. A. Bowman and J. R. Matlock, dancers Sam Keenan and J. Morton, and musicians C. Harris, A. Jackson, W. Saunders, and J. G. Thomas. Lastly, Taylor Brown and Jimmy Mills were versatile performers who served as the extra end men and, with Billy Sanders, appeared in a variety of supporting roles. Given that the core of this party had been together for almost three years, the troupe possessed an extensive repertoire that allowed for varied programmes that drew repeated visits. Their polished style that was augmented by Hicks' management acumen, which ensured that the tour was well-planned and, though the precise arrangements remain unclear, that the performers were receiving fair compensation for their efforts.⁶⁷

Following their debut, the Georgia Minstrels captivated Auckland for the next three weeks, playing to packed houses and earning plaudits that effectively ensured the success of their venture into the unknown. A measure of the sensation they created was perhaps best captured by a newspaper notice describing their departure:

The Georgia Minstrels left the wharf last evening, at five o'clock, by the Wanaka. About five hundred persons were on the wharf witnessing their departure, and the huzzas and expressions of regret were very remarkable. Some of the females among the crowd were affected almost to tears. If report is to be credited with truth these whitey-brown and darkey minstrels have been very hospitably entertained by their white friends, pic-nics and little

⁶⁷ Although there were a few lineup changes, the troupe stayed together for almost three years, which was a fairly long run for the minstrel industry, which was often characterized by lots of turnover and acrimonious conflicts over money.

drives into the country being amongst the offerings which were made to their musical genius.⁶⁸

Following a quick trip to the Thames goldfields, the party visited the cities of Napier and Wellington and then toured around the South Island. During their fortnight in Christchurch, the Hicks boasted of over eleven thousand paid admissions, and special trains had to be scheduled to ensure that those in outlying areas had an opportunity to take in the show.⁶⁹ Inclement weather curtailed a visit to the Otago goldfields, but the troupe capped the tour with a prosperous stand in Dunedin before departing for Tasmania at the end of July. While the Georgia Minstrel's initial tour lasted just over three months, their extraordinary success in New Zealand raises a number of issues that warrant further elaboration.

One of the most salient points centers on the simple fact that New Zealand proved to be a much more commercially and socially congenial environment for African-American performers than the United States. As his repeated and mostly futile efforts to control successive black minstrel parties indicated, Hicks found it very difficult to operate in the United States, but these troubles obviously did not carry over to the antipodes. The New Zealand tour was organized under the auspices of a white Auckland-based theatrical entrepreneur named R. J. DeLias and the troupe employed a local advance agent whose efforts ensured good publicity.⁷⁰ A comment from a Dunedin paper was characteristic in this regard, noting that, "Mr. Bligh, the indefatigable agent, has left no stone unturned in heralding the approach of the Georgias, and the town has seldom

⁶⁸ *Evening Star* (Auckland), May 17, 1877

⁶⁹ *Press* (Christchurch), June 23, 1877

⁷⁰ DeLias regularly imported talent from overseas and apparently used his funds from the Georgia Minstrels' success to purchase the Theatre Royal in Auckland for £7,500. *The Footlight* (San Francisco), September 11, 1877 and October 15, 1877.

been so well bill'd by handsome posters."⁷¹ While the exact details of the arrangement between DeLias and Hicks remains unclear, Hicks was listed as the troupe's manager throughout the tour, and he mediated the outfit's advertising and interactions with the press. There also seems to be little doubt that this leg of the tour was commercially profitable inasmuch as the party consistently played to packed houses even when charging higher than usual prices.⁷² The Georgia Minstrels also avoided what turned into a historically bad year for minstrelsy in the United States by traveling abroad, which was perhaps part of the reason for the broad smiles of the nattily attired members of the group as they posed for publicity portraits in Auckland.⁷³

Beyond such pecuniary matters, in New Zealand Charles Hicks was clearly in control, and the success of the outfit afforded the kind of independence that had proved so elusive in the United States. As the reminiscences and experiences of numerous African-American minstrels attested, even relatively simple matters like travel and housing arrangements could prove difficult to negotiate in the United States and minor problems could quickly escalate into life-threatening situations. Henry Sampson's anthology of blacks in show business contains countless accounts of racial abuse and violence as well as the more pedestrian troubles that entertainers faced in terms. In New Zealand, the Georgia were free of many of the racial constraints faced by black performers back home relating to accommodation, travel, and the like. The picnics and

⁷¹ *Saturday Advertiser* (Dunedin), June 30, 1877.

⁷² There were essentially two tiers in pricing at the time with so-called "popular prices" of 3s, 2s, and 1s (boxes, stalls, pit) being the usual for standard fare. Quality touring productions opened at 4s, 2s 6d, and 1s, but unless they were really first-rate, prices were later reduced to encourage attendance. It is a mark of their success that the Georgia Minstrels were able to maintain the latter pricing structure throughout their tour and in smaller markets like Oamaru, Napier, and Timaru and even at times raised prices to 5s, 3s, and 2s without hurting attendance.

⁷³ Unfortunately, the State Library of Tasmania has lost or otherwise misplaced what was the only known copy of this item. It features individual photographs of each performer grouped together on an "Original Georgia Minstrels" poster. A photograph of the original can be found in Harvard Theatre Collection.

other occasions detailed in the press likewise suggest that the performers experienced a much greater degree of social acceptance and interaction with Pakeha than was typical of white Americans.

Perhaps this helps explain Hicks' combative response to the one significant race-related incident covered in the papers during the tour. While the troupe was in Dunedin over the July 4th holiday, a town councilor denied their request to discharge fireworks, referring to them as "a lot of travelling niggers to whom the Celebration of American Independence was of no consequence." Hicks fired back in a letter to the *Otago Daily Times*:

In our country any public official using such expressions as those quoted above would be held up to public scorn as a person to whose nature common decency was unknown. Who can better appreciate the blessings of freedom than those who have been bought, sold, and held in bondage, as members of our company have been? If the person referred to had been better informed as to the loyalty existing amongst the "niggers" in America who are not "travelling," especially since the Emancipation Proclamation, he would have better understood our request. We shall at any time be glad to enlarge his knowledge, and also try and instruct him as to the courtesy usually extended to strangers.⁷⁴

The minstrel's indignation extended through their performance that evening as well, when the "obnoxious" official was ridiculed with a conundrum that was apparently "enough to bring down the house."⁷⁵ That the crowd so clearly relished in this mockery with the minstrels was broadly indicative of the sympathetic reception accorded to the party. All of this is not to argue that New Zealand represented a problem-free paradise for black entertainers, but clearly for the Georgia Minstrels it offered an improvement in both commercial and social terms over the situation in the United States.

⁷⁴ *Otago Daily Times* (Dunedin), July 4, 1877.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, July 5, 1877.

One of the most obvious and persistent dynamics in the commentary about the Georgia Minstrels centered on a comparison between white and black minstrelsy in which the former was derided as a pale imitation of the “real” thing. In this vein, the *Thames Advertiser* observed that although the audience had “long been shown the peculiarities of these people,” a performance by the “genuine article” demonstrated that “the imitators are as far removed from the original as darkness is from light, and are as much to be despised as a counterfeit coin when passed off as possessing the genuine ring.”⁷⁶ Not everyone agreed of course, and one unimpressed critic equivocated that “it is a matter of debate whether painted niggers or real blacks are preferable,” but for most reviewers the fact that the troupe were actual African-Americans limited undue criticism.⁷⁷ The frequent invocation of the word “genuine” was the hallmark of this trope and located the appeal of the troupe in their authenticity as “Negroes” over any specific merit as performers. The *Evening Star*, for example, offered a standard criticism of the troupe’s vocalists, noting that “the solos as specimens of artistic singing they were not good, but as samples of the real slave melodies of Georgia they were perfect.”⁷⁸ There were different standards in play here and a sense that black and white minstrels were almost incomparable precisely because the former simply were what the latter could only try to represent. This kind of essentializing logic was apparent in much of the commentary on the Georgia Minstrels and derived its power from the dominant stereotypes of black Americans that were circulated and reinforced through popular culture. In a passage that hearkened back to Uncle Tom and Jim Crow, the dramatic critic for the *Otago Witness* was delighted that the Georgia Minstrels were able to “represent

⁷⁶ *Thames Advertiser*, May 8, 1877.

⁷⁷ *Timaru Herald*, June 26, 1877.

