Some contextual information

My dissertation, “Embodying Race, Performing Citizenship” examines racial impersonation, a performance genre that originated in the context of nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy. During the peak years of immigration between 1880 and 1924, American popular entertainers expanded their repertoires from belittling depictions of African Americans to a variety of other races and ethnicities. My survey of programs and playbills reveals that artists of Irish, Chinese, and Jewish heritage replaced white racial impersonators when local variety theatre transitioned into vaudeville, America’s first nationwide entertainment industry. While the economic profitability of racial impersonation encouraged broad participation, my dissertation shows the extent to which immigrant artists deliberately coopted the genre to combat dominant racial stereotypes. Irish vocalist Maggie Cline juxtaposed boisterous singing with an elegant demeanor and sophisticated fashion choices to simultaneously oppose the “lace curtain” and “shanty” Irish stereotypes. Chinese tenor Lee Tung Foo sang operatic arias and told jokes in a Scottish kilt to challenge the image of the unmusical, humorless Chinese person doomed to only perform traditional Chinese arts. Jewish entertainer Sophie Tucker combined “black-style” music and dance, Jewish humor, and a mix of “black” dialect and Yiddish language to attack the “Jew as racial hybrid” stereotype. The common denominator across racial identities and performance specialties was juxtaposition: the act of fusing discordant racial signifiers into one performance and body. Canonical scholarship on immigration argues that “assimilation” is the pathway toward inclusion, but the artists I study contest this narrative. Thanks to racial juxtapositions, their hyphenated identities did not translate into a performance of passing or assimilation, but rather, retained the uniqueness of each individual component.

This paper is extracted from my second dissertation chapter, which focuses on second-generation Jewish American racial impersonators. The chapter opens with contextual information on Jewish immigration history and a literature review of contemporaneous race theories. My case studies are Sophie Tucker and Eddie Cantor, two well-known Jewish singing comedians who came out of a lesser-known tradition of first-generation Jewish racial impersonators. Here I include performance reconstructions and analyses for Eddie Cantor, yet keep in mind the goal of the chapter is to draw comparisons between the two cases. At this stage, most of theory is relegated to the beginning of the chapter (I offer a sample of it here): I would appreciate your feedback on how to integrate performance analysis and theoretical intervention. The driving question for me is: what can performance teach us about racial perception and immigration history? Help me condense an answer from the Eddie Cantor case, and I would test it against Sophie Tucker.

Thank you, I hope you enjoy the reading!

Maria
It is commonplace for scholars of culture to identify artistic productions as standing either inside or outside the mainstream. The former has been defined “dominant” or “majoritarian,” while the latter “subversive” or “minoritarian.”¹ This distinction is not a simple one to make when it comes to Jewish American contributions to popular entertainment. We might agree to call these “subversive” in some cases, especially when, in the words of Esther Romeyn, they “represent the ‘apotheosis of the low,’ a ‘de-centering’ of the ‘superior’ cultural norm of Anglo-Saxondom and its hierarchies of taste, race, and caste.”² Yet Jews were (and are) anything but a marginalized minority in American show business. Henry Bial has termed the phenomenon “Jewish dominant minority.” He writes:

The binary, dominant versus oppressed paradigm of ethnic and cultural studies lacks a vocabulary that can address the phenomenon of a dominant minority. […] Contemporary performance theory holds that performance’s political potential lies largely in its power to disrupt the existing social order […] But the Jewish minority, which we might call a dominant minority, is not looking to overturn the entire applecart. Its political activism as played out in theater is limited largely to addressing issues of racial or ethnic discrimination.³

This paper grapples with Jewish paradoxical positionality as ethnic and religious minority in society and “dominant minority” in American popular entertainment. Starting in vaudeville as performers and later theatre managers, going into the nickelodeon industry and eventually Hollywood, working as writers, composers, and directors on Broadway, Jews saw theatre and film as spaces to express themselves and do good business.⁴ Many have hypothesized the causes

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¹ Arguably, the text that first and most influentially challenged this model was Stuart Hall’s essay “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular” (1981).
² Esther Romeyn, Street Scenes: Staging the Self in Immigrant New York, 1880–1924 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 207.
of this phenomenon: Irving Howe, Brooks McNamara, Andrea Most, and, naturally, Henry Bial, to name a few. Here I focus on the consequences instead: thanks to Jewish networks of empresarios, theatre owners, publicists, and creatives, second-generation Jewish American performers worked on soiled ground.

In 1920, Jewish American philosopher Horace Kallen revised the concept of “assimilation” to fit the particular experience of Jewish immigrants in the United States. Assimilation is neither a path towards domination, as nativist believers in the Jewish “conspiracy” for world supremacy argued at the time, nor a process of obliteration, as the supporters of the melting-pot ideal advocated. In “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot,” Kallen explained:

Once the proletarian level of independence is reached, the process of assimilation slows down and tends to come to a stop. The immigrant group is still a national group, modified, sometimes improved, by environmental influences, but otherwise a solitary spiritual unit, which is seeking to find its way out on its own social level. […] Then a process of dissimilation begins. The arts, life, and ideals of the nationality become central and paramount; ethnic and national differences change in status from disadvantages to distinctions.

Caught in the middle of their “disassimilation” process, hyphenated American Jews exploited their contacts and privileged position in show business not only to get easy employment, but to address issues of racial and ethnic discrimination by means of performance. Ideas about racial difference had been popular since the foundation of the American Republic, but at this particular

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historical juncture, they went from being abstract philosophical concepts to applied science. Not coincidentally, the emergence of modern social sciences in the United States overlapped with a sustained period of racial reaction marked by the institutionalization of Jim Crow, Asian exclusion, and the ascent of eugenics. In the span of only four decades between 1880 and 1924, discriminatory racial theories concretized into restrictive immigration laws. American Jews were particularly affected by the debates over immigration restriction: new Jewish immigrants were barred from entering the United States after the Johnson Reeds Act of 1924, and those who had already established a residence were increasingly marginalized.

As the dilemma of identity as race became a central topic of concern in both intellectual and political circles, Jewish artists experimented with racial ideas in their stage practices. To this new generation of performers in the 1910s and 20s fell the responsibility to alter the established “stage Jew” stereotype that both gentiles and fresh-from-the-boat Jews had contributed to popularize between the 1880s and the 1900s. They were not “looking to overturn the entire applecart,” as Bial claims, but they introduced a new concept of Jewish Americanness for audiences that, compared to those of a generation prior, were more ethnically diverse and open to understand difference. They did so despite race theorists fueled discussions on immigration restriction, in fact, they turned some contemporaneous xenophobic concepts on their head by means of racial impersonation. They were the American Jews who changed the status of “ethnic and national differences” “from disadvantages to distinctions:” here I discuss the life and career of one of the most inventive early-twentieth-century Jewish American performers, singing comedian Eddie Cantor.

