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Chapter 6

“Like a Thanksgiving Celebration without Turkey”: Minstrel Shows

New immigrants embraced many aspects of American popular culture in their quest to find a way to belong in their new homeland, and as with news reports of colonized Africans or lynched Southern blacks, some of the plays presented in immigrant parishes and clubs and at settlement houses carried racialized codes on who belonged. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as South and East Europeans arrived by the millions, one of the most popular native American theater forms was the minstrel show. Blackface minstrel shows had first been presented by and for working-class whites in the 1830s, a time when urban artisans feared that industrialization was decreasing their standing as independent craftsmen and pillars of the virtuous republic, and relegating them to wage slavery. While early minstrel shows satirized the pretensions and hypocrisies of wealthy white urbanites as well, the buffoonery of Jim Crow in depictions of supposedly idyllic Southern plantations, and Zip Coon, the dandified urban black, were the characters who kept Irish, German, and native-born whites coming to the minstrel show. Satires of white foibles did not preclude mockery of minstrel “blacks” themselves, and many theatergoers who flocked to the minstrel show also witnessed or participated in anti-black riots such as Philadelphia’s 1834 Flying Horse Riots or New York’s 1863 Draft Riots in which at least 120 blacks were killed. Many minstrel-show patrons also embraced the Democratic Party, which was allied with slaveholding Southerners and, after the Civil War, the later regimes of Southern “Redemption” from “Negro Misrule” through disfranchisement and Jim Crow segregation. For early minstrel-show patrons, appreciation of stage blacks rarely translated into sympathy or common cause with real-life blacks.¹

By the late nineteenth century new immigrants embraced the form as well, and Slavs, Jews, and other newcomers avidly blacked up in order, as Michael Rogin has argued, to solidify their claims to a place in the white nation once the veneer of burnt cork was removed.² Minstrel shows became staples at Slovak parishes and social clubs, and, as for other groups, blackface plays paradoxically served to legitimize new immigrants’ claims to belong as “regular” (read “white”) Americans. On occasions when immigrants wished to present their right to

partake of American identity and celebrate patriotic holidays, and when they christened sites of ethnic pride, the celebrations often included a minstrel show in which new immigrants masqueraded as blacks, members of an even more benighted group.

As we've seen, Slovaks were not above denigrating European rivals in racialized terms, but by World War I Magyar bashing was sometimes accompanied by minstrel shows, conflating slighting comparisons to Magyars and blacks. In 1918 a Slovak from Brooklyn wrote to *Jednota* declaring, "Our people have had quite enough of this comedy!" The "comedy" that enraged him was the travesty of sitting in the same parish with both Magyars and Magyarones (Slovaks who had adopted Magyar as their first language). But Slovaks had finally succeeded in expelling the unwanted element. "Magyars and Magyarones are no longer welcome in our parish," he informed the editor. "Now we can announce that our parish is purely Slovak, free of any filthy polluting Magyars." The language of purity and filth in decades to come would almost exclusively be used in sneering reference to dirty *čierny* (blacks), who within three years of this letter would be singled out and barred from Philadelphia's Slovak Hall (hostile treatment not even leveled at Magyars).³ But in Brooklyn on this instance ethnic distinctions between Slovaks and "filthy" Magyars were still made, even though within a few years such markers became less salient as more blacks moved North.⁴

But the tale of Slovak triumphalism in Brooklyn isn't over. In order to drive the message home, the parishioners had also founded the "Slovak American Citizens Club" to replace the former Hungarian-Slovak Citizens Club. To highlight this transformation, the writer cited the club's "many noble intellectual deeds. Such as our St. Joseph's young people's organization, which presented its first 'Minstrel Show' in our Slovak Hall before more than a thousand people, and many more had to be turned away for lack of space. The young people sang and acted beautifully, such that everyone marveled it was really only their first performance. Thus this is only a glimpse at what kind of a future our youth have before them." It is not clear which aspect of the Brooklynites' new identity transformation—into Slovaks—into Americans—into citizens—the use of blackface was supposed to cement, but it indeed pointed to the future for many Slovak youth.

As Slovak anger at Magyarones—"the traitors to our Slovak language," the Brooklynite wrote—makes clear, language usage was central to many immigrants' sense of identity. But if Magyar was unacceptable as an alternative in Brooklyn, we must wonder if blackface minstrelsy made the English language a little more palatable for those in the Slovak American Citizens' Club, who very likely did not sing "Swanee River" in Slovak.⁵

Slovaks and Rusyns of Passaic similarly objected to public displays of "Mongolian" flags (i.e. flags of the Kingdom of Hungary), but minstrel shows also were presented there by Greek Catholic churchgoing Rusyns as parish fundraisers and also as claims on the attention of the wider city. Tuxedo-clad performers commanded respect as they staged familiar minstrel jokes and

songs, for by the turn of the twentieth century minstrelsy had become domesticated as a symbol of respectable, middle-class gentility. Many YMCA's and middle-class Protestant churches had minstrel clubs, and minstrel show sheet music was produced for an avid audience that performed such songs in the parlor, epicenter of the nurturing domestic haven from a heartless, industrializing, and suspect polyglot world. In this regard immigrant performances of minstrel shows were bids for legitimacy and acceptance from mainstream native-born white society; indeed, German and German-Hungarian Lutherans—no doubt facing perils of their own as suspect Teutonic enemy aliens—performed their own minstrel shows during and shortly after World War I at Passaic's St. John's Lutheran Church. And even most Slovaks and Rusyns, whether they liked it or not, were subjects of an enemy Kaiser. The easiest way for such enemy aliens to deflect attention from their ethnicity was to call attention to their ostensible racial consanguinity with other Americans. Blackface minstrel shows were an important, somewhat overlooked aspect in immigrants' identity assertion and acculturation to the New World (see Figure 6-1).⁶

FIGURE 6-1: Passaic minstrel show, circa 1919. Slovaks, Germans, Jews, and others dressed in tuxedos to establish claims to respectability, but in blackface—to assert claims to whiteness.

Some second-generation German Americans in Philadelphia and elsewhere also chose minstrel shows as their premiere English-language productions. As early as 1897, the German American *Freundschaft* Club decided that its first-ever English-language theater piece had to be a minstrel show, thereby wedding their acculturation as Americans to a recognition of the salience of whiteness in the New World. This staging of German minstrelsy grew more frequent, Russell Kazal argues, as more African Americans arrived in Philadelphia during the Great Migration even as German Americans were stigmatized by the events of the Great War.⁷

Minstrelsy was a malleable practice that could even on occasion facilitate Slovak nationalism. In 1913 *New Yorkský denník* noted that Juraj Kazamek of New York had “stitched together a four-page songbook of Slovak songs for young schoolchildren.” Along with such predictable Slovak fair as the anthem “*Hej, Slováci!*” was “*Starý Dzho*,” “translated from the English ‘Old Black Joe.’”⁸ The question of which language to speak, which caused resentment of Magyarization, became less important if English and Slovak were both used, at least in part, to belittle an even less privileged group, African Americans.