⁷⁸ *Evening Star* (Auckland), April 23, 1877.

the pathetic side of the negro character, as well as that grotesque humour which is its natural characteristic.”⁷⁹

The presumed naturalness of the performance was a point touched on by countless reviewers and reflected an ongoing tension between a negative and generally racist understanding of blacks as inherently entertaining and a more positive realization that prior white representations were essentially caricatures.⁸⁰ The *New Zealand Herald*, for example, opined, “The humour is genuine and unrestrained; even the most grotesque performances of the corner men are rendered in such a natural manner as to add largely to the effect. There is far less effort made to speak in broken English than is perceptible in the ‘funny’ men of most minstrel troupes, and the Americanisms, instead of being caricatured, fall quite naturally from the wide-spread mouths of these sable performers.”⁸¹ The passage mixes a realization as to the inadequacy of white minstrels with a more problematic tendency by which black minstrels seemed to reinforce aspects of established stereotypes of African-Americans. To put it another way, if as one particularly excited reviewer wrote, “all our preconceived notions are thrown in the shade in the presence of the actual sable article of which the Georgias are composed,” the character of the new notions that arose out of the performance remain questionable.⁸²

As numerous commentators noted, the simple fact that the entertainers were black created intense excitement, and the minstrels manipulated this energy with songs and jokes that “moved the feet and risible faculties of the audience almost to an alarming

⁷⁹ *Otago Witness* (Dunedin), July 7, 1877.

⁸⁰ Huggins suggestively argues that blackface minstrelsy represented “a pleasurable escape into naturalness (256)” and this dynamic certainly seems operative in a New Zealand context.

⁸¹ *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), April 26, 1877.

⁸² *Thames Advertiser*, May 8, 1877.

extent.”⁸³ The audience wanted to have some “genuine fun” and came to the show with a set of expectations and stereotypes that the Georgia Minstrels both accommodated and resisted. The overall publicity campaign that hyped the troupe as former slaves and attested to the authentic character of their plantation material certainly played to a Pakeha preoccupation with slave life.⁸⁴ In part, depictions of slave life were appealing because they seemed to confirm Pakeha superiority in two ways. The first was the evident self-satisfaction taken from British leadership in the abolitionist movement, and the second was a kind of implicit comparison of the brutality of slavery with the ostensibly more benevolent treatment accorded to the Maori. Although the Georgia Minstrels could perhaps be condemned for catering to white fantasies, it was a move that proved highly profitable and the evidence indicates that their plantation sketches included much more realistic elements and characterizations than a typical white minstrel show.

Black minstrelsy emerged out of complex interplay between white fascination with black life and efforts by black performers to establish both artistic and commercial control over the representation of black culture. This was an unequal and ongoing conflict that the Georgia Minstrels’ experience in New Zealand helps illuminate. Did their performances lend credibility to conventional caricatures of African-Americans? Undoubtedly, the answer was yes, but the situation was complicated by the fact that so many observers recognized the comparative inadequacy of white minstrelsy and consequently expressed a much fuller appreciation of the vitality of black entertainers and culture. The Georgia Minstrels also retained a measure of control over how their

⁸³ *Evening Star* (Auckland), May 15, 1877.

⁸⁴ The supposed status of the troupe as former slaves was for the most part a fabrication. In the most complete study of the various earlier editions of the Georgia Minstrels, Eileen Southern demonstrated that only a handful of them ever experienced slavery. Regarding this particular party, Richard Waterhouse believes only one member, J. R. Matlock, had actually been a slave. Waterhouse, 66-67; Southern, “Georgia Minstrels.”

performance was framed, and it is telling in this context that Hicks led off each show with an introductory speech about the black struggle for freedom and the troupe's particular history.⁸⁵

As black performers gained a presence on the stage, they also helped revitalize minstrelsy by developing new acts, innovating older ones, and introducing traditional material that had escaped appropriation by white minstrels. The Georgia Minstrels' performances included minstrel songs by black composers like Sam Lucas, traditional folk songs like "Old Aunt Jemima," and a substantial amount of non-racial songs and sketches that made for a varied and fresh programme. While plantation material was invariably included, it never dominated the show and their interpretation was certainly richer and more realistic than the usual white minstrel version.⁸⁶ Reviews lauded their plantation finale for portraying "a realistic picture of life in the South" and noted how the music and dancing were "reproduced with great effect, including the weird wild chants of the slaves whilst at their work."⁸⁷ The Georgia Minstrels thus introduced negro spirituals to New Zealand, and this sort of original content that gave their version of the plantation a texture and depth that white minstrel adaptations so clearly lacked.

The last thing to consider in the context of this initial tour by the Georgia Minstrels centers on the performative aspects of the endeavor, both for the entertainers and their audience. One of the recurring motifs of the literature on black performance concerns the trope of masks and the way they were manipulated in different ways and for

⁸⁵ While the details of the speech are unclear and it was undoubtedly self-serving, it did establish a narrative context for the performance. It garnered occasional complaints as well: "The public went to see the performance of those real nigger minstrels, not to hear their history, nor be called upon to sympathise with their condition." *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), April 24, 1877

⁸⁶ For a detailed explication of the cultural politics of plantation themes used by black entertainers, see Brooks, "The Negro in the New World."

⁸⁷ *Star* (Christchurch), June 19, 1877.

different ends by black artists.⁸⁸ In the course of a discussion about black minstrel shows, Amiri Baraka wrote that they were “parodies or exaggerations of certain aspects of Negro life in America. But in one sense the colored minstrel was poking fun at himself, and in another probably more profound sense he was poking fun at the white men.”⁸⁹ One obvious example of this in the context of the Georgia Minstrels was the way in which the party used their supposed slave origins to drum up business and sympathy from a credulous public. Hicks seemed to relish putting on the press and adopted an irreverent tone in the troupe’s advertising as when a “thank you” notice was put in the paper after a prosperous run in Christchurch that read in part: “Good-bye White Folks One and All!”⁹⁰ This notion of “hokum,” that black artists were toying with and taking advantage of their white audience has usefully been elaborated on by Karen Sotiropolous.⁹¹ Of course, the show trade in the United States had long dealt in “humbug,” so black entertainers certainly had a model to build upon, but such matters could become much more charged in particular racial contexts.⁹² Whether or not one considers the tour as a kind of shuck and jive routine writ large, there was an underlying playfulness to the Georgia Minstrels that would seem to confirm Baraka’s point.

In this context, whether or not and to what extent the audience appreciated that this was indeed just an exaggerated performance becomes extremely significant. In her

⁸⁸ Both Nathan Huggins and Robert Toll riff on the “mask” motif in the titles to their respective chapters on black minstrelsy. For a noted exploration of this trope, see Ralph Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 45-59.

⁸⁹ Imamu Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1963), 85.

⁹⁰ Beyond the slavery issue, Hicks frequently offered exaggerated accounts of performing for noteworthy figures and royalty in the United States and Europe. He also claimed to be the originator nearly ever song and act the Georgia Minstrels performed. *Press* (Christchurch), June 23, 1877.

⁹¹ Sotiropolous, 36-41.

⁹² It seems unlikely, for example, that anyone could have gotten killed over the Feejee Mermaid, but a wrong move by a black performer in the United States, for one, could have had much more serious consequences. On humbugs and the U.S. show trade see Harris, *Humbug* and Cook, *Arts of Deception*.

recent study, Sotiropolous argues that turn-of-the century black entertainers used “racist stereotypes in their performances in part to distance themselves from these images, since it was abundantly clear (at least to themselves and their black audiences) that they were *performing* these roles, not embracing them as representative behavior. They sought to show their audiences how much they were skilled actors – professionals – playing stereotypes in an effort to expose the fictions within the imagery.”⁹³ While this is a salient point, the situation in New Zealand was obviously far different, and the only real reference point for Pakeha audiences were prior minstrel caricatures. The question comes down to whether the public was sophisticated enough to appreciate that this was indeed just a show or if a gullible audience simply saw their racist stereotypes being reinforced and confirmed. Were the Georgia Minstrels, in a sense, seen as exhibits or were they recognized as performers? The overall presentation by the Georgia Minstrels, perhaps problematically, seems to have left the audience room for imagining both possibilities.

The Georgia Minstrels followed their sensational success in New Zealand with an equally popular and prosperous tour through Australia, which has been ably chronicled by Richard Waterhouse. There is evidence to suggest that Hicks was planning a world tour, but for whatever reason those plans never eventuated and the main troupe, though not always together, spent the next three years in the antipodes.⁹⁴ When interest in the minstrel show flagged, the Georgia Minstrels teamed with the L. M. Bayless Dramatic Company in mid-1878 for a spectacular production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.⁹⁵ Hosea Easton played the title role, and the mixture of minstrelsy and melodrama proved a

⁹³ Sotiropolous, 9.

⁹⁴ *New York Clipper*, January 26, 1878.