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Eddie Cantor: “America’s Blackest-faced Comedian”

Eddie Cantor was born in New York City in 1892. Orphaned at the age of two, he was raised by his maternal grandmother, a sixty-three-year-old Russian cigar maker who never learned to speak English. He received no formal acting or musical training, yet went to become one of the most popular singing comedian in the country. He did not have any sponsor or official introduction to the entertainment industry, yet raised from amateur nights to the burlesque wheel, from big-time vaudeville to Broadway, thanks to an established network of Jewish entertainment workers in New York City. Despite coming from a segregated Jewish Orthodox community, his touring shows first, and radio, film, and television engagements later brought him close to multiethnic American publics from coast to coast. He was active on stage and screen until he passed away in 1962.

Many have looked for the “secret” of Cantor’s long successful career, the shared opinion being that he knew when and how to adjust his style to evolving societies and mediums. But beyond his adaptability, he knew how to use a popular performance vocabulary—that of racial impersonation—to give proud representations to the American “melting pot,” hyphenated identities, and the particularity of the Jewish immigrant experience in America all at once. To achieve this, he performed in a variety of racial masks, accents, and costumes, while letting his Jewishness creep in from underneath. I call this “staged racial hybridity” Cantor’s performance


trademark: in fact, compared to his first-generation Jewish colleagues whose racialized performances functioned independently of their own ethnic identity, the appeal (and humor) of Cantor’s racialized characters was contingent on and even heightened by his well-publicized Jewishness.

The outcomes of Cantor’s methods were multiple. On the stage, his racial hybridity was at least in part a studied tactic to succeed in vaudeville, a corporate entertainment industry that capitalized on racialized images and fast changes in characters. But despite the utilitarianism, Cantor’s racial combinations also fostered connections with colleagues from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds; staged racial hybridity thus lead the way to long-lasting interracial relations off the stage, confirming the multi-racial, integrated dimensions of early-twentieth-century American popular entertainment. On the other side of the footlights, racial hybridity was perceived as advancing a pluralistic view of race, in fact, Cantor often accompanied his songs and sketches with more or less explicit messages of interracialism. “Do you know my idea of perfect harmony?” Cantor used to ask in Kid Boots, his first musical comedy. “I’d like to see a baseball game between the KKK and the Knight of Columbus, with a negro umpire, for the benefit of the Jewish war relief.”

Cantor was a keen and insightful observer, learning his craft by impersonating popular racial comics of the time in a sort of mimetic exercise. He soon realized that the more hybrid his characters, the more intrigued his managers and audiences. Jewish vaudevillians playing “Hebrew” or minstrel types were a common sight; as vaudeville veteran Joe Laurie recalled, many blackface comedians simply wore black makeup “and talked ‘white.’ No dialect, didn’t

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even try, in fact some of them told Hebe [Jewish] stories in blackface.”

Thus Cantor experimented beyond the now-standard “Jewish blackface” to appear original and keep his act fresh. He literally “dressed” the part of a variety of racialized characters: a black butler imitating Al Jolson, a black servant who wants to fight for his “mother Russia” in World War I, but also a German mayor, a Chinese “Don Giovanni,” and an Indian Chief who “went to Hebrew school.”

Stories and jokes were adjusted to accommodate these original moments of hilarity not only in stand-alone sketches, but in fully scripted musical comedies as well. Even in Whoopee, a musical comedy whose plot was adapted from a short story and earlier dramatic piece, the story expanded to include characters and situations so that Cantor, the star of the show, could burst out from an oven with his face blackened by soot, or haggle “the Jewish way,” as he had done in many Jewish sketches before, but this time in redface disguised as an Indian Chief.

Cantor’s stage career can be divided into three phases: his formative years in small-time vaudeville (1907-16) and musical revues under Florenz Ziegfeld Jr. and the Shubert Brothers (1917-23); his rise to stardom in musical comedies on Broadway and Hollywood (1924-30); and a final phase which included frequent vaudeville appearances to promote his latest film and radio show, one last stage musical in 1941, and an acclaimed one-man show with which he toured until he retired. Below I analyze Cantor’s “staged racial hybridity” focusing on its motives, developments, and effects on and off the stage in the years from Cantor’s debut to 1930, when his film and radio engagements began to outnumber his stage appearances. A chronological approach allows to highlight the progression of Cantor’s racial impersonations from business-

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11 Joe Laurie Jr., Vaudeville from the Honky-Tonks to the Palace (New York: Holt, 1953), 139.
12 Cantor played these characters (respectively) in: Gus Edwards’ children act Kid Kabaret (1912–13), “Master and Man” with Al Lee on the Keith’s vaudeville circuit (1914–15); on the Peoples vaudeville circuit (1909–10); in the Ziegfeld Follies (1917); and in the musical comedy Whoopee (1928–29).
imposed to self-made and original. Almost a survival strategy at the outset, racial impersonation became a tool to initially disclose and, later, proudly affirm Cantor’s own Jewish identity. From there, explicit Jewish references turned into political stance, while racial hybridity achieved the level of legitimate theatrical representation on Broadway and Hollywood.

I.

Before comedy became Eddie Cantor’s business, it was his survival strategy in poor Lower East Side. He often asserted, unashamed: “We had to laugh to keep from crying, there was such poverty, such misery and disease.”¹³ His autobiographies are punctuated by childhood memories about the jokes he would tell adults to redeem himself from a misdeed or the shows he would put on for other street children. His funny stories would even improve his life conditions, as for example when he became “camp clown” at Surprise Lake Camp, a tuition-free summer camp for poor Jewish boys (fig. 1). He recalled: “I became camp clown in the hope that I’d be held over for more than two weeks. It worked. They’d keep me six or seven weeks each summer. I’d play jokes, sing, anything to keep staying.”¹⁴ The same urgency pushed Cantor out of amateurship and into the world of professional entertainment. In the words of Edward R. Sammis who interviewed Cantor in 1933, singing was not even one of Cantor’s interests, but he learned out of necessity, when his first job at Carey Walsh club in Coney Island involved musical sketches. With Bedini and Arthur, the comic duo Cantor accompanied in his first vaudeville

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¹³ Typescript draft of autobiography, 4. Eddie Cantor Papers, box 33, UCLA.
¹⁴ Ibid., 11. Surprise Lake Camp was young Cantor’s respite from the pollution and poverty of the Lower East Side. There, he enjoyed the clean air, nature, and hearty foods so much that he kept donating big sums to the organization until the died. Surprise Lake Camp is still operating today and is the oldest Jewish camp in the United States. https://surpriselake.org/about/history/
engagement, he “learned tricks” “in the actor’s art of self-defense […] because he had to. He invented business that got him a laugh on his single exit.”