While it is odd to see such songs rechristened as “Slovak songs,” by 1913 songs and plays taken from the minstrel stage had for years been employed by reformers to teach immigrant children about America. From the late 1880s settlements had made it one of their prime missions to Americanize the children of immigrants while valorizing ethnic gifts brought to America by the newcomers.⁹ But some lessons on America possessed a racial message as well. At settlement houses such as Christadora House on New York’s Lower East Side Jewish and Slavic (plus some Italian) children were enrolled in the Loyalty Club in 1898 and 1899. In this club they learned to sing tunes such as “Alabama Coon” and “Coal Black Coffee.” In 1907 other children sang “some patriotic songs . . . which brought back the memories of our forefathers,” and heard lectures on why the old immigration was superior to the new, but that once naturalized an immigrant became an American. Still, “coon songs,” which were popular mass entertainments performed by black as well as white blackface singers, helped acculturate immigrant children to the New World, as well.¹⁰

The Americanizing mission of settlement house workers was facilitated too through the staging of minstrel shows. As early as 1904 a minstrel club under the direction of “Mr. Edwards” met weekly at the East Side Settlement House in New York’s heavily Slavic and German Yorkville section.¹¹ Back downtown, at Christadora House, as early as 1908 Jewish and Slavic children performed in plays such as *The Nigger Night-School* and *Darktown on Parade*, which, like citizenship classes, presumably told them much about becoming American. *The Nigger Night-School* featured “Dr. Solon Sloe, B.A., ph.D.,” and “his evening pupils,” all performed by actors with Jewish or possibly Slavic or Hungarian surnames. As on earlier minstrel stages, the pretensions of pompous, self-important blacks with grand titles were mocked. Black ministers, politicians, and shady businessmen had from the 1880s

similarly been the butt of cartoons in the humor magazine *Puck*, and the generalogy of such ridicule of blacks striving way over their supposed class "place" continued with the white comics on radio's *Amos 'n' Andy* lampooning the Kingfish and the Fresh Air Cab Company. In 1908 the Christadora minstrel show was the entertainment sponsored by the settlement's Washington Club, which performed the play at the Girls' Hebrew Technical School on Saturday evening, April 4, 1908. Americanization and racial masquerade went hand in hand at the Washington Club, and ethnic institutions were enlisted in delivering lessons in the salience of whiteness.¹²

As at the East Side Settlement downtown immigrants were regularly coached in the minstrel-show aspect of American identity. In 1912 the Settlement's Boys' Glee Club presented the "grand annual minstrel show," indicating blackface had become a regular feature at the settlement. As in 1908 the show was presented at an ethnic venue, this time Hebrew Technical Hall, and the main parts—Bones, Zeke, Tambo, Skillets, Bingo, Brown, and Mr. Jones, interlocutor—were standard minstrel show clowns. The actors were Jewish immigrants or children of immigrants, and the chorus of "pickaninnies" likewise consisted of Jewish children. The regular minstrel show was followed by an intermission, after which an "extra feature—skeleton rag" was performed by "Mr. Jones and Skeletons."¹³ In 1913, as noted in the last chapter, an original musical farce, *Mexicana*, was performed at the settlement house; Herman Martinson, Kate Schechter, and Irvin Tannenbaum sang the musical number, "Stand Back, You Swarthy Pagan!"¹⁴

The 1915 presentation of *Darktown on Parade* may have been an even more elegant affair. The "minstrel sketch in one act by Mr. Charles D. Orth Jr." was presented by the Senior Young Men's Association of Christadora House at the Palm Garden. Actors with surnames such as Goldfarb, Weinberger, and Weiss impersonated pretentious blacks such as "Rastus Cornstalk, a Chauffeur and a Darktown Sport." The action took place during a reception at Cornstalk's house, an occasion to satirize black claims to a place in high society, a comedic situation even for immigrant actors at a settlement house. The actors also engaged in a double masquerade time-honored on the minstrel stage, for Irving Weinberger donned both burnt cork and a dress to portray Melinda Cornstalk, Rastus's wife. Supposed threats to the status quo from racial as well as gender strivers were lampooned in Orth's play, staged at a time when suffrage marchers were haunting Woodrow Wilson's White House and the minds of many Americans.

As Alexander Saxton and W. T. Lhamon Jr. have noted, antebellum minstrel shows often combined class criticisms of the wealthy with portrayals of clownish black dandies and indolent plantation hands, and Orth continued this tradition in *Darktown on Parade*. Cornstalk's guests "Sam Crowfoot," "Mose Whitehouse," "Jerry Hawkins," and "Phoebe Snow" (like Melinda, portrayed by a man, Morris Goldfarb) mingle with the chauffeur's employers, the millionaire "Morgan Vanderfeller" and his wife. The character was a swipe at three bosses in a play by Lower East Side Jews steeped in the union battles and socialist oratory of the

era. As Lhamon argues, in the antebellum theater the minstrel mask was often a pretext to critique the status quo and subvert capitalism's verities, and not solely a diatribe at blacks. Evidently something of this tradition continued in 1910s New York.¹⁵

Moreover, the "order of songs, dances, and specialties" printed in the *Darktown on Parade* program indicates that the play was an opportunity to satirize many ethnic groups and show business genres. "Night Time Down in Dixie-Land" was followed a few numbers later by selections from "Pagliacci," then "Everyone Sings Tipperary," "Back to Carolina You Love," "Chicken Reel Clog Dance," and "Chinatown." Robert C. Toll notes that early minstrel-show scripts were often loose collections of gags and musical numbers, and this may have been the case at Palm Garden that night in 1915 (see Figures 6-2 and 6-3).¹⁶

Eric Lott has written on the ambivalent attitude antebellum working-class audiences expressed while watching minstrel shows. Along with racist mockery, increasingly Irish immigrant attendees projected onto blackface representations of slaves their longings for a supposedly idyllic life down South, far away from the time clock and encroaching factory system. Envy of course mixed with degradation, and desire rarely went so far as to spur minstrelsy's audience to make working-class alliances in trade unions or other organizations with real-life captive blacks. Critiques of wealthy capitalists were aired, too, as in the Jewish immigrants' later sendup of "Morgan Vanderfeller, millionaire," in Orth's *Darktown on Parade*. But at the end of the staged farce "black" assertions to citizenship rights by Zip Coon were mocked as ridiculous chimeras.¹⁷ I have argued a similar ambivalence toward blacks existed in Slovaks reading of lynchings in their newspapers—horror, titillation, racism, anger at the brutality of Americans—all these coexisted, with the less admirable of human emotions often winning out over time. Through their production of minstrel shows, East European immigrants likewise expressed a range of emotions. As with Lott's 1850s Irish, Slovak immigrants, watching and performing minstrel shows in places such as Passaic and Brooklyn after finishing their 66-hour work week, engaged in a similar transference onto blacks of their envy for a mythical, carefree life.¹⁸

Settlement house workers exhibited some ambivalence on race following World War I, for Jewish and Slavic immigrant children at the Christadora House continued in 1918 to perform minstrel shows through the house's Northover Cadets, and featured "a monster minstrel show and dance" in 1922. But the house by 1925 also sponsored a "program of Negro poetry and music, with Countee Cullen and Harry T. Burleigh performing their own work. It seems as if the staff at Christadora House was by this point uncertain whether to satirize or celebrate America's "Negro" heritage.¹⁹

Already by the first decade of the twentieth century, however, Slavic immigrants had moved beyond a reliance on native-born reformers' tutelage, and Slovak, Czech, and Croatian theater troupes were producing minstrel

DARKTOWN ON PARADE

A Minstrel Sketch in One Act

by

Mr. Charles D. Orth Jr.

Presented by the

Senior Young Men's Association

of

Christodora House

PALM GARDEN

MAY 6, 1915

Scene: A Reception in Rastus Cornstalk's House.

Time: The Present.