⁹⁵ The show debuted at the Princess Theatre in Melbourne on June 8, 1878 and ran for an unprecedented twelve weeks of sold-out performances: *Australasian* (Melbourne), June 15, 1878; *Lorgnette* (Melbourne), October 7, 1878.

popular and critical success with Australian audiences.⁹⁶

In February 1879, the Georgia Minstrels returned to New Zealand for a three-month tour that alternated between the minstrel format and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. There were two noteworthy developments during this second circuit through New Zealand. The first concerns the remarkable accolades Hosea Easton received for his portrayal of Uncle Tom. The *New Zealand Herald* effused, "It was a surprising delineation of a most extraordinary character. It was a perfect *personnel* of the authoress's ideal – quiet, unassuming, steadfast, and Christian, and we pay Mr. Easton a very high compliment on his exceedingly clever and perfectly sustained representation of a part which, in less able hands, might have so easily caricatured."⁹⁷ This comment captures something of the larger process by which black performers like Easton were able to insinuate themselves into and subsequently open up previously impoverished white-controlled representations of African-Americans. The second significant event was that the Georgia Minstrels began staging "Sacred Jubilee Entertainment" that featured traditional negro spirituals like "Steal Away Jesus" and "Go Down Moses," leading off with a Good Friday performance in Dunedin. Hicks "explained the nature of the hymns and songs, and stated that although some of the selections might appear to be burlesques on religion, they were nothing of that sort" and while most of the selections seem to have been well-received, one reviewer noted that several items "had a rather ludicrous effect."⁹⁸ This kind of response was echoed in the reception of the Fisk Jubilee Singers over a decade later, but it was the Georgia Minstrels that first introduced and demonstrated the efficacy of this kind of

⁹⁶ While Sam Lucas is popularly known as the first African-American to take on the role of Uncle Tom, the Melbourne production with Easton actually preceded him and Easton's success in the role was much more pronounced. Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit: Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: S. F. Vanni, 1947), 225-26.

⁹⁷ *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), February 18, 1879.

⁹⁸ *Otago Daily Times* (Dunedin), April 11 and 12, 1879.

entertainment in New Zealand.

When Charles Hicks headed back to the United States in June 1880, many members of the troupe elected to remain in the antipodes. Hosea Easton and Sam Keenan both married and permanently resettled in Australia while continuing to appear on stage in a variety of roles and often with white entertainment combinations.⁹⁹ Other former members embarked on new careers altogether as O.T. Jackson and C. Harris opened up a barbershop in Melbourne.¹⁰⁰ Billy Wilson continued to tour on his own but ran into some serious trouble when he and an African-American cook named Edward Clarke were arrested in Wanganui in June 1880. Clarke, Wilson, Easton, and another former Georgia Minstrel named David Bowman had been touring through the country districts around the Wanganui River and spent the day in town drinking and playing billiards at the Victoria Hotel. At some point the hotel's cash-box was stolen and Clarke was caught and arrested along with Wilson who protested that he had unknowingly received some of the money from Clarke. Wilson was lucky to escape conviction but Clarke was sentenced to 18 months in prison.¹⁰¹

The episode is intriguing because it demonstrates that at least some black entertainers were circulating in mostly Maori areas beyond the major towns and cities. In early 1881, Wilson joined with R. B. Lewis, who led the rival Georgia Minstrel party, and gathered together the remaining performers from both groups into a company called the Mastodon Colored Minstrels for a two-year circuit of India, Singapore, China, the

⁹⁹ These integrated minstrel troupes were themselves a measure of the liberality of the Pacific entertainment scene, particularly as they often featured white women performers as well. By contrast, American minstrelsy remained rigidly segregated through the end of the century. Easton's marriage at least does not seem to have been very happy as he soon found himself in court for desertion. *Argus*, January 24, 1879.

¹⁰⁰ *Lorgnette* (Melbourne), October 27, 1879.

¹⁰¹ *Wanganui Herald*, July 23 and 25, 1880; *Wanganui Chronicle*, November 25, 1880.

Dutch East Indies, and Australia.¹⁰² During the New Zealand leg of the tour, the Mastodons offered the now standard mix of African-American entertainment by doing a minstrel show, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and an occasional jubilee concert.¹⁰³ Although it's unclear precisely what happened to every member, the majority of the Georgia Minstrels remained abroad, and some dispersed to rather far-flung locales around the Pacific. The American minstrel Tommy Hudson found several of them stranded in Shanghai in 1883 and in a letter to the *Lorgnette* from 1885, reported that some of the Georgia Minstrels were in Calcutta "acting as waiters and billiard markers."¹⁰⁴ In the meantime, Easton, Keenan, and a few other performers remained active and ensured that black entertainment retained a place on the Pacific circuit until the next wave of African-American talent arrived in 1886 and 1887.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the "Big Black Boom"

When Frederick Loudin took over the Fisk Jubilee Singers following George L. White's abrupt dissolution of the group, he did so with a sense of mission, intoning that "hitherto, the triumphs and wonderful achievements had been accomplished under the direction and management of the so-called dominant race, but in September, 1882, a Negro steps to the helm."¹⁰⁵ Loudin was a phenomenal bass singer, an ambitious entrepreneur, and, according to Doug Seroff, "the most politically outspoken black

¹⁰² *Lorgnette* (Melbourne), February 19, 1881; *New York Clipper*, July 21, 1883.

¹⁰³ *Press* (Christchurch), January 13, 1882; *New Zealand Observer* (Wellington), February 18, 1882 and March 4, 1882; *Otago Daily Times* (Dunedin), April 8, 1882.

¹⁰⁴ Hudson came down with Emerson's California Minstrels in 1873 and subsequently made a career on the Pacific circuit piloting around a combination minstrel-burlesque show called Hudson's Surprise Party. *Lorgnette* (Melbourne), October 23, 1883 and January 18, 1885.

¹⁰⁵ Marsh and Loudin, *The Jubilee Singers*, 123.

entertainer of the nineteenth century.”¹⁰⁶ Anxious to show his mettle, Loudin reorganized the Jubilee Singers and guided them on an extraordinary six-year-long tour around the world. Although they retained the Fisk name, the party was at this point a commercial rather than a charitable venture and consisted of a total of ten vocalists and an accompanist.¹⁰⁷ The Jubilee Singers arrived in Melbourne in May 1886 and spent the next four years traveling through Australasia, in the course of which they made two extended tours of New Zealand from November 1886 to June 1887 and again from November 1888 to April 1889. The party toured much more widely than was typical of visiting entertainers and embarked on a number of country tours that took them through nearly every corner of the colony where they were lauded by Pakeha and Maori alike. The tours were a commercial and artistic triumph and the troupe without exception played to crowded houses and garnered ecstatic reviews, but like the Georgia Minstrels, the commentary also reflected a rather uneasy dynamic between racism and popular culture.

A typical performance by the Fisk Jubilee Singers consisted of fifteen or so selections drawn from an extensive repertoire of negro spirituals and standard secular fare. Although the Jubilee Singers featured “traditional” or vernacular black music, their version of the spirituals were typically scored as four-part arrangements and otherwise cleaned up in deference to the sensibilities of their mostly white audience.¹⁰⁸ This process engendered an ongoing debate among African-American artists and intellectuals about the relative value of authenticity versus the merits of a more formal aesthetic, but it was

¹⁰⁶ Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 3.

¹⁰⁷ The shift from charitable to commercial purposes was at least partially driven by the exploitative arrangements that White imposed on the Fisk Jubilee outfits of the 1870s, which saw the singers reap very little reward from their spectacular success. Loudin at least seems to have believed that the troupe deserved much more by way of compensation and the contracts and overall profits: Sandra Graham, “On the Road to Freedom: The Contracts of the Fisk Jubilee Singers,” *American Music* 24, no. 1 (2006): 1-29.

¹⁰⁸ Ronald Radano, “Denoting Difference: The Writing of the Slave Spirituals.” *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 3 (1996): 506-544.

also an issue that New Zealand commentators engaged with.¹⁰⁹ As one Wellington critic astutely observed, the Jubilee Singers

Are not merely negroes singing their religious meeting melodies in rough uncultured plantation style. They are one and all trained vocalists of rare natural gifts and ability, and while giving in all fidelity the negro hymns, they do with all the added charm of skilled and talented vocalism by voices of magnificent timbre, quality, and range.¹¹⁰

And yet in a fashion that echoed responses to the Georgia Minstrels, the preponderance of reviewers tended to see the music of the Jubilee Singers as an extension of their essentialized identity and celebrated it as the “natural” and “peculiar” expression of the race. Through the music, said one observer, “the audience can sympathetically enter into its spirit of the melodies and themes of the songs that formed the method of expression of a people who had little to look forward to but to them the happy crossing of the Jordan.”¹¹¹ While this sort of empathic identification was certainly positive in some respects, it also was frequently accompanied by a more dubious kind of romantic racialism that located African-American expression within an essentialized and limiting framework.¹¹²

More often than not, critics were at loss to even describe the Jubilee Singers and simply asserted the need to experience them for oneself. After fumbling about for the proper words, one reviewer simply said, “it is just the soul which put into and comes out of every word and every note.”¹¹³ The “unique” phrasing, “plaintive” melodies, and “weird” vocalizations were endlessly noted, but it was the profound emotional depth and

¹⁰⁹ For an excellent account of this larger intellectual debate among the former, see Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

¹¹⁰ *Evening Press* (Wellington), February 9, 1887.