Racial impersonation also began as a survival strategy, initially in the fast-changing context of vaudeville amateur nights, and later in burlesque and small-time vaudeville. Lacking the financial means to pay for a comedy writer or the time to come up with his own jokes and characters, Cantor started out by imitating other racial impersonators, some of whom he had never even seen perform in person, but only through other mimics’ imitations. Cantor’s renditions were thus twice removed from the originals, which surely gave him space to alter his seniors’ characterizations. He imitated Cliff Gordon, the “German Congressman,” coloring his opinions with ridiculous analogies; Harry Thompson, the Irish “Mayor of the Bowery,” who would dismiss his cases in the Essex Market Court with double-entendres; and Junie McCree, the Irish “Sappho in Chinatown,” a drug addict who spoke with a drawl. He also mimicked Joe Welch’s famous Hebrew type, picking up on the line “if I had my life to live over again, I wouldn’t be born.”

Cantor’s blackface character similarly originated as an emergency measure to keep his modest engagement in “novelty-ruled” vaudeville while lacking the capital to invest in a comedy writer. In the 1909-10 season, Cantor toured the Peoples Vaudeville Circuit for sixteen weeks. The small chain was managed by Nicholas and Joseph Schenck, Adolph Zukor, and Marcus Loew, all recent Jewish immigrants and future moguls of the film industry. After telling the same

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jokes as German, Irish, and Easter European characters for the first three fourths of the engagement, Cantor felt “really stumped,” out of ideas. He thought of mimicking old age, perhaps this time without the Joe Welch’s imitation. As he later told Jane Kesner Ardmore, the ghost writer for his second autobiography: “I tried a few dark lines around my mouth and they only made me look haggard. I tried to wipe off the marks, and they spread […] I had it! I quickly rubbed the cork over my cheeks, my brow, my neck, my ears.” With an implicit sense of guilt, Cantor wrote elsewhere: “Hiding behind a black mask, I got the booking for another four weeks on the same circuit. That was easy.”

Cantor’s first blackface might have been a fortuity dictated by vaudeville’s rule of novelty, yet he continued to perform it until 1918 and intermittently until the 1940s. At first, he “dressed in a battered high hat, a loose-fitting second-hand Prince Albert, and huge pancake shoes,” to reproduce the conventional minstrel image of the Reconstruction. In this costume, he began his experiments in blackface performance while accompanying Bedini and Arthur and, later, playing the part of a black butler in Kid Kabaret. Considering the several racial costumes he had already worn and discarded according to market demand, he could have done the same with this one. Instead, he kept altering his blackface and injecting it with references to his own Jewish identity, as I will detail below. “The sooty spirit of the cotton fields was brought up to the twentieth century,” Cantor reminisced. In the end, “there was just a trace of the cotton fluff in [his character’s] ears, but the night-club rhythm danced in his eyes.”

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18 Cantor, My Life, 114.
19 Ibid., 115.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
Bedini and Arthur, a black-and-white juggling act, were touring the Orpheum circuit when Cantor ended his contract with the Peoples circuit. The Orpheum was a “big-time” and better-paying chain, which was enough to convince Cantor to take the job despite the “downgrading” to supporting artist. Cantor’s role was simply to fetch plates for the jugglers to spin: for this, he had to wear blackface like Arthur, not to overshadow Bedini’s straight man’s role in whiteface (fig. 2). But despite the little time he spent on the stage, Cantor was able to get his share of laughs by holding on to the plate, exchanging complicit looks with the audience, and even polishing the plate before handing it out to the two visibly annoyed jugglers.\footnote{Weinstein, \textit{Eddie Cantor}, 25–6; Goldman, \textit{Banjo Eyes}, 31–2; Cantor, \textit{My Life}, 120–3.}

Cantor had been playing with Bedini and Arthur for seven months when at the Shea’s Theatre in Buffalo the occasion came for a promotion. The act was placed second to last on the bill, right before the closing number gathering all the artists back on stage. This meant that they only had the upstage space for their performance, as behind the curtain the set and cast would be preparing for the group finale. Juggling required much more surface area than that, thus Bedini and Arthur were caught unprepared. Cantor, on the other hand, had experience singing and joking in spaces of any size. He offered to sing a song and entertain with some of his comedy, which, since he had no jokes ready, would be entirely gestural. The song he selected was an early Irving Berlin, “Ragtime Violin.” He came out with a big violin case, opened it with fanfare, made the audience impatient to see its content, and finally, took out a small toy fiddle. He scratched a few chords, looked apologetically at the audience for his total incompetence, then tried oiling the chords but with no improvement. He ultimately threw the toy fiddle out, and with a nervous, remorseful expression on his face, began his song. As the ragtime rhythm accelerated, his voice also augmented in volume and confidence. He remembered “walk[ing] rapidly up and
down the stage, clapping my hands and bobbing about like perpetual motion. The result was something new and entirely unintentional in jazz interpretation [...] I had to sing encores till I was exhausted.”

In the standard old minstrel costume, Cantor chose to scratch a fiddle instead of the banjo, the archetypal musical instrument of the plantation South. Additionally, in lieu of the expected “coon” or nostalgic plantation song, he sang a distinctive Jewish ragtime. The Jewish reference would not be obvious to all, but it surely was to the Jews in the audience. In fact, not only the fiddle was the protagonist of many traditional Jewish songs, but Irving Berlin’s popularity as the Jewish composer who was revolutionizing Tin Pan Alley had already reached vaudeville. Cantor’s blackface sketch at Shea’s Theatre was quite unique. The embarrassed and apologetic persona he created for the occasion was more akin to a “Hebrew” type—like for instance, his imitation of Joe Welsh as the “pathetic looser”—than the typical merry-go-lucky minstrel character. Pushed progressively to its extremes, this paradoxical character fusing black mask and nervous personality, minstrel clothes and “Jewish” fiddle would become Cantor’s trademark aesthetic.

In Atlantic City with Bedini and Arthur, Cantor met an old acquaintance, George Jessel, a twelve-year-old comic who was also touring vaudeville theatres on a production by Gus Edwards. Edwards was a sketch writer, composer, and manager who was particularly interested in producing young talents. He already had a new idea in mind, a children’s show bringing together the most hilarious imitations and popular jazz songs. It would be a “kids’ cabaret,” a

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23 Cantor, My Life, 125–6; Goldman, Banjo Eyes, 33.
24 Nebbish types had been played by “Hebrew” comics such as young David Warfield, Joe Welch, and Willie Howard. Willie Howard opposed his disheveled, diminutive character to his brother Eugene’s elegant and imposing authority figure.
twenty-minute scene of a party among children when their parents leave them at home alone.\textsuperscript{25} With the only supervision of their black butler (Eddie Cantor in blackface), the house children invite children from the street: “Muttsky,” billed as “a little bit Yiddish” (George Jessel), an Italian flower seller (Ruthie Francis), “Chaucey Pickadilly,” a Londoner who forgets his British accent to sing ragtime (Albert Hinston), an Irish match seller (Fanny McVay), and many more (fig. 3). The multiethnic group performed a variety of specialties, including a ballet dance, popular songs played on the classical violin, and ragtime songs. The closing number, titled “Mimic Land—The Proper Way to get Upon the Stage,” was a series of imitations of well-known theatre personalities: Mme Trentini, Blanche Ring, Raymond Hitchcock, David Warfield, Eddie Leonard, and Al Jolson. Leonard and Jolson, two of the greatest blackface performers of the day, were played by Cantor.\textsuperscript{26}