CHARACTERS

Rastus Cornstalk, a Chauffeur and a Darktown Sport	Tony Algis
Melinda Cornstalk, His Wife	Irving Weinberger
Morgan Vanderfeller, a Millionaire, Rastus' Employer	Henry B. Cohn
Mrs. Vanderfeller, His Wife	Jack Weiss
Sam Crowfoot	Aaron Lindenthal
Mose Whitehouse	Friends of Rastus
Jerry Hawkins	Alex. Cooper
Phoebe Snow	Benjamin Gold
	Morris Goldfarb

Men and Women Guests

FIGURE 6-2: Program, *Darktown on Parade*, a minstrel show performed by mostly Jewish children enrolled in the Christodora House Settlement on New York's Lower East Side.

Order of Songs, Dances, and Specialties	
1. Night-time Down in Dixie-land	Chorus
2. I Wonder Who Wished Her On Me	Tony Algis
3. Plankety-Plank	Tip Top Trio
4. Operatic Selection "Pagliacci"	Ben. Gold
5. Virginia Lee. Song and Dance	Balsam, Harris and Chorus
6. Everyone Sings Tipperary	Ben. Gold and Chorus
7. Algernon	Irving W. Weinberger
8. Modern Dances	Miss Sophie Frank and Jack J. Reich
9. When You Wore a Tulip and I Wore a Big Red Rose	Goldfarb, Cooper and Chorus
10. A Little Love a Little Kiss. Violin Solo	Max Merksamer
11. Ventriloquist Act	Henry B. Cohn
12. Rose in the Bud	Jack Boyd
13. Back to Carolina You Love	Dan Ferone and Chorus
14. Chicken Reel. Clog Dance	Aaron Lindenthal
15. Chinatown	Benjamin Shor and Chorus
16. Rufe Johnson's Harmony Band	Christodora Octet and Chorus
17. Solo	Louis Eichelbaum
18. Goodbye Girls, I'm Through	Tony Algis and Chorus
<hr/>	
<p style="text-align: center;">PRODUCED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF Mr. Harry G. Treadwell, Mr. L. T. Getty</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">TIP TOP TRIO: Tony Algis Dan Ferone Walter Fisher</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">CHRISTODORA OCTET: Tony Algis Philip Algis James Algis Paul Stellmach H. Granzow A. Weintraub W. Engleman</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">SPECIALTIES: Max Merksamer Morris Cohn Miss Sophie Frank Jack J. Reich Irving Balsam Harry Harris</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">CHORUS: Lester Bachner Sam Norkeen Louis Eichelbaum Harry Greenbaum Adolph Reich Irving Tow Hyman Goldberg Meyer Klein Sam Goodman Jacob Jacobowitz Maurice Geller Harry Schneider Charles Scherzer Edward Gelb Morris Thursh David Rosanofsky H. Kornbluh Pincus Honig Joseph Brotsky Henry D. Ellenbogen Herman Moscovitz R. Lunney J. Levy Arthur Keinarth L. Figli Benjamin Schor E. Katz</p>	

FIGURE 6-3: Second page of the program for *Darktown on Parade*.

extravaganzas in their own venues. Moreover, such productions were often regarded as celebrations and assertions of immigrants' rightful place in the American community. Minstrel shows were performed at moments when immigrants asserted their normality and right to belong in America—at dedications of Slovak American Citizens' Clubs, for settlement house Americanization clubs, on Fourth of July or other holidays, or, later, to dedicate servicemen's memorials following World War II.

As with Christadora House programmers offering minstrel shows but also the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, a similar ambivalence existed to blacks in some ethnic fraternal theater troupes. From the 1910s through the 1930s, the Czech-American Drama Society of Chicago offered village plays and comedies in the language of Prague as well as translations of classics, but also performed minstrel show numbers in English. Sheet music for "Old Black Joe," "My Old Kentucky Home," "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground," and even more offensive tunes were part of the society's repertoire. The Czech actors performed a minstrel song, "Crowded Hole"; the hand-written lyrics and sheet music to this song were found among the theater troupe's many Czech-language plays:

Yonder comes a nigger with a sack on his back, Honey.
 Yonder comes a nigger with a sack on his back, Babe.
 Yonder comes a nigger with a sack on his back, Honey.
 2nd: Nigger, fell down and busted sack, Honey.
 Nigger, fell down, broke the sack, Babe.—
 Nigger fell down and broke the sack,
 Daughter seen the crawdads backing back.²⁰

English-language acquisition, rightly regarded as a hallmark of immigrants' acculturation to a new country, is here used to denigrate an even more marginal group and to learn one's place as a white American.

The Chicago Czechs also performed an English-language play, *The Night Riders*, that was written by Frank Dumont in 1908. While the Night Riders, vigilantes closely akin to the Ku Klux Klan, had been deployed to terrorize black and white Republicans in the South during the Reconstruction Era, in Dumont's play the targets of vigilante action are duplicitous white plantation owners. Nevertheless, the play script instructed actors that the "Night Riders" should "dress up like Ku Klux Klan; long white gowns, white masks with large holes for eyes, short white peaked caps like dunce caps." The play also transposed stereotypes of shiftless and pretentious blacks from the minstrel stage; Czech actors were cast in Dumont's play as "Uncle Solomon, an old darkey servant" and "Silas Stickney, a colored politician—very flashy coon politician; large checkers in trousers." Stock characters familiar to minstrel-show patrons were adapted to the needs of Slavic immigrants.²¹

Other plays performed by the troupe may have been minstrel shows as well, although perhaps *Fox-Trott Molly* (*An American grotesque by L. MacDonald and R. Skeets*) was merely a sendup of American middle-class foibles. Still, some of the outlandish names of characters in this play—Archibald Ralph Wandersprout; Serafina Gramophon; Fifi Cheeks Maserka—are the kinds of mockeries of ludicrous black pretensions at middle-class respectability familiar to minstrel-show patrons. Another Czech play similarly had “swindler” and “bootlegger” characters named “Good Buy, professor,” “Jeannie Pumpkin,” and “Sylvie Rhubarb.”²²

As noted in the previous chapter, Czech American actors in Chicago as well as Saint Paul performed a Czech play, *Dceruška z Afriky*, written by Bretislav Ludvík in Prague in 1918. The exploits of the explorer and his African daughter were recycled for immigrant audiences, with belittling blackface tropes of cannibalism of the kind mass-produced for consumers in news reports and carnival, circus, and world's fair publicity brochures and souvenir journals.²³ Slovak actors in 1915 New York similarly donned blackface and savage costumes to perform as the Cannibal Symphony Orchestra in opening ceremonies at Slovak Hall, while Polish Sokols in Pennsylvania's anthracite coal country masquerading as Filipino savages likely used burnt cork to lend “authenticity” to their performance. On the New York occasion the minstrel savages cavorted with a Charlie Chaplin impersonator, too, again suggesting that popular culture and mass entertainment often were enjoyed by immigrants in racialized contexts.²⁴

Not every depiction of blacks was this mocking. In Chicago the Czech actors performed an odd comedy of Czech immigrant timber workers in the Wisconsin forests, *All Right!* (The tag line is the only English phrase that one of the timber beasts understands.) The Czech characters speak a mix of pidgin English and Czech, although one worker seems to understand little or no Czech. When the workers decide to go back to Prague to look for “*ženuška*,” little women, this character wants to know if that's something good to eat. Fortunately there is one character who can mediate between the bad Czech of some and minimal English of the others. Washington is described in the stage directions as “a lame, comic Negro,” but he seems to be one of the more dignified characters, and the foreman praises him as “very good labor.” He tells Joe, the character who hopes to eat “*ženuška*,” that his friend will “go back to Europe for a wife—*ženuška*—get it?” He adds in perfect Czech, “You need to study your Czech a little closer.”