¹¹¹ *North Otago Times* (Oamaru), January 1, 1889.

¹¹² On “romantic racialism,” see George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

¹¹³ *Bruce Herald*, May 24, 1887.

pathos of the performance that so many auditors found striking. If, as we have seen, the minstrels manipulated a particular stereotype of African-Americans as inherently entertaining, the Fisks catered to the other dominant image of the quiescent and pathetic Uncle Tom. Indeed this connection was explicitly made by a reviewer who wrote of Loudin that “one can almost fancy that the grave sedate gentleman who introduces his companions is an educated ‘Uncle Tom,’” and continued,

To those who have not heard these children of song the first impression is one of wonder and delight: wonder, when the wild, thrilling melodies are being sung with an earnestness peculiar to the race; and delight when the voices sink with a mournful cadence into a sweet plaintive strain that just reaches the ears of the listener. Their great charm is not so much in their rendering of the class of music that Europeans are wont to listen to, as in the fantastic and original style of the songs peculiar to their race.¹¹⁴

Although they certainly did it a more serious manner, Loudin’s presentation of the music as genuine slave melodies echoed the minstrels in important ways. For both the Georgia Minstrels and the Fisk Jubilee Singers there were risks and rewards associated with the ways that their particular performances variously reinforced and challenged established stereotypes.

Whatever the interpretative issues, the Fisk Jubilee Singers were a commercial juggernaut. The *New Zealand Mail* quoted a manager saying that he would never think of playing against them because they were “worse than a circus.”¹¹⁵ During their initial two-week engagement in Wellington, Loudin supposedly cleared an impressive fifteen hundred pounds and New Zealand theatrical columns regularly noted how the party was

¹¹⁴ *Wairarapa Daily* (Masterton), February 7, 1887.

¹¹⁵ As a large and spectacular touring attraction, circuses were obviously a big draw and managers tended to avoid going to head to head with one if they could avoid it. *New Zealand Mail* (Wellington), February 11, 1887.

“gathering an extraordinary amount of coin.”¹¹⁶ Loudin’s management acumen and capacious drive for publicity ensured their broad appeal:

This is the sort of show that suits everybody. The regular theatre-goer, and the party of a goody-goody turn of mind who considers theatrical entertainments sinful and shocking, both patronise the Fisks, and so, while the company ‘gives pleasure to all,’ the astute Loudin rakes in the shekels of the godly and ungodly, and probably ‘enjoys a good laugh’—in his sleeve—at the absurdity of human nature.¹¹⁷

The idea of Loudin laughing on the way to the bank hearkens back to the notion of hokum, and, although the Jubilee Singers were certainly sincere in their presentation, the obviously commercial nature of their tour did at times rankle some commentators.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Fisk Jubilee Singers centers on the special connection they developed with their Maori audiences. Here it is interesting that the party toured much more widely than was typical of major attractions, and this took them to predominately Maori areas like the Waikato and the Wairarapa. In a letter to the *Fisk Herald*, Loudin described the effect of the music:

Their hearts were touched. They came again and again, and when we asked them the reason, they indicated that they recognized kinship....they were quite clear that Maoris were ‘same’ pointing to our faces....I had many interesting conversations with the Maoris about the lives and hopes of colored people.¹¹⁸

Being of a politically progressive bent, it was hardly surprising to see Loudin take such an interest in the struggles of New Zealand’s indigenous inhabitants. Perhaps the most obvious, but nonetheless important, basis for the relationship stemmed from a mutual recognition of the problems and discrimination each faced as racialized minorities in white-dominated societies. But neither was this connection foreordained, and part of what

¹¹⁶ *L’Entre Act* (Sydney), March 12, 1887; *Otago Witness* (Dunedin), May 6, 1887.

¹¹⁷ *New Zealand Observer* (Wellington), March 23, 1889

¹¹⁸ *Fisk Herald*, December 1887, quoted in Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 12.

was so interesting about the relationship between the Fisk Jubilee Singers and their Maori audiences was that it was not in fact automatic. In *The Jubilee Singers*, Loudin demonstrated the limits of any kind of identification based on skin color or social position with a disdainful portrayal Australian Aboriginals that aped racist colonial discourse and contained a blunt comparison to Maori that read, “Unlike the aborigines of Australia, they are a strong, vigorous, intelligent people.”¹¹⁹

The budding relationship between the Fisks and some Maori continued as the party traveled to Wanganui. There a local paper described how

The Maoris appear to be greatly interested in the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and lose no opportunity of accosting and speaking to them. One old tattooed warrior, when asked his opinion of them, gravely implied: ‘Oh! all the same the Maori.’ They say they are their brothers from over the water.¹²⁰

Though this particular interaction was mediated by a Pakeha observer, there were other indicators of the close connection that the Jubilee Singers established with their Maori audiences. The most obvious, though still important, of these was simply the amount of time the group devoted to touring through predominately Maori areas in stark contrast to other visiting entertainers that generally avoided such places.¹²¹ The diary of tenor R. B. Williams also details many other everyday and more formal interactions with various Maori groups and reflects a sympathetic concern with their oppression.¹²²

In the Wairarapa, the Fisks were invited to a *hui* (a social gathering or formal assembly) at Papawai pah, which was one of the centers of the nascent Maori cultural and

¹¹⁹ Marsh and Loudin, *The Jubilee Singers*, 142.

¹²⁰ *Wanganui Chronicle*, April 18, 1889.

¹²¹ Given the spectacular sums that the Fisks were making in the major colonial cities, there would certainly seem to be some degree of financial cost associated with this decision.

¹²² Williams later became a lawyer in Wellington and worked on several Maori Land Court cases: Chris Bourke, “R. B. Williams: He Came, He Sang, He Stayed,” *Music in New Zealand* (Autumn 1991): 48-51. Thanks to Chris Bourke for providing a transcript of Williams’ diary from the 1887-1888 tour.

political revival of the late nineteenth century.¹²³ Ever outspoken, Loudin was soon making public comments about the general maltreatment of Maoris and the need for temperance and education that many Pakeha found outrageous. The response by an editor of the *Waipawa Mail* was instructive in this regard and sought initially to dispel their bond by arguing that

Mr. Loudin forgets the very marked difference between the Maoris and the American negroes. The latter are clever, and above all they are not lazy or indolent...What a contrast to the natives of New Zealand! These poor creatures are still in the last stage of savagery.

This rather remarkable inversion of typical racist rhetoric in the United States was followed by a passage that condescendingly thanked Loudin for his input and defensively suggested that Pakeha prejudice was a myth for “the people who are now their betters...treat them as equals.”¹²⁴ The relationship that developed between some Maori and the Jubilee Singers, though obviously viewed as a threat by many Pakeha, highlighted the way in which the transnational diffusion of black popular culture served as a medium for cross-cultural interactions and identification.

As we have seen, minstrelsy provided the dominant lens through which African-American entertainment was understood, and a good indicator of this was the simple fact that many newspapers insisted on describing the Jubilee Singers as the “Fisk Minstrels.” Despite the serious and refined nature of the performance, there was often inappropriate laughter on the part of the audience either due to the lyrics or particular vocal effects. Some audiences simply found the religious sentiments expressed in songs like “The Old Ark’s A-Moving” patently ridiculous and during a rendition of “I’m Rolling through an Unfriendly World,” Loudin’s “enunciation of the leading motif evoked much

¹²³ *Wairarapa Standard* (Greytown), February 21, 1887.

¹²⁴ *Waipawa Mail*, January 15, 1887, quoted in Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 12-13.

amusement” with a Waikato audience.¹²⁵ In an unfamiliar context, some the particularities of African-American music proved unintentionally humorous and audiences were “unable to resist a laugh at the un-hymnlike words, or the ludicrous turns in the melody.”¹²⁶ The idea that the Jubilee Singers at times projected a sense of the ludicrous certainly spoke to established minstrel stereotypes, but some of this confusion also derived from the presence of both minstrel and comic songs in their repertoire. Loudin frequently performed “The Laughing Song” and his laughter, “which he makes contagious to a degree of rendering the more susceptible of his hearers somewhat hysterical,” obviously evoked the kind of risible response that was more characteristic of a minstrel show than a refined concert.¹²⁷ Although it was a sentimental tune, Mattie Lawrence, the prima donna soloist, often performed “Old Folks at Home,” something that would also seem to reinforce the connection.