Cantor liked the prospect of playing in \textit{Kid Kabret} to the point of forcing Bedini and Arthur to release him from his contract with them.\textsuperscript{27} As the black butler, he moved further away from the old-style minstrel character, in fact, a journalist from Calgary thought his blackface comedy was “the Al Jolson type,” and Lois Willoughby from Chicago named Cantor “the Frank Tinney of the cast.”\textsuperscript{28} Neither Jolson nor Tinney were typical blackface minstrels, the former with his mysterious brashness and the latter the “anti-gags” \textit{par excellence}.\textsuperscript{29} Thanks to “a style

\textsuperscript{25} Cantor, \textit{My Life}, 126–8; Goldman, \textit{Banjo Eyes}, 37.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Kid Kabret}, program. Reprinted in various newspapers with slight variations, especially in the number of actors involved, ranging from 17 to 21. Clippings in scrapbook, Eddie Cantor Papers, box 57, UCLA.

\textsuperscript{27} Cantor, \textit{My Life}, 126–7.

\textsuperscript{28} Clippings in scrapbook, respectively: n.d. from Chicago Palace Music Hall and Calgary, June 28, 1913. Eddie Cantor Papers, box 57, UCLA.

\textsuperscript{29} On Al Jolson, see Goldman, \textit{Banjo Eyes}, 108. On Frank Tinney, see Frederick Snyder, “American Vaudeville, Theatre in a Package: The Origins of Mass Entertainment” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1970). Akin to Cantor singing “Ragtime Violin,” Snyder mentions a sketch by Tinney in which he made “ludicrous efforts to play the ‘Miserere’ on the bagpipes” (81). As one
of his own and a most engaging manner,” Cantor was the number-one object of praise in each review of the show: 30 he “rises far over the rest in ability, they are ‘just cute kids,’ yet he is the comedian that seems to lend the whole performance its dash and zest,” wrote a reporter from Seattle. 31

Cantor graduated from Kids Kabaret after two years touring cross-country and working with a number of other comedians and racial impersonators. On the West Coast, he shared the bill with Will Rogers, the roping master and comedian who would become one of his best friends and teachers. 32 Rogers introduced Cantor to his booking agent, Jewish impresario Max Hart. Hart booked Cantor on the Keith’s big-time circuit and provided a straight man, Al Lee, for his blackface character. 33 Their act was called “Master and Man” and, as Cantor later described it, it was “strictly a nut act.” 34 Cantor was the anarchic presence onstage, interrupting Lee’s singing with silly jokes and non sequiturs. 35 Being finally in charge of his own role, he also restyled his appearance. To contrast the absurdity of his jokes, he wore a pair of big white-rimmed glasses

of Tinney’s admirer quoted by Snyder once said, Tinney created laughter “by lengthening the preliminaries, by false starts, erasures, corrections—until his arrival at the point relieves the suspense” (81).

30 Clipping in scrapbook, n.d. from Burtis Grand theatre. Another clipping from the Maryland theatre, Baltimore, stated: “it is doubtful whether the popular author and musician could add anything to Cantor’s accomplished work; [...] the other characters are just typical American boys and girls.” Eddie Cantor Papers, box 57, UCLA.

31 Clipping in scrapbook, n.d. from Orpheum theatre. Eddie Cantor Papers, box 57, UCLA.

32 Will Rogers’ act and Kid Kabaret often shared the page in reviews of the Orpheum circuit. Clippings in scrapbook, Eddie Cantor Papers, box 57, UCLA.

33 Goldman, Banjo Eyes, 43.

34 Cantor, My Life, 147.

35 According to Henry Jenkins, through “the conflicting figures of the clown and the comic antagonist,” anarchist comedies “explore the relationship of the ‘natural,’ uninhibited individual to the rigidifying social order,” and provide audiences with a temporary escape from the restraints of civilization. With his foolishness, Cantor’s black servant challenged the “rigidifying social order” embodied by Lee’s white master. Henry Jenkins, What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic. Film and Culture. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992. 221–222.
which gave him the appearance of an intellectual. To contrast the standard black southern dialect of blackface minstrels, he spoke with grandiose vocabulary in his natural New York accent. To distinguish his look from the rural, baggy outfits of minstrel shows, he wore the elegant suit of a modern city dweller, only a few sizes smaller so to increase the impression of slightness. Finally, playing against images of brimful or even aggressive black physicality, he created a coward, somewhat effete character that looked very much as the exaggeration of his shy fiddle player for Bedini and Arthur (fig. 4).

The big news of the moment was the war in Europe, so Cantor made a joke of the situation and further confounded the audience regarding his ethnic/racial identity:

Cantor: You’ll have to let me go.
Lee: Why?
Cantor: To fight in the war, to fight for my mother country, Russia.
Lee: Russia?
Cantor: Darkest Russia.
Lee: I didn’t know you were Russian.
Cantor: Oh, yes. My relatives are all in the war. My father’s General Petrovitch, my uncle’s General Ivanovitch. Then there’s eczema—another itch…

Pronounced in a New York accent by a thin man with a scared look on his face—and in blackface, strangest of all—this joke must have resulted as funny as it was paradoxical. For the anonymous critic reporting for the Indianapolis News, the intellectual touch resulted even feminine. They wrote: “Cantor is one of the most refreshing blackfaces seen here in a long while […] When he has restrained the ultra feminine [sic] slap-me-on-the-wrist imitation just a trifle there will be hardly anything in his act that will not deserve the highest praise” (fig. 5).37

36 Cantor, My Life, 145.
37 Clipping in scrapbook, n.d., Eddie Cantor Papers, box 57, UCLA.

TAPS workshop
If read with common stage stereotypes and anti-Semitic racial theories in mind, this slight critique indirectly supports a connection between Cantor’s blackface and its Jewish source. The “ultra feminine” had been a feature of the stage Jew since the earliest representations of Shylock in the United States, as Harley Erdman explains. In addition, as Daniel Boyarin asserts, “historically, the Jewish male is, from the point of view of dominant European culture, a sort of woman.” Maleness, according to the theoretical legacy Boyarin refers to, is defined by physical strength, courage, and confidence. The feminine, by contrast, is constituted by physical weakness and alternative forms of gaining power such as dissimulation and trickery. Boyarin traces this gendered understanding of Jewishness back to Ancient Rome, when rabbis would define themselves as “feminized” to resist the hypermasculine, oppressive Roman state. Otto Weininger, a self-hating Jew converted to Christianity, went as far as devising a psychological theory that opposed the “Aryan/masculine” to the “Jewish/feminine” psyche: according to Weininger’s model, the Jewish male inhabits a liminal space between the two poles. Cantor’s blackface was “unusual” because associated with physical weakness and cunning humor. Contrary to the stereotypical image of blackness as physical prowess and lacking intellectual abilities, Cantor’s blackface character was evidently delicate and proudly intellectual. When linked to ideas of Jewishness, both these traits adopt feminine attributes. As a consequence, Cantor’s joke about “mother Russia” only confirms his Jewish identity, which is already

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embodied in the “feminine” traits (cowardice, intellectuality, minute physicality) of his original blackface character.