For their part the immigrants accept Washington as one of their own, since he has spent so much time in “Little Bohemia” that his Czech is better than that of the American-born Joe. The real butt of the humor in *All Right!* seems to be the immigrants who are having a hard time adjusting to the New World. “James,” a Czech greenhorn, speaks nothing but Czech except for “All Right!” which he enthusiastically exclaims whenever a whiskey bottle is near. In the end Washington accompanies his friends back to Prague as they search for wives.²⁵

As Lhamon has argued, early blackface characters used the minstrel mask not simply to mock slaves or free blacks, but as a guise under which satirical

commentary on many aspects of industrial society could be expressed. While a Czech immigrant likely used burnt cork to portray Washington, and the instructions “a comic lame Negro” left some room for anti-black buffoonery, this play seems to portray greenhorns as more comical than black fellow workers.²⁶

In a similar vein, Slovak writers employed the figure of a black porter to turn a greenhorn into the butt of a joke about the credulity of unwary newcomers. At the train station in Braddock, Pennsylvania, runs this 1921 item on *New Yorkský denník*'s humor page, a black porter who had lived among the Slovaks for years, spied a newly arrived Slovak lady. He went over to her and said in Slovak, “So, my dear, where are you from?” After she gets over her amazement at a black man talking in Slovak, she asks where he's from. When he replies, “Same as you, honey, I'm from Humenne,” she finds this impossible, because she knows Humenne, and not even the Gypsies are this black. “Look, my dear countrywoman,” he replies. “I've been in America twelve years already, and I've had it so hot the whole time that I've become completely black. If you stay in America twelve years, you'll become completely black, too.” “And with that our black fellow countryman went on his way.” This joke seems to be a mockery of greenhorns ostensibly horrified that there are black people on the earth, but also a cautionary tale of how “hot” newcomers to industrial America found factory work. A warning is delivered that Slavs, like blacks—“same as you”—would find discrimination in steel towns of America. As for Lhamon's pre-Civil War minstrels, a black face sometimes permitted biting commentary on wider social issues.²⁷

In Chicago evidently members of the Czech-American Dramatic Society shared in class-conscious militancy prevalent in many immigrant communities. Czechs here performed translations of plays of workers' struggles such as Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers* and others by Zola, Dumas, and Shaw, and sang homages to “The First of May,” even if they also performed a “Haiti Ballad” that ignored the U.S. Marines' occupation of that island.²⁸ Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the company also performed a Czech-language play, *When Slavery Was in Bloom in America*, which celebrated the quixotic battle of John Brown. Rebecca Hill has noted that the abolitionist who raided the federal armory at Harpers Ferry in 1859 has since his hanging been alternately stigmatized as a fanatic and lionized as a martyr to abolitionism. But in the decades since the Civil War, she notes, it was only African Americans and radicals who unequivocally embraced Brown as a hero, while other commentators developed a selective squeamishness toward the use of violence in furtherance of a political goal.²⁹

In Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, however (and no more precise date for the staging of this play can be ascertained from the Czech-American Dramatic Society's records) Czechs performed a Czech-language play in which Brown is celebrated and a blackface Frederick Douglass articulated the justice of the abolitionist cause, even as he tries to talk Brown out of his suicide mission.

The play has characters question the “civilized” nature of American society, and Brown himself cautions about relying on the legal system and well-meaning

politicians to bring about change. When a character praises Abraham Lincoln, Brown says,

There's still a long way to go yet. Abraham Lincoln is an especially good lawyer. But what now passes for our law is an evil that has roots as deep as hell as far as the black man's concerned. Slavery is a hydra. The Southern states are able to fight for slavery and I have no wish for the United States to suffer from a civil war. I am sure that it is possible to lead a rebellion against slavery, and that my way is right. . . . And without shedding one drop of blood.

Lincoln's fan points out the unlikelihood of a bloodless revolution, countering Brown's assertion by asking, "By leading a foray that will cause a nationwide armed slave insurrection?" Indeed, the historical Brown was no pacifist, but the play is unusual for the immigrant theater in presenting a sympathetic portrayal of blacks and their plight. Even a critique of lynching makes it into this play, when prior to Brown's hanging a Virginia soldier suggests that maybe he should just lynch Brown. When a lynch mob develops on the day of the hanging and terrorizes the surrounding countryside, Gallagher, a reporter for the *New York Herald*, exclaims, "What? Who was hanged? Lynching? Oh, you say lynching? Gosh. History will remember it with sauce. Lynching in the newspapers, the top spice." As noted in Chapter 2, lynching accounts were "the top spice" of many newspapers, Slovak journals included, and Gallagher's comments may have called to mind for his immigrant audience ongoing white terrorism against blacks in the 1920s and 1930s. Later in the play Gallagher tells Robert E. Lee, the army officer who captured Brown, "Following this terror came the worst violence by thousands of marauders." A grim Colonel Lee replies, "For a long time we won't be able to suppress [*nepobavili*] these serious lynchings. The devil take it." While one would have preferred to see the condemnation of lynching come from Frederick Douglass or one of the play's black slave characters, the Czech version of John Brown, "a play in three acts on the historical battle against slavery," is a sympathetic portrayal of blacks and their plight that is rare in the immigrant theater.³⁰

The socialist Slovak newspaper *Rovnost ľudu* similarly offered praise to John Brown as part of its ongoing feature on counterhegemonic news "from American history." Brown was praised for his effort to win "liberation from slavery."³¹ Such depictions were rare outside the socialist press, however. And on the immigrant stage unfortunately other performances were less complimentary to blacks and more directly drawn from minstrel-show traditions. Slovaks of Trescow, near Hazleton, Pennsylvania, in 1909 gave notice in *Jednota* of a "grand picnic" slated for the July Fourth holiday, and promised "good entertainment," including "base-ball, target shooting, nigger minstrels, and contests between known sportsmen." The minstrels likely were blackface immigrant performers, for while African American actors in 1909 did tour in blackface, often appearing as

adjuncts to circuses, the Trescow affair was a Slovak-run celebration. As on other festive occasions celebrating American holidays, blackface was on this instance regarded as a necessary component of the patriotic program.³²

Other plays performed at Slovak parishes, published in the Slovak press, express the desire of immigrants to perform the role of regular Americans. Plays such as *Cesta k americkemu Občianstvu* (*The Road to American Citizenship*) were published by *Denník Slovák v Amerike* and *Národný kalendár* as early as 1897, while 40 years later, by now second-generation Slovaks and Rusyns at Philadelphia's Holy Ghost Greek Catholic Church were still performing a self-mocking *Grinorka* (*The Greenhorn*). The play contains no black characters, instead mocking the immigrants' own comical process of acculturation—although with some digs at “Tony the Italian Iceman.” On the bill that evening, though, was also a selection of American songs by a parish quartet—including that minstrel standby, “My Old Kentucky Home.”³³

Such bricolage, appropriating bits of racialized American culture into immigrant productions, had occurred even earlier. In 1918 “greenhorn” plays had also been twinned with “McDonough's Jass Band Orchestra,” in which musicians with Irish and Slavic surnames performed in blackface. Letter writers from Luzerne and Larksville, Pennsylvania, recounted for *Jednota* the performances of the same play, *V Službe* (*At Your Service*). This comedy of immigrant foibles in the New World contained no black characters, although it did include “An Italian, seller of fruits, books and fish, also a vagabond,” performed by Ján Kester in Luzerne and Jozef Benkovsky in Larksville. But the production was accompanied by the blackface syncopators.³⁴ Greenhorns were set along the road to Americanism, if not exactly citizenship, by a process of blackface, and reading of blackness in black and white.