In a rather remarkable coincidence, the New Zealand public was presented with an opportunity to make a first-hand comparison between the two styles when the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Hicks-led American Coloured Minstrels crossed paths in Dunedin during late December 1888. The Jubilee Singers were finishing a tour of the country towns in Otago when the minstrels arrived and, perhaps not wanting to compete with another African-American outfit, they only gave one afternoon performance before moving on.¹²⁸ That evening, the *Otago Witness* reported that the Fisks “were visible in the dress circle of the Princess Theatre, where they had looked in to see their coloured

¹²⁵ *North Otago Times* (Oamaru), April 22, 1887; *Waikato Times* (Waikato), December 15, 1886.

¹²⁶ *Wanganui Herald*, January 20, 1887.

¹²⁷ *Evening Press* (Wellington), February 20, 1889.

¹²⁸ *Otago Daily Times* (Dunedin), December 29, 1888.

brethren do the funny business. They seemed amused.”¹²⁹ This brief but seemingly cordial encounter between two talented companies in this remote corner of the world was an impressive indicator of the ongoing globalization of African-American entertainment and the importance of transnational markets across the Pacific played in the process.

Charles Hicks had returned to the scene with a new and improved troupe of minstrels in July 1888, and the party made two circuits through New Zealand over the next two years. During the intervening years, Hicks had struggled, bouncing between working for white-owned troupes and making occasional and ultimately futile efforts to organize companies of his own. In the 1880s, white managers tightened their control over black minstrelsy, and an increasingly consolidated theatrical system meant that independent acts found it difficult to secure bookings. The trend towards larger troupes, lavish productions, and extensive promotion effectively froze out black managers and ensured that most of the profits from black performances stayed in white hands. Perhaps the most nefarious aspect of this process was the restrictions it placed on the content of black shows, which almost exclusively emphasized plantation material and effectively re-energized damaging stereotypes of black Americans.¹³⁰ Evidently fed up with this state of affairs, in 1886 Hicks and another black manager named A. D. Sawyer organized a party that promised to offer “fresh features” and do away with the “worn-out figureheads that have outlived their usefulness in the antiquated acts of the past.”¹³¹ Unfortunately, the Hicks-Sawyer Minstrels proved unable to overcome the severe obstacles that faced independent black companies in terms of the capital that white managers were able to raise and the difficulty they had in securing bookings. In a clear indicator of the latter

¹²⁹ *Otago Witness* (Dunedin), January 4, 1889.

¹³⁰ Toll, 205-15.

¹³¹ *New York Clipper*, August 7, 1886.

point, Hicks was eventually reduced to advertising for dime museum bookings.¹³² Clearly stymied in the United States, it was around this time that Hicks, no doubt hoping to recreate past triumphs, began to plot his return to the Pacific circuit and in early 1888 set sail from San Francisco with a large and talented new company.¹³³

The troupe, billed as the Hicks-Sawyer Coloured Minstrels or simply the American Coloured Minstrels, arrived in New Zealand and debuted to an overflowing house at the Theatre Royal in Wellington on November 5, 1888. The show demonstrated some significant progress and innovations on the typical offering by the Georgia Minstrels from a decade earlier.¹³⁴ First and foremost, the slavery hokum was dropped, and the overall orientation of the show de-emphasized the significance of plantation material, bucking the dominant orientation of black minstrel entertainment during the 1880s in the United States. With some two-dozen performers, the new outfit was able to offer a much more diverse programme that owed more to vaudeville than the minstrel tradition.¹³⁵ The repertoire of the troupe's premiere vocalists, tenor Wallace King and bass Will Johnson, consisted almost exclusively of nonracial ballads like "The Old Stone Mill," "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep," and "The Cricket on the Hearth."¹³⁶ Other popular acts like the acrobatic routines of the Connor Brothers, Frank Duprey's trombone specialty, William Wesley's yodeling, and a precision military drill entitled "The Black

¹³² Hicks and Sawyer quarreled and the party split in mid-1887, though both laid claim to the name, so there were actually two separate Hicks-Sawyer Minstrel companies touring. *New York Clipper*, August 27, 1887.

¹³³ The Melbourne-based *Lorgnette*, which was the clearing-house for Australian show business news, first reported that Hicks was organizing for a tour in August 1887, though it would be almost a year before they arrived in Sydney.

¹³⁴ Several of the original Georgia Minstrels that remained in Australia such as Hosea Easton, J. R. Matlock, and Billy Saunders rejoined Hicks on this tour.

¹³⁵ On vaudeville's ascent in the American entertainment business, see Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹³⁶ For more on King, see Ronald Henry High, "Black Male Concert Singers of the Nineteenth Century: A Bibliographic Study" in *Feel the Spirit: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Afro-American Music*, ed. George R. Keck and Sherrill V. Martin (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 117-34.

Zouaves” bore little resemblance to typical minstrel turns. Although this shift might broadly be seen as a response to shifting public tastes, it seems important to recognize that Hicks was at the forefront of the move, and while the show certainly preserved elements of the minstrel tradition and relied on racial caricature, the Hicks-Sawyer Minstrels were also clearly trying to push beyond it.

One of the novelties that derived from the minstrel tradition was introduced by perhaps the most feted performer in the outfit, Irving Sayles, who specialized as a “coon” figure in sketches and popularized the song “I’m the Father of a Little Black Coon.” Coon songs stood rather ambivalently between the older minstrel stereotypes and the development of modern African-American music, but what they underscored was the way in which black entertainers were becoming a central influence on the direction of American popular culture.¹³⁷ Sayles was described as “the boss ‘comical coon’ of the show,” and his antics were commonly featured in newspaper reviews.¹³⁸ Still, the most notable feature of the show was the near absence of the kind of sentimental plantation material that was so central to black minstrelsy in the United States. Freed from the constraints of white management and a poisonous racial atmosphere, the Hicks-Sawyer Minstrels charted a self-consciously new course for African-American entertainment in the antipodes, and their overall success demonstrated the efficacy of this new departure.

In January 1889, the *New York Clipper* published a letter from Charles Hicks trumpeting that, “The ‘Big Black Boom’ has struck ‘Maiori Land’ [*sic*], and what is more, with much success,” and, for the most part, Pakeha commentators praised this shift,

¹³⁷ On coon songs and stereotypes, see James M. Dorman, "Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction American Blacks: The 'Coon Song' Phenomenon of the Gilded Age," *American Quarterly* 40, no.4 (1988): 450-71; Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, Coon Songs, and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

¹³⁸ *Evening Star* (Auckland), January 28, 1890.

reflecting a much greater appreciation of the minstrels as talented artists.¹³⁹ The overall “freshness and novelty” of the programme and the musical elements in particular were often singled out for praise, with one reviewer suggesting that “Judged from the musical standard of Christy Minstrel performances the company is an excellent one, and far superior to anything that has travelled this colony for years past.”¹⁴⁰ Echoing earlier criticism was the recognition of the comparative poverty of white minstrel caricatures, and more than one commentator combined praise for the “absence of that stale-exaggeration of the negro character” with an appreciation of the performers as “artistes of no mean standing.”¹⁴¹ Still, such comparisons represented a slippery slope, and a comment such as, “there is something about the manner, bearing, and accent of the darky proper which is never quite actually reproduced, which is, in truth, inimitable,” functioned as both a positive evaluation and an implicitly racist characterization of African Americans.¹⁴² Clearly, race always played a role when reviewers assessed the merits of the performance, but the larger point here is that the kind of “real nigger” rhetoric that characterized the reception of the earlier Georgia Minstrels was much less visible during these later tours. To explain the merits or appeal of the Hicks-Sawyer Minstrels, reviewers were wont to focus on talent and ability over explanations that were premised on stereotypes about the essential character of the race. This tendency was of course partly due to the absence of a publicity campaign attempting to convince them otherwise as the “Great Slave Troupe” slogan of the Georgia Minstrels was replaced by

¹³⁹ *New York Clipper*, January 19, 1889.

¹⁴⁰ *Evening Press* (Auckland), November 7, 1888.

¹⁴¹ *Star* (Christchurch), December 11, 1888

¹⁴² *Southland Times*, January 10, 1889.

“The Big Black Boom.” More importantly, it was also a measure of the evolution of black performers and their ability to push beyond the constraints of the minstrel tradition.