II.

In 1916, agent Max Hart signed Will Rogers into the famed musical revue The Ziegfeld Follies and, only a few months later, convinced Florenz Ziegfeld Jr. to hire Cantor for the following year’s production. In 1917 the Follies were on their eleventh edition. Each edition had a theme—pleasures of urban America in 1917, war and patriotism in 1918, prohibition in 1919—that loosely connected a long sequence of songs, dance numbers, and comedy sketches. Ziegfeld was known for his elegant tastes in both design and women, in fact, he personally picked both the fabrics for the thousands of costumes and the comeliest chorus girls to would wear them. He worked closely with his stage designer Joseph Urban and choreographer New Wayburn. Choreography was less about dance and more about “human” stage design: of the four or five dozens of chorus girls, only a handful performed any dance steps, with the rest simply parading their impressive costumes (or, more often, lack thereof) in geometrical formations.

These parades made the Follies famous worldwide, as did the comedy teams who entertained the audience in between the frequent set changes. Comedy scenes were devised under Ziegfeld’s supervision, yet unlike with chorus girls, Ziegfeld could not monitor the witticism of his great comedians in every detail. Musical revues like the Ziegfeld Follies and, a few years later, musical comedies revolutionized Broadway for integrating well-known vaudeville talents, popular songs, and choreographies or plotlines that were much more structured compared to old variety theatre. Higher salaries for the performers came at the expense of their liberty to direct themselves. Yet precisely for this reason, the little independence that the artists were able to

41 Cantor, My Life, 152–3.
attain reveals their aesthetic and career priorities. In Cantor’s case, the fact that he joined the *Follies* as a blackface performer but was soon able to differentiate racial referents and characters in later editions hints at his deliberate effort to turn his stage personas into racial hybrids.\(^{42}\) From a blackface assistant to Bert Williams in 1917, he advanced to a whiteface role in 1918, to solo specialties in both blackface and whiteface in 1919. At the end of his experience with Ziegfeld, Cantor’s humor was recognizably Jewish for both its content and presentation.

Act 1 scene 7 of the *Follies* of 1917 was according to many critics one of the funniest. In “Pappy and Sonny,” Bert Williams as a black porter bragged to his workmates about his son Abner due from college on the train. “He’s on the football team,” “he is like his dad!”\(^{43}\) Cantor played Abner, a boyish and effete young man. He would embarrass his father with his immaturity: “Look, Dad, I carry matches!” Deeply humiliated, Williams would respond: “Son, pick up those grips!” And Cantor, “Dad! Remember, I have a temper!”\(^{44}\) On their debut in Atlantic City, Cantor remembered “camping” all over the stage as he used to do in his vaudeville routines. In the dressing room after the performance, Bert Williams, in his “almost professorial

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\(^{43}\) The Ziegfeld Follies of 1917, program and scripts, MCNY.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.
manner,” said to Cantor: “Look, son, don’t push too hard. You can afford to underplay this character because the situation almost carries the scene.”

This is just one of the many memories Cantor reported in his autobiographical writings about his relationship with Bert Williams. He had admired the Bahamian American comedian since his amateur days. “It took weeks of stinting and saving before I was able to buy a ticket to his show. As I watched him, I knew, even then, that here was greatness—here was a man with a divine spark.” What caught Cantor’s attention was especially Williams’ control: “he could stand, very quietly, in the center of the stage and, without moving an inch, manipulate emotions as if they were puppets on a string.” Cantor’s grandiose gesticulations—what the *Indianapolis News* reporter had called “ultra feminine slap-me-on-the-wrist imitation”—were hyperexcited compared to Williams’ measured moves. Determined to learn from the great pantomimist, Cantor “rationalized that tickets to [Bert Williams’] shows were good investments and, in the next few years, caught as many as [his] precarious finances would allow.” The pedagogical experience did not end there. In the *Follies* of 1917, Cantor “expected possible resentment from Bert, how would he react to another black face?” But instead, Williams took him “right to his big heart and taught [him] many things. In the matter of timing: ‘Don’t be too anxious for the next line, let ‘em laugh.’” It is possible that Cantor’s embarrassed stare and distinctive eye-rolling was inspired by Williams’s advice. In fact, many of the features Cantor was praised for in his career—his skills at interpolating songs and short punchlines, for instance—he listed as

45 Eddie Cantor, “Bert Williams—‘The Best Teacher I have Ever Had,’” in Era Bell Thompson and Herbert Nipson eds., *White on Black; the Views of Twenty-two White Americans on the Negro* (Chicago: Johnson Pub., 1963), 92.
46 Cantor, “Bert Williams,” 90.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Typescript draft of autobiography, 13. Eddie Cantor Papers, box 33, UCLA.
Williams’ forte: “He had a unique way of rendering songs, injecting his talk between rests and catching up with the melodic phrase after he had let it get a head start.”

In the Ziegfeld Follies of 1917, Cantor and Williams “became Pappy and Sonny on stage and off” (fig. 6). Their relationship inverted the standard racial roles of the time, with Cantor, the eager student, learning from the great master. Cantor later wrote of Williams: “As a performer, he was close to a genius. As a man, he was everything the rest of us would like to have been.” Cantor was very aware of the effort that must have taken. He saw Williams living in segregated hotels when they went on tour, and recounted episodes such as when at a bar he was charged the outrageous sum of fifty dollars for a scotch that he and his white colleagues got for free. “Bert opened his wallet, took out three hundred-dollar bills and said, ‘I’ll take six, if you please.’” Cantor reflected: “He never got angry, he kept his dignity—but why should he have been placed in such a position?” He could see the suffering behind Williams’ gracious modes even on the stage. “He could make you laugh while you were feeling sorry for him,” Cantor later commented, revealing not only the focus with which he observed his great teacher at work, but also the intimacy of their boundary-breaking relationship.