These racial masquerades occurred around the time famed actors such as Al Jolson performed the same feat in vaudeville, on Broadway, and then in 1927's *The Jazz Singer*, and as Matthew Frye Jacobson and Michael Rogin note, the audience no longer notices Jackie Rabinowitz's Jewishness under the obviously sham blackface, but rather his whiteness. The babushkas of Brooklyn likewise were lost beneath burnt cork. Newspaper accounts of “*Negrov lynčovanie*” were perhaps forgotten, too, in the fun-filled evening of beautiful singing and acting.³⁵

I do not mean glibly to label such performances as simply racist. By 1918, the minstrel show was a staple of American popular culture, and Slovak newcomers also internalized this entertainment as a further step in their assimilation, something one did to become an American—at least of the white variety. As noted, the minstrel show was often seen as a marker of middle-class respectability (again, at least for white performers in church socials or comfortable parlor sing-alongs). The tuxedoed Passaic Rusyns performing at St. Michael's auditorium at least partially saw a route to legitimacy in such stagings—but legitimacy came at a price of another, excluded group that was the “original” of the masquerade. Americans loved minstrel shows in the very years that real blacks were excluded

from any meaningful integration with whites, even in Northern venues such as New Jersey.³⁶

Some immigrants surely gave little thought to the status of blacks as they performed with minstrel bands, for there were other motives for enjoying minstrelsy. Jazz, too, by 1918 was a popular culture form avidly consumed by Slavs and Irish in Larksville and Luzerne and thousands of other towns; as Eric Lott, John Strausbaugh, and Lhamon have noted, the “love and theft” (to borrow Lott’s phrase) of “black” culture (in authentic and inauthentic minstrel forms) has been an ongoing process of almost simultaneous envy and scorn since the 1830s. Slavs in McDonough’s “jass” combo had a variety of motives for blacking up—including pleasure and perhaps financial gain.³⁷

The “readings” of minstrelsy may not have been univocal, even within the head of a single Slovak. As Lott has argued regarding the antebellum audience at blackface minstrel shows, desire for the supposed liberty of pre-industrial labor embodied in stage “slaves,” as well as more carnal desire for the “black” body, coexisted with a biting and savage mockery of the racialized underclass held in bondage. Elite Northern Whig abolitionists, perceived as hypocritical, were also satirized in these minstrel shows. Then, too, notes of pity crept into the audience’s reaction, at least when minstrelsy merged with “Uncle Tom” shows. But in the years in which Slovaks and other Slavs—like other white Americans—were engaged in minstrelsy, other references to the fate of real blacks, as lynching victims, subjugated colonial captives, despised American outcasts, permeated immigrant newspapers. Thus an immigrant donning blackface may have simultaneously experienced thrill at the comic fun; terror when he considered that he had read of the lynching of real blacks; contempt for the hapless victim who had exhibited his lack of manhood by “allowing” himself to be hung; repugnance at the brutality of *Amerikansky* engaged in this barbaric ritual; and a sober awareness that a similar fate might await Slovaks if they weren’t careful. All these emotions and more may have contended, until repetition, and years of residence in the racialized United States, taught the reader which sentiment it was preferable win out.³⁸

Another cultural artifact in which Slovaks would make their mark, the New Year’s Mimmers’ Parade in Philadelphia, was also at times an occasion for racialized mockery. Competing in the 1916 parade were marchers dressed as blackface “Zulus,” although early entrants were also often apt to portray stock vaudeville Germans in their musical masquerades. As we saw in the previous chapter, tropes of savage Zulus were often employed in immigrant newspapers. While the parading “Zulus” harkened back to these journalistic and side-show models, elements of blackface had been employed before the rise of the side-show and minstrelsy in carnivalesque revelries such as those employed by Mimmers. Indeed, the founder of the most successful Mummer string band, the Slovak Philadelphian, Joseph Ferko, knew of other blackface traditions from his family’s homeland. Christmastime *jasličkari* likewise donned blackface to impersonate the *Čert* (devil) or hairy Father Winter figures as they went door to door begging holiday alms.

In Philadelphia, though, such costumes were eventually adopted for the Mummers' Parade to satirize African Americans.³⁹

Even before the "Zulu" marchers stepped down Broad Street, Slovaks in Philadelphia and elsewhere consumed blackface humor courtesy of their newspapers. Rip and Račik, the humor duo of *Slovák v Amerike*, often accompanied their banter with illustrations of a grinning, simple-minded minstrel-show black. The jokes sometimes have no overtly racial component, as in one 1903 column, where Rip says, "Hello, kinsman! I see that you've shot yourself in the arse! How'd you do it?" "Indeed, with great difficulty, my kinsman!" Račik replies, and then the black minstrel fool appears.⁴⁰ Three years later an identical minstrel image of a black buffoon accompanied another humor column, Godfather Švablik from Kakašovec, where the old country curmudgeon argues in broken Slovak over whether he has been properly tutored in English, and if he isn't really a Persian in disguise. The joke is interrupted, however, when Godfather notices that "the black porter has just arrived, like this," at which point the minstrel image reappears.⁴¹ A third iteration of the minstrel face accompanied a 1907 item in a humor column concerning black islanders that began, "I heard it said one day, in an account of Africa, that there's an island there, on which there live the blackest people on earth, and these blackamoors had the blackest luck" (see Figure 6-4).⁴²

Perhaps the minstrel image merely symbolized the introduction of bad vaudeville humor, but, if this was the case, the black caricature appeared in a newspaper permeated by race. Roslyn Poignant has noted that the same illustrations (literally

FIGURE 6-4: A minstrel-show black cartoon accompanied several items in humor columns. This one is from the "Rip and Račik" humor column in *Slovák v Amerike*, July 7, 1903, 3. That same day, the paper ran three news items of lynchings on page two.

stereotyped) of cannibals appeared in multiple news accounts of traveling side-shows as well as news stories of cannibals, establishing a ready template for white consumers of a standard image of black savagery.⁴³ Likewise, the same grinning black fool appeared interchangeably in Slovak papers, whenever an African American was mocked, and sometimes even when he was not. In either case the stereotype of a simple black buffoon was etched on the immigrant paper's pages. And on July 7, 1903, the day when the minstrel black followed Rip and Račik's first quip, three lynching stories appeared on the previous page.⁴⁴ The immigrant newspaper offered a palimpsest of race in a variety of contexts, not all of them humorous.

Humor items mocking blacks grew more pointed following World War I, a time when more blacks were migrating into Northern cities, places where Slovaks and other new immigrants encountered them. As Kazal has noted, anti-black cartoons began to appear in German newspapers in Philadelphia during the 1920s, a decade when some German Philadelphians took steps to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods and parishes.⁴⁵ Similarly, in the 1920s, *New Yorkský denník* ran many black jokes on the paper's humor page. An item headlined "That's enough of the blacks" has a mother asking her son, "Joey, weren't you told yesterday that God gave us our daily bread?" "Little sonny" answers, "Hey mom, but I told him that we've given it all to the whites, just like before the war!"⁴⁶ As we'll see in the following chapter, blacks were indeed forced to "give back" any promise of equality hinted at during World War I, as whites attacked blacks in urban race riots in Chicago, Omaha, Tulsa, and other places. This joke may have been a sardonic comment on the plight blacks faced during years in which racial subordination was reimposed on blacks.