Like their predecessors, the Hicks-Sawyer Minstrels found a congenial reception in New Zealand and encountered a level of sociability and acceptance that must have proved agreeable. One of the interesting facets of the tour was the fact that the troupe had its own baseball team, a sport whose popularity across the Pacific reflected the United States expanding influence.¹⁴³ The minstrel team, with Hicks umpiring, played against numerous local clubs and even though they beat the Wellington team 51-11, a newspaper account of the game noted that “hearty good-fellowship” prevailed, and the teams retired to a local hotel for drinks.¹⁴⁴ In a rather more unusual example, the acrobat John Connor won a Greco-Roman wrestling match against a local champion as part of a show in Napier, and it seems needless to say that this kind of interracial competition was very unlikely to have occurred back in the United States where segregated sports were the rule.¹⁴⁵ The minstrels were also welcomed at major public events and took part in the Auckland Jubilee celebrations and were on the closing programme for the South Seas Exhibition, which was a kind of regional World’s Fair held in Dunedin.¹⁴⁶ During their second circuit through New Zealand, the minstrels added a rather risqué act to their roster in the form of a “clever and agile contortionist” named Eva Germaine.¹⁴⁷ That such a move was deemed acceptable and passed without comment underlined the more flexible social and racial environment that existed in New Zealand for black performers.

¹⁴³ Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu, “For Love of the Game: Baseball in Early U.S.-Japanese Encounters and the Rise of a Transnational Sporting Fraternity” *Diplomatic History* 28, no. 5 (2004): 637-62; Thomas W. Zeiler, *Ambassadors in Pinstripes: The Spalding World Baseball Tour and the Birth of the American Empire* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

¹⁴⁴ *Evening Post* (Wellington), November 15, 1888.

¹⁴⁵ *Hawke’s Bay Herald* (Napier), February 14 and 15, 1890.

¹⁴⁶ *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland), February 9, 1889; *Otago Daily Times* (Dunedin), April 20, 1890.

¹⁴⁷ *Auckland Star*, January 20, 1890

Although the minstrel company dissolved in Australia the following year, as before many of the performers, including Hicks himself, elected to remain abroad and were active on the Pacific circuit for years to come.

The New Zealand tours of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Hicks-Sawyer minstrels in the late 1880s underscored the colony's status as a receptive market for African-American entertainers. While this was due in part to what might be described as structural changes in terms of demographic and technological developments that combined to make the colony a profitable market for touring entertainers, there were a variety of other motivating factors. Foremost among these was simply the ability of black managers to maintain control and secure greater remuneration in their ventures. Charles Hicks' career as a manager in the United States was a spotty one and reflected ongoing instability as his troupes were seemingly constantly struggling, and when they did succeed, were often taken over wholesale by white managers. In the antipodes, he successfully managed two three-year long tours without any similar interruptions and played the best venues throughout, not the dime museums that he was forced to advertise for back at home. Although the associated financial arrangements for Hicks remain unclear, the troupe clearly did well, and Loudin, for one, made a fortune during his time abroad. In May 1889, he was sued by their Australian advance agent, Edward Price, and though the suit was dismissed, it was revealed that the net profit for him personally up to that point of the tour was £8500, which was an extremely large amount of money for the time.¹⁴⁸

As important as such pecuniary matters were, the socio-cultural dimensions of the New Zealand experience were just as significant. It seems doubtful, for example, that the

¹⁴⁸ *Bulletin* (Sydney), May 11, 1889.

Fisk Jubilee Singers planned to spend a little over two years visiting every corner of the colony, but clearly touring there was congenial as the group undoubtedly had better financial opportunities elsewhere. The evident sociability that the performers experienced vis-à-vis both Maori and Pakeha was also of a different order than many of them faced in the United States and suggests why so many of them elected to stay abroad. The apparent benefits of the move across racial systems for African-American entertainers also underscored the degree to which race relations were about power. In a society in which Maori were the racialized other that Pakeha sought to subordinate, African Americans were not particularly threatening, and while particular stereotypes of blacks abounded, they lacked the vitriol they possessed in an American context where race relations were a site of intense discursive and social conflict as the segregation system developed. Ultimately, perhaps the best explanation for the presence and prosperity that African-American performers centers on this particular racial dynamic and the way in which New Zealand served as a kind of refuge from racism in the United States that by and large poisoned social relations and made working conditions so difficult for black entertainers.

Conclusion

Overall, the late nineteenth-century tours of New Zealand by the Fisk Jubilee Singers and Hicks-Sawyer Minstrels demonstrated the varied and often lucrative rewards available for African-American entertainers willing to explore transnational markets. Whether in social, commercial, or artistic terms, the experience had a definitive impact on black performers as many of their subsequent stories made clear. Frederick Loudin, for one, returned to the United States in 1890 and retired a wealthy man, but he remained

attached to his time abroad. He built a large house in his hometown of Ravenna, Ohio, naming it “Otira” after a beautiful gorge in New Zealand and later in life proudly showed a reporter a *toki pounamu* (greenstone adze) given to him by the widow of a Maori chief.¹⁴⁹ The other basso with the Fisks, Orpheus McAdoo, returned home only long enough to put together his own jubilee troupe. McAdoo spent the next decade touring the world and passed away in Sydney in 1900 having just organized the greatest combination of African-American talent to yet visit the colonies.¹⁵⁰ Tenor R. B. Williams married an Australian woman and moved to Wellington in 1891 where he practiced law and occasionally performed. He was respected enough in the community to be elected mayor of Onslow Borough and stood unsuccessfully for Parliament and lived in Otaki upon retirement until his death in 1942.¹⁵¹

The veterans of the Hicks-led minstrel troupes likewise dispersed widely, though many remained active on the Pacific circuit. Hicks himself became the manager for Harmston’s Circus, returning to the United States only briefly in 1894 to recruit new talent for a combination troupe.¹⁵² He spent his remaining years touring through the Far East and died on the road with the circus at Surabaya in the Dutch East Indies in 1902.¹⁵³ Trombonist Frank Duprey also died on the road with a company, in Osaka, Japan.¹⁵⁴

Hosea Easton more or less owned the role of Uncle Tom in Australia and continued to

¹⁴⁹ *Cleveland Gazette*, December 3, 1892, quoted in Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 13.

¹⁵⁰ Josephine Wright, “Orpheus Myron McAdoo: Singer, Impresario,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 4, no. 3 (1976): 320-27; Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 139-40.

¹⁵¹ “Coloured Evangels – Memory of the Fisk Jubilee Singers,” *Dominion Post* (Wellington), June 5, 1942; Bourke, 48.

¹⁵² *New York Clipper*, November 24, 1894

¹⁵³ An article in the *Straits Times* (Singapore) notes with sadness that both “Colonel Hicks” and “CUSCO the clown” succumbed to cholera at Sourabaya. A later report indicates that, “Their friends in that city, the proprietor of the circus, and Mr. Powell, the American consul, Mr. Powell, subscribed to put tombstones on their graves.” Hicks’ tombstone reads: “Sacred to the memory of Col. Chas. B. Hicks of Harmston’s Circus, born at Baltimore U.S.A., died at Soerabaya 22nd July 1902 at aged 61 years. After life’s fitful Fever he sleeps well.” *Straits Times* (Singapore), July 29, 1902 and January 17, 1903.

¹⁵⁴ *Lorgnette* (Melbourne), October 1894.

toured the trans-Tasman vaudeville circuit until his death in Sydney in 1899. The McAdoo band, led by the renowned Henderson Smith, began the funeral procession, which included prominent white performers and the other members of McAdoo's show.¹⁵⁵ Billy Speed, Jack Evans, the Connor Brothers, W. H. Downes, and Wallace King all remained and worked in vaudeville, circuses, and in King's case, on occasion as a solo vocalist. When King came through Wellington with Dix's Gaiety Company in 1902 he was receiving top billing as "The Famous Silvery Tenor," though a drinking problem would lead to an early death.¹⁵⁶ Also with the Dix company in New Zealand were perhaps the most successful of the Hicks' veterans, Charlie Pope and Irving Sayles. During the tour, Pope wrote a letter to the *Indianapolis Freeman* about how "the Negro performer is welcomed and appreciated in foreign countries" and highlighted the "many advantages" for "progressive Negro performers" abroad.¹⁵⁷

As these many different trajectories indicate, New Zealand represented but one part of a broader story about the extraordinary mobility of African-American entertainers in the Pacific during the late nineteenth century. What it suggests is the need for a larger frame of reference with respect to the history of African-American popular culture, one that looks beyond the transatlantic world to global circulatory systems and a longer history of this cultural mobility. As Kennell Jackson rightfully notes, "One of the most fascinating aspects of writing on black culture is how little of it notes that trafficking is important to the culture's vitality," and indeed the history of black performance looks

¹⁵⁵ *Sydney Mail*, July 1, 1899.