Besides “Pappy and Sonny” and a blackface solo titled “The Episode of the Eddiecantor,” Cantor sang “The Dixie Volunteers” in “The Episode of the Mississippi Levee” (Act 2, scene 4). On a literal level, the audience could interpret the song as a patriotic hymn, but in his blackface makeup, New York accent, and tight suit Cantor’s “three cheers to the Dixie

50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Eddie Cantor, As I Remember Them (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1963), 48–9.
53 Cantor, Take my Life, 281.
54 Ibid.
55 Cantor, “Bert Williams,” 90.
56 The Ziegfeld Follies of 1917, program, MCNY.
volunteers” heroically enlisting to fight in World War I left room for a more critical perspective on the legacy of the Southern military ideal.\(^{57}\) In the following year’s edition of the *Follies*, the patriotic theme infused the whole show. As the antithesis of courage, physical vigor, and devotion to the mother country, Cantor’s character in “The Aviator’s Test” (Act 2 scene 18) built its humor on paradox. The scene expanded on the war jokes Cantor and Al Lee had presented in vaudeville, with the addition of a physical examination part that confirmed Cantor’s character’s unsuitability to join the war.\(^{58}\)

Cantor fought hard against both Ziegfeld and Abe Erlanger to play this scene in whiteface. Erlanger, at the time head of booking for the Theatrical Syndicate, which controlled almost all the leading houses in America before the emergence of the Shubert brothers, was backing Ziegfeld with money and theatres in New York and on tour.\(^{59}\) At the Atlantic City try-out, after seeing Cantor playing the sketch without his black makeup, Erlanger ordered the piece cut from the production. Cantor threatened to quit the *Follies* if the scene was not restored before the New York opening.\(^{60}\) Ziegfeld and Erlanger, both of German Jewish ancestry, might have felt uncomfortable with Cantor’s Jewish references in his own white skin, especially since these insinuated anti-patriotism at a time when German immigrants were distrusted and even persecuted if suspected of supporting their home country in the war. In blackface, Jewish

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\(^{57}\) Despite the “Dixie volunteers” come from “the land of Old Black Joe,” the lyrics equate them to two Confederate generals: “they are going to be fighting men—like Stonewall Jackson and like Robert E. Lee.” This verse is paradoxical in itself: in Cantor’s presentation, the questionable nature of the piece must have come to the fore. Edgar Leslie and Harry Ruby, “The Dixie Volunteers” (New York: Waterson, Berlin & Snyder, 1917). [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31175035190092&view=1up&seq=1](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31175035190092&view=1up&seq=1)

\(^{58}\) *The Ziegfeld Follies of 1918*, program and scripts, MCNY.


\(^{60}\) Goldman, *Banjo Eyes*, 68.
references would not be emphasized as much, as the absurdity of a black man even testing to be a military pilot would have taken over the absurdity of a weak white Jew becoming one. After some quarrelling, Cantor was allowed to give the sketch a trial. The scene turned out to be the biggest hit of the show. For Variety’s leading critic Sime Silverman, “as far as comedians go, [Cantor] is the backbone and hit of the show […] He makes his comedy material laughable, and does so especially in the aviator’s test scene.”\(^{61}\) The New York Globe confirmed this view, calling “The Aviator’s Test” a “good, rollicking, belly-shaking slapstick that recalled the palmy days of Weber and Fields,” a quite insightful comment, considering that Joe Weber and Lew Fields were also Jewish comics.\(^{62}\)

According to Cantor’s own narrative, performing in whiteface in “The Aviator’s Test” was not a decision he made based on the material he was presented with, but rather an impulse he felt for fear of losing contact with the audience. He resolved: “old Black-face must die. In a moment of emergency, I had put on this dark mask and it had helped me to success. Now the audience knew only this cork-smeared face, while I stood hidden behind it wondering what would happen if the blacking came off.”\(^{63}\) Of his opening in Atlantic City he remembered: “It was the first time that I felt revealed to the audience and in personal contact with it.”\(^{64}\) While this might have been a convincing justification for Cantor’s early-twentieth-century fans, modern readers can sense the effort that went into romanticizing this memory. In fact, as Cantor’s character evolution in the following edition of the Follies indicates, whiteface was not just an

\(^{62}\) Clipping, New York Globe, n.d., The Ziegfeld Follies of 1918, MCNY.
\(^{63}\) Cantor, My Life, 187.
\(^{64}\) Ibid.
aesthetic requisite to improve his audience interaction, but a necessary device for his original interpretation of Jewish stereotypes to come to the fore.

In their thirteenth edition in 1919, the Ziegfeld Follies reached their peak in elegance, fun-making, and sales. The New York Dramatic Mirror offered a good summary of the show’s highlights:

The shimmy dance has a riotous demonstration. Then there are such rich, as well as amusing scenes as Palm Beach, a circus wherein Miss Miller enters upon a white horse, an auditorium wherein are assembled a minstrel first-part aggregation, and an osteopath’s office with its muscle-slapping practitioners.\(^65\)

Eddie Cantor was the protagonist and co-writer of “At the Osteopath’s” and played Tambo in the “minstrel first-part aggregation” together with Bert Williams as Bones, and George LeMaire as the middle-man.\(^66\) In the former scene, he was free from makeup, while in the latter he played in blackface. With Cantor as the patient-victim and George LeMarie as the bone manipulator, the osteopath scene elaborated on the physical examination part of “The Aviator’s test” from the previous edition. The minstrel revival was a critique of the extravagance in contemporaneous theatre, especially musical revues of the Ziegfeld kind, as opposed to the genuine humor of old-time minstrels. With Bert Williams, “the grand old man of minstrelsy,” returning to the Follies after a gap year in 1918, and blackface straight comic George LeMaire joining in 1919, a tribute to blackface minstrelsy was expected.\(^67\) Predictably, Eddie Cantor played Williams’ sidekick against LeMaire’s middle-man.

\(^65\) Clipping, New York Dramatic Mirror, June 24, 1919. The Ziegfeld Follies of 1919, MCNY.
\(^66\) The Ziegfeld Follies of 1919, program, MCNY.
\(^67\) Cantor called Williams “the grand old man of minstrelsy” in My Life is in Your Hands, 159. George LeMaire, coincidentally, was also the blackface performer who taught Sophie Tucker how to apply her “high yellow” to the best effect. Tucker, Some of These Days, 40.
Cantor playing in both the osteopath and the minstrel scenes might seem to contradict his efforts at discarding the blackface the previous year. In fact, if Cantor, as he himself claimed, had left the blackface behind so not to lose contact with the audience, he should also have rejected the most standard and alienating blackface role of all, that of a minstrel Tambourine. But since negotiations around roles, authorship, and image were the bread and butter of this business, we might hypothesize that Cantor accepted to play in the minstrel revival in exchange for authoring “At the Osteopath’s.” If that were the case, the fact that Cantor never referenced his part as Tambo in any of his autobiographical publications, whereas he often described his experience as “the victim of a bone manipulator” as transformative, could be explained in terms of career priorities: his blackface part might have been only a means to an end, a character that he had to play in order to save himself the opportunity to keep experimenting with performing Jewishness in whiteface. As he later stated in an interview following his Shubert Brothers’ Broadway Brevities production (1920), “I do the same stuff with or without it [blackface], but folks have me pegged as a blackface man and a blackface man I’ve got to be…I don’t myself quite understand why people will laugh more at a joke delivered in blackface than the same [joke] without the burnt cork. But they do.” Cantor performed in whiteface for the entire show, and because of that, received forty letters of people who seemed to think they “hadn’t gotten their money’s worth.” This experience must have established once and for all the significance of blackface for Cantor’s future career: from then on, he kept using it but, as in Ziegfeld’s minstrel show revival, only to “revive” his own signature character for the pleasure of his most nostalgic spectators.