Other jokes, however, employed slurs of supposed blacks' oversexed and unclean features. In one joke, contributed by a "native of Uzhorod," in present-day Ukraine, a black lady with a small child boards a streetcar in Cleveland and sits not far from the conductor. "All at once the child began to cry, and no lullaby dissuaded him, he only bellowed some more. The black lady took out her breast and gave it to the infant, which still turned away and wept. At this the wrathful black woman shouted to the child. 'Hey, if you don't take the breast, I'll call the conductor, damn it!' The conductor grew all red, but didn't take up the black woman's offer."⁴⁷ A newcomer from Uzhorod was in 1921 mocking a black woman's streetcar *faux pas*. One wonders if her urban neighbors similarly mocked a greenhorn's ineptitude on the "strit kar."⁴⁸

Other jokes have a "nigger" asking his son why he doesn't go swimming with the white boys. "Because, Papa, they were white before they went swimming, and they want to stay white." The joke, contributed by a Slovak who signed himself "*Štrbanka*" ("Toothless"), is not all that funny considering that young black Chicagoans had recently been stoned by a white mob enraged when they drifted too near a whites-only beach, triggering the 1919 race riot. But the joke of contamination of whites due to swimming with blacks speaks to developing white

ethnic phobias of supposed pollution. It should be noted, however, that by 1923 this stereotype of black uncleanness was supplied to the humor column by a Slovak, not merely accepted from the wider white society. A Sicilian immigrant similarly noted for the present author that in New Brunswick, New Jersey, a public swimming pool “had to” be closed in the 1950s when blacks sued for the right to swim with other residents.⁴⁹

Another joke contributed by “Edna from Scranton” plays to post-World War I fears of blacks with military training, apprehensions that, as we’ll see in the following chapter, were expressed in relation to the Chicago riot. Edna’s joke perhaps defused for her readers the fear of such black combat veterans. Headlined “I knew the role well,” the joke tells of a black soldier on guard. “When he saw an approaching officer, he hollered ‘Halt!’ The officer stopped and said, ‘OK’ and started back on his way. But a few moments later the nigger again screamed halt! ‘You’ve stopped me a second time,’ the officer said. ‘I’d like to know what you’re going to do next.’ ‘Just so you know,’ said the nigger, ‘my orders are holler halt three times and then shoot.’”⁵⁰

Another joke explicitly questioned blacks’ full personhood, albeit in a “humorous” context. This item, too, was forwarded by a Slovak contributor, “Damsel,” whose joke was headlined “On creatures, and why the Negro is black.” “When God created the first man in the far-off times the devil loved to watch him, and wondered at it, that such a nice, white man was created by God in the image of God. And then the devil set to thinking on it, and thought that he’d like to shape for himself such a nice man, too.” So the devil set to work creating a man in his image, but “when his work was done, he saw that the man created by God was a nice white color, whereas his was all black. So he went up to him and slapped him one on the butt. Very quickly the black began to cry, and therefore the devil began stroking his head, telling him not to weep.”

Damsel offered this moral to her story: “The Negro therefore is black because he was created by the devil, and all his works from that time on are so feverishly blackened [*očernala*], his hair was singed [*oškvrneľ*] by the devil’s hot hands and therefore he has ever after been stained by where the devil laid his hands, and has always been lacking.”⁵¹

Even at the socialist paper, *Rovnost ľudu*, the editors by 1925 could run odd cartoons of blacks’ supposed foibles, even as they maintained a stance deploring lynching and colonialism. An English-language cartoon concerns the exploits of “Squire Edgegate.” A lawyer tells his black bootlegger client, “Frogeye,” “You told me you were innocent, and I was able so to convince the squire—Now what do you think my services were worth?” The stereotypically shiftless, lying bootlegger replies, “Mistah Stone, Ise broke flatter’n a pancake. But ah kin bring you a quart ob dat liquor Ise bin sellin for leben dollars.” To find this cartoon minstrelsy here among calls for an end to lynching is lamentable.⁵²

The black-white divide was naturalized to the extent that jokes in Negro dialect were an accepted part of the English pages of immigrant papers, which by the

1940s were seeking to recruit or retain second-generation readers. An English-language panel cartoon in *Národné noviny*, "Our Neighborhood," has children rummaging around in a garbage dump. "Oh, boy! A Sambo Doll!" one boy exclaims (see Figure 6-5).⁵³ While another English-language cartoon that ran in *Národné noviny*, "Teddy Ronson," featured a black teen who joined white comrades in fighting crime, there were no black faces in "our neighborhood," just as by 1941 many white ethnics in Detroit, Chicago, and a variety of other cities resisted black residential incursions.⁵⁴

Amerikansky russky viestnik turned to even more scathing minstrel caricatures on its English-language humor pages. In 1943, one item, headlined simply "HUMOR," presented a joke Rusyns could have heard on their radio if they

FIGURE 6-5: Comic strip, "Our Neighborhood." *Národné noviny*, July 2, 1941, 6. During the early 1940s, English-language features ran in ethnic newspapers in a bid to retain second-generation readers. The jokes, though, were sometimes at blacks' expense. "Oh, boy! A Sambo doll!"

turned to *Amos 'n' Andy*. “‘Breddern an’ sistahs,’ said the visiting colored preacher. ‘Ah’s got a five dollar sermon and a two dollar sermon, and a one dollar sermon. De deacons will now pass de plate, and Ah will know which o’ dem dis congregation wishes to hear.’”⁵⁵ Such English-language items, designed to retain American-born members as part of the Rusyn community, served too to bind the immigrants as part of a wider white community (see Figure 6-6).

By 1943 such minstrel humor had been an ingrained feature of immigrant journals’ humor pages for decades. Other jokes in the early 1920s had featured tales “from the days of slavery,” in which a slave, told to “fix the roof,” laughs at his master: “You bought me for \$50? Man, you could easily have gotten an Irishman to do the same job for two bucks!”⁵⁶ While arguably this was a gibe at the Irish, it must be recalled that in other issues illustrations of grinning minstrel blacks punctuated jokes at blacks’ expense in the very editions in which multiple lynchings were reported. In discounting suggestions of Polish anti-black racism, Thaddeus Radzialowski says such black stereotypes and jokes were a staple of the early twentieth century and in Polish papers were importations from mainstream, English-language culture. No doubt they were in the Slovak press, too, although as noted some jokes employing well-circulated anti-black gibes were contributed by Slovak readers. But unlike in Polish papers, where Radzialowski says anti-American and anti-Irish jokes also appear, in *New Yorkský denník* such jokes are absent. Jokes in which Jews and Gypsies are targeted ran in Slovak papers, but, while lamentable, of course these groups were familiar to East Europeans, while minstrelsy traditions were learned and conveyed after arrival. And as we’ll see, such jokes at blacks’ expense ran in a decade in which ferocious anti-black riots broke out in many Northern cities, atrocities that were never systemically directed at Jews, Italians, or other white ethnics, for all the anti-immigrant animus that such newcomers faced in America.⁵⁷

In considering minstrelsy and the appearance of black “humor” in the immigrant press, context is important—and offstage, as we’ll see in the following chapter, from the 1910s Slavic whiteness was naturalized as a hardening anti-black animus occurred. While *The Jazz Singer* is often regarded as the last gasp of acceptable white ethnic use of blackface, evidently news of its demise never reached many Slovak First Wards. Ann Douglas has argued, “Inevitably, the return of the black musical to Broadway, inaugurated by *Shuffle Along* in 1921, spelled the decline of white blackface, and hence of Jolson himself.” This argument may hold for Broadway, but Michael Rogin has demonstrated the enduring life blackface enjoyed in Hollywood well past World War II.⁵⁸ Regarding live theater versions of minstrelsy, Douglas likewise fails to consider the degree to which amateur “provisional white people” living far from the Great White Way continued to use blackface minstrelsy to solidify their racial identity through the 1940s and even into the modern civil rights era.⁵⁹

As Lott, Rogin, David Roediger, and James Barrett have documented, “in-between peoples” newly arrived from Europe often solidified their racialized place

W. Penna. Slavs To Hold "Pre-Invasion Rally" In Kennywood Park On Slav Unity Day, June 20

Pittsburgh, Pa. — Over 50,000 Western Pennsylvania Americans of Slav descent are expected to celebrate the American Slav Unity day on June 20th with a "pre-invasion of Europe" rally and a concert in Kennywood Park, according to Judge Blair T. Gunther, the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the American Slav Congress and Stephen Zeman, Jr., Committee Secretary.