¹⁵⁶ "Dix's Gaiety Company," Theatre Ephemera Collection and Programmes, Alexander Turnbull Library. *Indianapolis Freeman*, January 24, 1903, quoted in Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 287.

¹⁵⁷ *Indianapolis Freeman*, June 21, 1902, quoted in Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 254-56.

very different from a transnational perspective.¹⁵⁸ When the development of African-American entertainment was stunted in the United States by a combination of white management and racial restrictions, black performers found ways to develop and prosper abroad. Transnational markets like New Zealand served as refuges of a sort and allowed black performers a degree of commercial and artistic autonomy that they were denied in the United States. Understanding the reception of African-American entertainment abroad also provides a useful comparative perspective for evaluating the ongoing struggles and strategies of black performers as they worked to variously accommodate and supersede racist stereotypes and caricature.

The other half of the equation was of course what the success of these performers illuminated about colonial life and race relations in New Zealand. Certainly the popularity of minstrelsy in general and the response to African-American performers in particular reflected broadly held stereotypes of blacks then circulating in the Anglo-American world. The primary locus of race relations in New Zealand always revolved around Pakeha and Maori, and the increasing intolerance that characterized the 1870s showed that colonial racial taxonomies were crystallizing.¹⁵⁹ The intersection of black entertainers with colonial race relations was invariably complex, but one thing that was clear was that it seemed to have little impact on how the visiting performers were treated themselves. As to the representations of African-Americans as mediated by black and white minstrel shows and the Fisk Jubilee Singers, their influence necessarily varied. Although there is little evidence that Pakeha drew reductive parallels between representations of African-American and Maoris, minstrelsy implied a racial logic that

¹⁵⁸ Jackson, 10.

¹⁵⁹ Paul Spoonley attributes this increasing intolerance of the 1870s to the influx of new immigrants and influence of Darwinism. *Racism and Ethnicity*, rev. ed. (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1993), 14-18.

confirmed white superiority and reinscribed invidious colonial distinctions between white and nonwhite peoples. When the Hicks-Sawyer troupe planned a visit to Napier, one local paper noted in anticipation that “the average colonial dearly loves a minstrel show,” and this popularity certainly confirmed that such shows were broadly if diffusely influential.¹⁶⁰

Certainly African-American performers and some in their Maori audiences were drawing connections among themselves, and Loudin’s experience in New Zealand evoked a kind of proto-consciousness about the global impact of racism and imperialism on people of color. In the more concrete terms of cultural exchange, the proliferation of Maori minstrel troupes in the 1880s and 1890s demonstrated that black music and performance traditions were seeping into Maori culture. The Tauwhere brothers, for example, were two Ngai Tahu (a South Island *iwi*) men who organized one of several different groups that combined a typical minstrel show with indigenous elements like the haka.¹⁶¹ The prominent statesmen Apirana Ngata, who was known for his work promoting and protecting Maori culture, had a predilection for minstrel melodies and wrote a number of Maori versions of minstrel standards.¹⁶² Doug Seroff and Lynn Abbott have also suggested that the four-part harmony singing of the long-standing Rotorua Maori Choir likely derives from the influence of the Jubilee Singers.¹⁶³

The Hicks-led minstrel troupes and Fisk Jubilee Singers thus left a rich and varied legacy in colonial New Zealand. And while black entertainers certainly found opportunities abroad, they also entered into a dynamic and at times fraught nexus

¹⁶⁰ *Hawke’s Bay Herald* (Napier), November 20, 1888.

¹⁶¹ *Press* (Christchurch), January 6, 1892.

¹⁶² For Ngata’s version of “Old Folks at Home,” see *He Kupu Whakamarama*, No. 35, January 1901. Melvyn McLean, *Maori Music* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1996), 317-18.

¹⁶³ Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 15.

between commerce, race, and popular culture. One figure that stood at the center of this swirl over a number years was Irving Sayles, who first arrived with Hicks in 1887 at the young age of fifteen and elected to spend the remainder of his career overseas. In the 1890s, he became one of the biggest stars on the trans-Tasman vaudeville circuit, earning £40 a week performing comic sketches and coon songs. In a 1911 interview with *Theatre* magazine in Sydney, he stated that

I could not be treated anywhere else in the world like this. I hope I have deserved the treatment I received. At any rate, I have tried to deserve it. I know of no complaint against me – except it is that I happen to have been born black.¹⁶⁴

While performing at the Opera House in Christchurch in 1914, he suddenly fell dead while chatting with friends in front of the Dominion Hotel and was buried at Linwood Cemetery.¹⁶⁵ Irving Sayles was emblematic of the transnational trajectory of black entertainment in the late nineteenth century as it was incorporated into an expansive U.S. culture industry and pushed abroad by a combination of troubled race relations at home and opportunities abroad. The Pacific circuit and New Zealand in particular proved to be a particularly receptive market within this larger process and suggests that the “distinctive patterns of cross-cultural circulation” discerned by Gilroy in the “Black Atlantic” had Pacific dimensions as well.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ *Theatre* (Sydney), April 1, 1911.

¹⁶⁵ *Press* (Christchurch), February 19, 1914.

¹⁶⁶ Gilroy, 88.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

In 1866, Mark Twain visited Hawai'i as a correspondent for the *Sacramento Union* and produced a widely read series of "Sandwich Islands letters" in the course of his four-month-long sojourn. While the primary reason for the assignment was to promote the sugar industry and American interests in the islands, it was Twain's humorous style and exotic descriptions that gave the letters life and captured the public's attention. In light of their popularity, San Francisco impresario Thomas Maguire encouraged him to "strike while the iron was hot" and embark on a lecture tour. After a promising opening night at Maguire's Academy of Music, Twain wrote the following: "I launched out as a lecturer, now, with great boldness. I had the field all to myself, for public lectures were almost an unknown commodity in the Pacific market."¹

The success of the ensuing tour proved that Maguire and Twain's instincts were correct, and it played a major part in Mark Twain's rise to national prominence. The show or "commodity" he offered was an hour and a half long discourse billed as "Our Fellow Savages of the Sandwich Islands" that interspersed "pointed anecdotes and side-splitting jokes" with colorful descriptions and information about the history and resources

¹ Mark Twain, *Mark Twain's Autobiography*, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Bros, 1924), vol. 1, 242-43; *Roughing It* (Hartford: American Pub. Co, 1872), 564.

of the islands.² The *Daily Evening Bulletin* found it “impossible to do justice to the lecture” in its review of the debut performance, but pronounced it a “brilliant success.”³ As the title suggests, the principal theme of the entertainment and the source of its amusement centered on contrasts between American “civilization” and Hawaiian life that generally portrayed “Kanakas” in a ridiculous light, though his humor could also at times cut both ways. Twain effectively capitalized on his experience in an imperial context abroad to establish himself as a writer and humorist at home, and, as Amy Kaplan points out, his status as a “national treasure” was thus derived from “international plunder.”⁴ This perspective usefully highlights how the making of American culture was a fundamentally transnational process implicated in imperial relations. As the Pacific circuit and Twain’s career both demonstrated, the boundaries between domestic and foreign developments were culturally porous. The interactions that ensued as American involvement in the Pacific increased occurred across a wide variety of cultural forms, and the most significant medium in that process was the Pacific circuit.

The making of the Pacific circuit was driven by parallel developments at home and abroad. With respect to the former, a thriving culture industry and robust and diverse domestic market ensured entertainers were well positioned to take advantage of opportunities overseas. The size and competitiveness that characterized the U.S. culture industry was particularly important, and blackface minstrelsy was perhaps example of this dynamic. A booming minstrel business ensured that competition was intense and

² On Twain, Hawai’i, and his career as a public lecturer, see Walter Francis Frear, *Mark Twain and Hawaii* (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1947); Paul Fatout, *Mark Twain on the Lecture Circuit* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960); Frederick William Lorch, *The Trouble Begins at Eight: Mark Twain's Lecture Tours* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1968); Randall K. Knoper, *Acting Naturally: Mark Twain in the Culture of Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

³ *Daily Evening Bulletin*, October 3, 1866.

⁴ Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 52.

provided incentives for troupes to search out new markets abroad, which helps explain why minstrelsy became the United States' first major cultural export. From the New York Serenaders in the 1850s to Kelly and Leon's Minstrels in the 1870s, the Pacific circuit provided an outlet and a potentially profitable option for the surfeit of minstrels in the United States. The amount of capital that the burgeoning domestic market generated also ensured that American entrepreneurs were comparatively better able to take advantage of opportunities opening up abroad. Perhaps the best example of this was the Cooper and Bailey Circus, whose tour was only made possible by an unprecedented outlay of capital and impressive display of logistics. The sophistication and strength of the U.S. culture industry was the primary force that drove the making of the Pacific circuit.