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70 “Cantor Finds Jokes Go Better in Black.”
“At the Osteopath’s” was again the most highly praised scene in the entire Follies. Sime Silverman wrote for Variety: “The one outstanding bit was ‘At the Osteopath’s’ with George LeMaire and Eddie Cantor doing rough low comedy of a kind that could not keep any face straight. Cantor enters feeling ill and LeMaire gives him the osteopath treatment in a travesty way, that, if Cantor can survive that knocks and hot weather while he is being pounded about, will prove that laughing bit of each performance.” As with the 1918 aviator scene, “At the Osteopath’s” combined witty dialogue, physical “rough” comedy, and topical satire. Cantor’s jokes were only superficially “dumb.” “How are your joints?” the doctor asked, and Cantor would immediately think of night clubs, rather than his knees and elbows. To the osteopath’s advice for managing headaches, “when I have a headache I go home, my wife kisses me, and the headache disappears,” Cantor would reply, “what time will your wife be home?” The rollicking slapstick would come in at this point almost as a wrestling match, with Cantor begging the doctor, “Kiss me!” and the doctor tugging his unfortunate patient even more violently. Like Silverman, John Corbin from the New York Times praised the physicality of the sketch, and again equated its humor to Weber and Fields: “Eddie Cantor was uproariously acclaimed by the audience and never failed to delight his admirers. An episode, ‘At the Osteopath’s,’ in which he was the victim of a bone manipulator, has not been equaled in physical humor since the old days at Weber and Fields.”

In terms of topical satire, the scene was a burlesque of osteopathy treatments, which had recently grown in popularity. Osteopathy lacked credibility and was not recognized by the

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71 Sime Silverman, Variety, June 20, 1919.
American Medical Association, in fact, the military refused to commission osteopaths as medical officers during World War I. Due to its dubious legitimacy, the figure of the osteopath was the perfect bouncer for Cantor’s comedy, which kept switching between innocence and street-savviness, cowardice and perspicacity. This ambivalence is what I interpret as Cantor’s revision of a classic stock character from Jewish folk culture, the nebbish. In Leo Rosten’s definition, the nebbish, or “nebekh” in Yiddish is:

an innocuous, ineffectual, weak, helpless hapless unfortunate. A Sad Sack. A ‘loser’ […] a nonentity; ‘a nothing of a person.’ To define the nebekh simply as an unlucky man is to miss the many nuances, from pity to contempt, the word affords. Nebekh is one of the most distinctive Yiddish words; it describes a universal character type. […] A nebekh is more to be pitied than a shlemiel. You feel sorry for a nebek; you can dislike a schlemiel.

While it is impossible to dislike Cantor’s nebekh, it is also hard to pity him or feel any contempt, as Rosten’s definition would demand. Thus Cantor’s revision: his character might be “innocuous, ineffectual, weak,” but he is never sad or a “loser.” He may get a few slaps and tugs, but his witticism always wins in the end. The audience sides with him, his street wisdom is simply irresistible.

In *Buffoon Men*, Scott Balcerzak analyzes Cantor’s “pansy-like negro with spectacles” as the adaptation of the nebbish type to American minstrel-derived performance culture. He argues that the blackface helped Cantor “universalize” the nebbish character and make it more

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appealing to a broader audience. In other words, while hidden under the blackface, Cantor’s nebbish archetype circulated widely in American popular culture and influenced later performers. In fact, Balcerzak resolves, to see the retention of Jewishness in the nebbish type, we must wait to see the resurge of signs of Jewishness from the nebbish characters of later performers such as Groucho Marx and Woody Allen. Balcerzak’s argumentation is compelling when limited to Cantor’s nebekh in blackface. However, when applied to the artist’s whiteface characters, which also presented nebbish features and became increasingly “Jewish” over the next decade, we might debate whether Jewishness, as he claims, only “resurged” in the nebeks of a whole generation later. In “At the Osteopath’s,” Jewishness was still implicit in the ambivalent sexuality of Cantor’s character, who initially fantasizes of taking advantage of the doctor’s wife’s curative kisses and later solicits kisses from the doctor himself. Yet the contiguity in the same production of this scene to others in which Cantor told “Jewish jokes”—his solo comedy number for instance, unequivocally titled “Fresh from the Brox”—certainly predisposed the audience to relate Jewish references from one sketch to the next.

III.

In the summer of 1919, the Actors’ Equity Association (AEA) affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) voted to strike theatres connected to the Producing Managers’ Association (PMA). Eddie Cantor, elected to AEA’s leadership council the previous year, initiated a walk-out of the Ziegfeld Follies. Ziegfeld responded with a series of injunctions and lawsuits, but he could not convince his performers to go back on stage. As the strike

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77 Balcerzak, Buffoon Men, 80–3.
continued, Cantor evoked his modest Lower East Side background to position himself alongside lower-rank theatre workers, despite his high salary and the risk of losing the opportunity to work for PMA producers forever.79 The Shubert Brothers, also of Russian Jewish origins and Ziegfeld’s direct competitors in the revue and musical comedy business, exploited the situation to sign some of the best, now-unemployed comedians and dancers. Cantor was one among the many who had no job prospect other than playing for the Shuberts. Thus, despite their fame of unsophisticated tightwads, Cantor decided to believe in the Shuberts’ promises: nothing less than a musical comedy with Eddie Cantor as its headliner.80

*Make it Snappy*, which instead turned out to be another plotless revue, took more than a year to commission, write, cast, and rehearse. Before Cantor could play in it, he was sent on tour with the *Midnight Rounders*, a revue that until then had not received much acclaim.81 Some adjustments were made to accommodate Cantor’s talents, most notably, two scenes were added, one about a weakling hypochondriac who gets examined for a life insurance policy (this was a riff of “The Aviator’s Test”), and a new prologue titled “Comedian Wanted” in which Cantor self-referentially applied for a job in the *Ziegfeld Follies*.82 Here the “manager” and Cantor negotiated the job thus:

Manager: All right—you’ll do—now there is one condition—there must be no rough stuff.
Cantor: No rough stuff (in amazement) why my comedy is always clean— I’m not one of those guys that have to rip a man’s collar off to get a laugh. (rips manager’s collar open) […]

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80 Cantor, *My Life*, 212.
81 Ibid., 213.
82 *Midnight Rounders*, script, 1922. Shubert Archive, Script Series, Script Box 91.

TAPS workshop
The sketch clearly satirized Ziegfeld’s reputation as “the Great Glorifier” of scantily-dressed chorus girls and Cantor’s own knockabout comedy style. Declaring the absence of “rough stuff” and violence on stage, the Shuberts positioned the production above their competitor’s for its supposed highbrow sophistication. Yet as Cantor’s final line clarifies, their triumph in terms of sales would not derive from any aesthetic choice, but rather, from employing a Jewish comedian to attract the Jewish audience. The joke played on stereotypical images of large Jewish families and strong family ties; thus with some irony and the clearest ethnic statement he had ever made on stage, Cantor started a new phase of his career as the Shuberts’ Jewish headliner.