Many nationally prominent American Slavs, Government and Labor Leaders and Congress figures are expected to address the thousands of Slav steel workers, miners and their families in Kennywood Park on the coming Sunday afternoon.

Mr. Zlatko Balokovich, nationally known violinist and president of the American Croatian Congress, and Congressman Will Rogers, Jr. are to be among many prominent figures to address the rally.

A similar Slav Day rally

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ickes, spoke before a crowd of 50,000, contributed all its proceeds to the Army and Navy Relief Society. This year, the net proceeds will be donated to the U. S. O.

A program of Slav songs, dances and music as well as a special U. S. O. Variety Club concert will add to the program.

HUMOR

"Breddern an' sistahs," said visiting colored preacher, "Ah's got a five dollar sermon and a two dollar sermon, and a one dollar sermon. De deacons will now pass de plate, and Ah will know which o' dem sermons dis congregation wishes to hear."

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Visitor: "My what a large skating rink!"

Instructor: "Yes. It has a seating capacity of 5,000."

.....

Elderly Relative: "Remember my boy, that wealth does not bring you happiness."

Young Man: "I don't expect it to. I merely want it so I may be able to choose the kind of misery that is most agreeable to me."

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"How much do I owe you for curing my deafness?"

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FIGURE 6-6: English-language humor in the early 1940s was often directed at blacks. *Amerikansky rusksy viestnik*, June 17, 1943, 1.

in their new homes via insidious comparisons to African Americans through such productions as minstrel shows. Indeed, minstrel shows continued to be staples of Slovak parishes, fundraisers that helped solidify the community financially, emotionally—and racially. Even in the 1950s such shows were advertised in the immigrant press and were prominent entertainments at church gatherings.⁶⁰

At Most Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church in Yonkers, from 1920 until 1962 Slovaks performed in an annual minstrel show, which Thomas Shelley writes “was a powerful unifying force in the parish and a source of great pride to the parishioners.” I would argue that the shows were also “a powerful unifying force” for Slovak parishioners’ sense of white entitlement, as well as a force in establishing new immigrants’ American identity, too. Part of that American identity was learning to think of one’s self as white, and Slovak theater played a role here as well. In the Yonkers Slovak community the minstrel show raised money for the parish, inaugurated the new parish school building in 1926, and played before standing-room-only crowds at the school’s 1,300-seat auditorium. Ads printed in the minstrel-show program generated income for the ethnic parish. While during the Depression receipts from the blackface performances fell off, and in 1936 “the profits from the well-attended Minstrel Show amounted to only \$1,500,” the festivities rebounded with better times. The minstrel extravaganza was expanded to two nights, and avid consumers of blackface even paid a dollar apiece to attend dress rehearsals (children were admitted for 50 cents.) Shelley argues that the shows were an important forum in which Slovak parishioners learned American popular culture by performing songs such as “Rose Marie” and “The Indian Love Call,” or tried out a few tentative dance steps to the fox trot.⁶¹

While Shelley’s emphasis is on the fun and communal warmth generated by the Yonkers minstrel show, he omits any consideration of the racialized component of these festivities. To be sure, it is impossible to gauge the meaning every attendee or performer took away from the annual blackface shows, but, while the minstrels continued at Holy Trinity, many Slovaks began in the 1950s to resist the incursion of blacks into their city neighborhoods, picketing proposed public-housing sites. When one of the chief employers of Yonkers Slovaks, the Alexander Smith Carpet Company, in 1954 threatened to move to Greenville, Mississippi, unless it won wage concessions, a Slovak woman characterized the demand with reference to another minority. “Greenville for coolie wages. Not us.” Another historian of Yonkers Slovaks argues that when the demographics of the city changed, parishioners were forced to abandon their beloved minstrel show. Slovaks familiar with the blackface tradition employed racial tropes as well as the language of victimization to characterize their lives.⁶²

Of course, as noted in Chapter 5, even six decades earlier, Yonkers Slovaks had characterized the injustice of being assigned German or English priests as a fate only fitting for “Kaffirs or Zulus of Africa,” not “U.S. citizens.” Distinctions between blacks and whites—even provisional ones such as Slovaks—were paramount for many newcomers to America.⁶³

Elsewhere in the country, Slovaks continued to perform minstrel shows through the 1930s and 1940s, and proudly pointed to such performances as symbols of the elite culture on display at ethnic parishes. Parishioners at Saint Francis Slovak Catholic Church in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, performed such

shows in the 1930s; moreover, a Slovak informant in the 1980s provided a photograph of one such performance to an ethnographer as an emblem of the elite productions that bound second-generation East Europeans to ethnic institutions even as they were acculturating to American mores. The naturalization of immigrants as white Americans continued to go uninterrogated well into the 1980s. The photograph appears in a section of a masterful study of this steel city's East Europeans that discusses the Americanization of Rusyns, Poles, Slovaks, and others. But nowhere in an otherwise insightful account of the city's Slavs is a linkage made between the embrace of whiteness and their Americanization.⁶⁴

In 1947 young Lutheran Slovaks of New Kensington, Pennsylvania, were praised for offering "a beautiful theatrical presentation, a 'minstrel show'. . . . There will be a lot of humor and laughing, so everyone will feel good." By 1947 other residents of the Pittsburgh area were organizing to break the segregated barriers that prevented black equality, even in the North, but Slavic minstrelsy continued to be celebrated.⁶⁵ Likewise, Wilkes-Barre Rusyns performed a minstrel show at St. Mary of the Assumption Greek Catholic Church as late as 1949, a graphic example of Slavic immigrants grotesquely blacking up to emphasize their whiteness. Any horror these immigrants may have felt when reading of lynchings had been supplanted by, or at best uneasily coincided with, an assertive whiteness. Moreover, the minstrel show was still pointed to with pride 39 years later as parishioners prepared the church's hundredth-anniversary souvenir journal, where a photo of the minstrel show appears as a representation of "parish plays." Race has often been omitted from the immigrant narrative, regarded as something having little to do with how immigrants and second-generation white ethnics acculturated to America. But such telling traces as the mementos of these parish galas suggest the color line was a salient marker for East Europeans' acculturation as Americans.⁶⁶

Nor were Slovaks alone. By 1930 minstrelsy was big business, and T. S. Denison's and other companies mass-produced minstrel-show scripts, costumes, and accessories for amateur thespians. Many of the patrons of this phenomenon were immigrants and second-generation white ethnics. In 1945 Scranton high school students performed a "Musical Americana," which included the blackface "Licorice Quartet" and three other minstrel acts. In Lawrence, Massachusetts, Lithuanians at Saint Francis' Roman Catholic Church in 1945 staged a minstrel show to raise money for the erection of a servicemen's memorial. Even Chicago's Croatian socialists, who otherwise presented plays extolling Proudhon, the 1870 Paris Communards, and 1930s unionization battles, unemployed people's councils and sit-down strikes, presented minstrel shows and "darker" plays. Croatian immigrant actors of the "Nada" theater troupe in the 1930s performed plays such as *The Starvation Army*, *a Labor Play on Unemployment* and *The Forgotten Man* from the Brookwood Labor College, and English-language plays from the Rebel

Arts League of the Socialist Party that included “Negro plays” by Langston Hughes.