U.S. entertainers exploited the Pacific market for both profits and publicity. Minstrels Jerry and Neil Bryant parleyed the money they made in Australia into a theatre in New York City, and Mechanic's Hall subsequently became a veritable institution. James Bailey used the proceeds from his tour to buy several other shows, and the season after he returned he was able to field the most complete and successful circus of the season and the first ever to use electric lighting. As Twain's "Sandwich Island Lecture" indicated, beyond such practical pecuniary matters, U.S. entertainers were also learning how to exploit the Pacific for its cultural capital and promotional value, which sold well with domestic audiences. In similar fashion, Harry Kellar used his experiences abroad to cultivate a cosmopolitan public persona and imbue his performances with an appealing exoticism.

The particular routes of U.S. entertainers were largely shaped by developments in the Pacific. The gold rushes in California and Victoria provided the initial impetus for

transpacific touring, and Australia, with its large population of English-speaking settlers, was significant from the start and it remained the most important overseas market in this era. But if the traffic between California and Australia was the primary axis of the emergent Pacific circuit, its contours continually shifted as the integrative forces of colonialism and capitalism transformed the region. The growth of cosmopolitan colonial ports like Singapore and Hong Kong and the relatively rapid development of markets in New Zealand and Japan were reflected in the more expansive itineraries performers adopted as the century progressed. Most significant were the ongoing changes in transportation and communication, which eased accesses and lowered transaction costs. Harry Kellar's second Pacific tour, for example, began in March 1882 in Batavia and proceeded through Australia and New Zealand before looping back through the major Asian ports. He ended back where he started just under two years later having performed over four hundred shows in fifty different locations, a reflection just how wide and integrated the Pacific circuit had grown by the early 1880s.

The evolution of the Pacific circuit over the second half of the nineteenth century was shadowed by an emergent global entertainment circuit. While there were indications of this as early as General Tom Thumb's tour around the world (1869-72), it was not until the 1890s that global tours became common for internationally prominent entertainers like Sarah Bernhardt (1891-93) and Mark Twain (1895-96). Twain's return to the Pacific after almost thirty years was motivated by the same financial incentives that had attracted so many other U.S. entertainers, and although his route continued around the world, the Pacific leg of his tour through Hawai'i, Australia, and New Zealand

covered grounds very familiar to U.S. entertainers.⁵ But if the Pacific circuit was in some ways being superseded by a global one, for many performers it remained a viable and profitable option.

Ernest Hogan was a celebrated African-American entertainer who embarked on a tour with a talented company in 1899 after he experienced some race-related trouble in the United States.⁶ Like the other black performers that preceded him, Hogan found the Pacific circuit amenable, and during the tour he successfully went to court to get out of an unfair contract with the company's unscrupulous white manager.⁷ For perhaps the first time in his life, he found himself in complete artistic and financial control and successfully piloted the company through Australia and New Zealand. On their way back home, Hogan's Afro American All-Stars broke records for receipts and attendance in Honolulu and demonstrated that that the Pacific circuit remained an important option for black entertainers.⁸

Just as the types, motivations, and routes of U.S. entertainers varied, their impact on the diverse local societies and cultures that they encountered on the circuit was necessarily mixed. American cultural forms was never simply monolithic in its message and effects, and its uneven distribution around the Pacific, which was heaviest in the settler societies of Australia, New Zealand, and Hawai'i and elsewhere largely restricted to port cities and colonial enclaves, ensured that its impact varied. As the reception of the

⁵ Miriam Shillingsburg, *At Home Abroad: Mark Twain in Australasia* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988); Mark Twain, *More Tramps Abroad* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1897).

⁶ Hogan was involved in an incident in New Orleans where he was forced to defend himself from an aggressive white man after accidentally going to the wrong ticket booth. After knocking the man down, Hogan, fearing repercussions and perhaps even a lynching, fled town. He later confessed to Tom Fletcher that he "didn't get myself together again until I was in Australia with my own company." *The Tom Fletcher Story: 100 Years of the Negro in Show Business* (New York: Burdge & Co, 1954), 141.

⁷ *New Zealand Sporting and Dramatic Review* (Auckland), October 12, 1899.

⁸ Hogan also won a suit against the Canadian-American Royal Mail Steamship for denying the company first class passage. The verdict rendered \$2250 in damages to Hogan. Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 212.

Fisk Jubilee Singers in New Zealand demonstrated, one of the clearest divides was between indigenous and colonial audiences. While a minstrel show might serve as a racializing cultural form that validated the imperialist assumptions of white colonial publics, it obviously meant something very different, but was often no less appealing, for indigenous ones. For colonial settlers, U.S. entertainers also at times served as a kind of imperial thread that connected them to their Western and metropolitan roots.

U.S. entertainers also projected an idea of America in their performances and provided a forum for cultural exchange. While the Cooper and Bailey Circus in many ways represented the apogee of the U.S. show trade, the undercurrent of dissatisfaction among some Australians with the spectacle showed how audiences were at times ambivalent about what they seemed to represent. In terms of cultural exchange, one of the most dynamic examples was hapa haole music, which emerged in Hawai'i during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Hapa haole songs were a syncretic cultural form that melded elements of Hawaiian music and culture with American popular music and were a direct legacy of the popularity of blackface minstrelsy in the islands.⁹ While this sort of cultural mixture was in some respects hardly a surprising development given the extent of U.S. involvement in Hawai'i, to a greater or lesser degree a similar dynamic played out wherever U.S. entertainers ventured.

The scope of the Pacific circuit and the volume of American entertainers that toured on it meant that an impressively broad swath of people, whatever their particular response, were exposed to U.S. entertainers during the second half of the nineteenth century. Ultimately, the "Empire of Culture" this constituted was broadly influential but

⁹ On hapa-haole music, see George S. Kanahale, ed., *Hawaiian Music and Musicians: An Illustrated History* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1979); Charles Hiroshi Garrett, *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

also tempered by publics that variously accommodated, enjoyed, and resisted the efforts of U.S. entertainers. However diffuse that influence, it was a kind of position and cultural power that can usefully be described as an empire, and the Pacific circuit presaged the predominance that U.S. popular culture assumed during the twentieth century.

In conclusion, I want to return to an episode from Mark Twain's second visit to the Pacific in 1895. When he visited Christchurch, New Zealand in November, the editor of the local newspaper penned a thoughtful commentary about what made American humor so distinctive and appealing.¹⁰ The analysis proceeded from the premise that English literature had a strong conservative bent, whereas American literature was, like the nation itself, conditioned by the "growth of decades, not of centuries: it was all brand new." It goes on to identify several themes or traits that made American humor unique.

The first of these was simply that the "Yankee is critical of everything," and this found expression in "ridicule towards everything that is sacred only by antiquity or sanctioned by convention." The sharp attacks on the powerful and the pious that characterized Twain's humor was seen as a reflection of this critical spirit and the broadly democratic ethos that prevailed in the United States. Secondly, it observed that "America is a piebald nation—or, rather, a medley of nations" where "the elements mingle in the crucible and combustion follows – the collision of races kindles the spark of humor." The vitality of American humor derived from its "heterogeneous mass" and this was on display in Twain's use of dialect and characterizations of various American types.

Another aspect of the "national disposition" identified was "keen commercial rivalry," which alluded to the well-worn stereotype of the acquisitive and competitive Yankee.

¹⁰ *Press* (Christchurch), November 16, 1895. The editor of the paper and, given his literary inclinations, the likely author of the piece was William Henry Triggs. The article is quoted in Shillingsburg (200-203) and thanks to Tricia Meehan of the Christchurch City Libraries for providing me with a copy.

Finally, the article noted that “a passion for Bigness predominates American life,” and this was personified in Twain’s humorous exaggerations and boasts.

The essay effectively argued that American culture was distinguished by its newness and freedom from Old World constraints, a commercially freewheeling and competitive environment that led one to always try and “go one better’ than one’s neighbor,” and a vibrant mix of people and cultures that imbued it with a remarkable vitality. While these suggestions might strike some as a kind of American exceptionalism, Twain’s very presence on the other side of the world was an indication that there was something extraordinary about the reach and appeal of U.S. popular culture. And if the commentary was somewhat stereotypical, it was in other respects remarkably insightful. The broadly democratic and diverse orientation of American society did allow for distinctive popular cultural forms to develop. Moreover, producers were pushed devise forms of entertainment that would please a wide and heterogeneous audience. The U.S. culture industry was defined by its commercialism, competitively, and certainly displayed a “passion for bigness.” While none of these explanations are entirely sufficient, in combination they do offer a compelling mix of economic and cultural reasons for why audiences abroad gravitated to and seemed to so enjoy the efforts of the U.S. entertainers that plied the Pacific circuit.

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