Another play, *Miners*, written in 1926 by Bonchi Friedman, a student at the Brookwood Labor College who was a member of Local 248 of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, had a cast including “An All-Devouring Capitalist” and a “A Kleagle” arrayed against comradely Polish and “Negro” miners. This would suggest at least some radical ethnics endeavored to treat the plight of American blacks seriously on the stage.⁶⁷

But the Croatian actors also performed minstrel shows such as *Down on the Levee*, procured from T. S. Denison’s *Blackface Plays*. The book *Everything for Your Minstrel Show*, which the Croatian actors also had ordered, provided instructions on the proper performance of minstrel shows for amateurs, and promised, “Denison’s Minstrel First Parts have put NEW LIFE into the MINSTREL FIELD. Our staff of Professional Writers have met the demands of a New Age.” Slavic immigrants were willing consumers of this genre, breathing new life into the minstrel field in the 1930s and beyond.

Denison’s book also included a list of props, costumes, and makeup available for order, such as a comic prop razor, “for what blackface show is complete without the cullud man’s favorite weapon?” Denison’s offered to the Croatians—and other amateur actors—an array of clownish blackface skits “expertly arranged and ready to use, for the convenience of inexperienced amateur minstrel directors and others seeking a modern, properly constructed first-part.” The company promised that, “These books will prove the salvation of the many amateur minstrel troupes which lack the personal counsel and guidance of an experienced director.” Makeup and props were offered for sale, too, such as a “Negro Fright Wig” and a “Negro Mammy Wig,” which the catalogue promised was “Very natural and woolly and has the real ‘Swanee Ribber’ appearance.” Of its quality tambourines, Denison’s catalogue writer asserted, “A minstrel show without tambourines is like a Thanksgiving celebration without turkey.” As with Lithuanians raising money for a patriotic servicemen’s memorial, this example suggests that East Europeans’ expressions of American patriotism and support of ethnic institutions cannot so easily be disentangled from U.S. binaries of race. Even Croatian socialist immigrants could not subsist solely on plays about sit-down strikes and turned to minstrelsy for fun (see Figures 6-7, and 6-8).⁶⁸

In other lands, too, blackface satirization of rustic Africans, as well as blackface sendups of pretentious blacks ridiculed for putting on elite airs, were employed to assert a nationalist identity. Jill Lane has documented the use of blackface satires during the nineteenth century as part of a growing sense of (white) Cuban identity in opposition to continuing *peninsulare* rule by Spain. As in the United States, the popularity of blackface theatrical performances did not preclude a hardening segregation of actual black citizens. Patriotism, parish

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Mirthquake Opening Chorus; Down in Alabama; I'm Painting Your Face in the Moon; There'll Be No More to Come; You're the Only One I Love; The Catfish and the Chicken; Columbo; Gals of Childhood Days; Watermelon Days; Me and Mah Bazar; I Can't Be Arrested for Making Love to You; The Minstrel Show Parade; Finale (with Opening Chorus).

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FIGURES 6-7 AND 6-8: T. S. Denison's *Everything for Your Minstrel Show* enabled amateur actors such as Chicago's Croatians to inject "NEW LIFE" into their minstrel shows. As Denison's book declared, "A minstrel show without tambourines is like a Thanksgiving celebration without turkey."

fundraising, and acceptance as a white man were all hastened by an embrace of blackface.⁶⁹

* * *

Recently some scholars have argued that depictions of minstrel shows as profoundly racist cultural productions are ahistorical and miss the satirical component of such early, antebellum shows. Indeed, Lhamon at times goes further, arguing for a subversive, ribald alliance between black and white demimonde performers and patrons of early minstrel shows, who targeted the real enemy and butt of the humor, an upper class imposing a new industrial capital order on reluctant wage earners losing their standing in the early republic. Lhamon cites many satirical early minstrel scripts in support of his argument that more than mockery of lazy plantation slaves or pretentious or ludicrous urban black dandies was at work in early evocations to jump Jim Crow.⁷⁰

Certainly much was contained under the blackface mask that upset the status quo, and more than racism was at play in the liberatory energy of early stage performers. Nevertheless, by the time Slavs and other new immigrants arrived in America, any subversive potential to blackface—at least for cross-racial alliances—had been anaesthetized if not eviscerated by the violent imposition of segregated Jim Crow statutes, lynch law, and disfranchisement. By 1900, minstrel shows occurred, simply put, not in a void where satire spoke truth to power, but in a profoundly racist society.

And the minstrel shows and jokes that Slovaks and other new immigrants read and performed likewise appeared in a surround of racial messages hardly subversive of the segregated, Jim Crow status quo. In the very issues of newspapers that have Rip and Račik tell minstrel jokes, lynchings are reported, in stories that announce as uninterrogated reality the sexual licentiousness of black libertines and the acceptance of vigilante justice when white mobs burned black offenders alive. Croatians purchasing minstrel scripts featuring razors—"every cullud man's favorite weapon"—contributed little to lower-class white-black solidarity. Minstrel shows were performed in some Slovak parishes into the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s, during a time when white ethnic anger at black migration into Northern city neighborhoods exploded into race riots. Indeed, the 1910s and 1920s heyday of minstrel shows as fundraisers and community celebrations at immigrant parishes already coincided with a spate of white-on-black race riots. It is the impossibility of separating the minstrel show as "just" a play from its larger racial surround that I have hoped to suggest here. The Slovak immigrant press, for example, abounded with slighting coverage of African cannibals as well as frequent accounts of black lynchings at home, in the very years that the minstrel show was enacted on many Slovak parish stages. The minstrel show was only one layer of a palimpsest of race presented by the immigrant newspaper; the traces of black cannibalism, savagery, and illegitimacy remained when a reader turned the page and read that "fun was had by all" at a parish minstrel show. Every turn of

the page presented an overlapping layer of condescension to black personhood, and, save in the few instances where radical immigrants such as the Czech actors of Chicago celebrated John Brown and Frederick Douglass, minstrelsy contributed to, rather than diminished, this portrait of black alterity.

In order to accept the minstrel act, as Lhamon suggests, as in some way a transgressive act celebrating the black trickster character, even as a cultural production forging a black-white alliance against the upper-class, respectable agents of social control, evidence would have to be presented for some acts offstage that built such alliances. Lhamon's treatment of pre-Civil War minstrel actors and audiences is lacking in this regard. Similarly, many Slavic immigrants blacking up did not reach out to blacks as fellow laborers getting the short end of industrial America's stick. Rather, Slovak newspapers as early as the 1890s presented stories that characterized blacks as impermissible outsiders, illegitimate competitors for residential space, and subjects unentitled to the jobs that they were characterized as stealing from immigrants.

We must therefore consider the Slovak newspapers' jokes yet again, not as mere humor, but in light of what they can tell us of the ferocity of white ethnic resistance to black residential and economic mobility when new immigrants faced African Americans in Northern neighborhoods. The final chapter will interrogate the coverage of urban race riots in the Slovak newspapers; in the face of such grim atrocities as occurred in Chicago, East St. Louis, and other cities, perhaps it is wise to retell a few jokes about black porters and greenhorns with an eye for what they can tell us about immigrant attitudes toward blacks.