While the Shuberts were busy putting together Make it Snappy, Cantor took some of the work on himself and, during his return dates with the Midnight Rounders, started trying out new material. He bought a sketch titled “Joe’s Blue Front” from comedy writer Lew Hearn and hired Hearn to play his straight man in it. The scene was about a Jewish tailor, his pushy assistant (played by Cantor), and an older Jewish costumer (Lew Hern). The costumer enters the shop with a very clear idea: “I want a nice suit—college boy’s style—nice suit with belt on the back,” but leaves confused with nothing like he had asked for (fig. 7). 84

Tellingly, in a situation that gave Cantor total control over his own role and image, he chose to deliver his comedy through the most Jewish of sketches, one set at a

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83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.

TAPS workshop
tailor’s shop. Russian Jewish tailors were one of the groups most impacted by May Laws: a series of regulations introduced by tsar Alexander III in 1881 that were explicitly drafted to “protect” Russian peasants from Jewish supposed economic and intellectual control. These laws forbid Jews from living in areas with less than 10,000 inhabitants, forbid Jewish ownership of land, real estate, and manufacturing business, and established a quota for Jews who wished to enter secondary education. Tailors were the artisans most likely to use some kind of machinery in their trade, which caused them to acquire the status of “manufactures.” May Laws allowed Jewish manufacturing only in the Pale Settlement, a 386,000 square miles region including parts of today’s Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and Poland where Jews had been allowed to settle since 1825. But many Jews had moved out of the area during the course of the nineteenth century, which explains why for these families of tailors relocating to America was more promising than relocating to the Pale Settlement. The cost of travel to America was higher, but so was the expected reward, especially considering that it was in the Pale Settlement that between 1881 and the 1910s the deadliest pogroms took place. The expansion of the ready-to-wear industry in the United States coincided with the arrival of great numbers of immigrants. As former slaves and their descendants were caught in an exploitative sharecropping system to produce the cheapest possible cotton in the South,

85 Cantor retained the rights for the sketch and made the tailor’s assistant one of his workhorses, playing it on several occasions including his first television appearance on *The Colgate Comedy Hour* thirty years later. Goldman, *Banjo Eyes*, 266–8.
so newcomers from Europe—oftentimes expert tailors, as was the case of many Jewish immigrants—were enticed into an abusive industrial system in the North.88

The American clothing industry thus developed in centers highly populated by Jews such as New York City and Boston. To make the Jewish reference even more apparent, Cantor and the Shuberts’ marketing team partnered with local clothing stores to develop a clever advertising stunt. When the Midnight Rounders came to town, newspaper advertisements featured the tagline “Eddie Cantor Could Sell ‘Em” and the name of the local clothing store. The ads praised Hearn’s elegant taste in wanting a “belt in the back” (the sketch came to be known by that title) and promised that customers would be satisfied in all their requests. To clarify Cantor’s character’s ethnicity in relation to the clothing business, the ads placed the fictional shop on Baxter Street, a section of Manhattan’s Lower East Side known for its clothing stores owned by Jews.89

Make it Snappy finally tried-out in Chicago in the winter of 1922 and played on Broadway for 96 consecutive performances from April 13 to July 1.90 Cantor’s Jewish identity on and off the stage was well established at this point, in fact, Make it Snappy could very well be the fictional production that Cantor “applied for” at the opening of Midnight Rounders, with his name “in place of the theatre’s name” “to bring in all the Jewish people.” In the prologue, a couple of playgoers talk with the theatre usher:

Mrs. Playgoer: Who is the star?
Usher: Eddie Cantor. I think he’s a blackface comedian.
Mrs. Playgoer: Oh! A darkey—I love those darkey expressions.

89 See, for example, Freeman Church Company, advertisement, Hartford Courant, March 15, 1921; Hickey’s, advertisement, Detroit Free Press, May 3, 1921; Rothschild’s, advertisement, Kansas City Star, November 28, 1921.
90 Fisher, Eddie Cantor, 62.
Mr. Playgoer: Darkey expressions? All the black-faced comedians now use Jewish expressions. I hope to understand enough Hebrew to enjoy myself.91

For the pleasure of audience members like Mrs. Playgoer, Cantor’s inevitable blackface cameo was positioned at the show’s closing, so to allow the time for encores. And much to the relief of audience members like Mr. Playgoer, Cantor’s Jewish references were so direct and clear that no insiders’ knowledge was needed to understand them. Theatre critic Alan Dale insinuated that might have been because the audience was actually all Jewish: “The programme contains no glossary for the edification of the uninitiated, but last night’s audience seemed to include none of those. The gently bubblesome Hebraism that effervesced so persistently was vastly appreciated. No glossary was necessary.”92 Dale’s insiders’ eye might have seen right: he was also a Jew, born Alfred Cohen in Birmingham, England and emigrated to the United States as a young man in 1887. Also, the night he reviewed was the show’s Broadway opening, which would have been attended by wealthy New Yorkers and other big names of show business, in other words, a Jewish majority. Yet this would unlikely be the audience composition for the entire run. As Cantor rightly observed, “through the years there’s been a lot of hop-de-do about the special caliber of a Broadway audience. It’s the bunk. Take a poll of a Broadway audience, you’ll find that two thirds of them are out-of-towners in New York seeing the sights. That’s why it’s no different playing Dubuque or Broadway. Who’s in a Broadway audience? Dubuque!”93

Thanks to a clear and “effervescent” Jewish humor, Make it Snappy was a show “to bring in all the Jewish people” but also the ethnically diverse “out-of-towners in New York.” Cantor’s

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91 Make it Snappy, script, 1922. Shubert Archive, Manuscript Music Collection, Series 330, Box 5.
93 Take My Life, 207.
Jewishness was conveyed through self-deprecating irony and politically inclined comedy, of which the police station and the bootlegging taxicab driver scenes are the greatest examples. In the police station sketch, Cantor impersonated one of his delicate nebbish characters, this time applying for a job as a police officer. Compared to the insurance office sketch in *Midnight Rounders* or the aviator’s test scene in the *Ziegfeld Follies*, here the “background check” dialogue goes beyond simply revealing the applicant’s Jewish identity. Through a succession of widespread Jewish stereotypes, the applicant mocks his own Jewishness and even makes the audience complicit in the satire, if not for a common ethnic background, for a shared theatergoing practice that allows them to recognize Cantor’s self-citations or burlesques of other Broadway shows.

**Captain:** Answer the following questions: name?
**Eddie:** Isadore Carralavotich.

**Captain:** Foolish?
**Eddie:** No, Jewish and Irish, my father…

**Captain:** On what side are you Jewish?
**Eddie:** on the East Side. […]

**Captain:** How old are you?
**Eddie:** Well, when Aunt Sarah first came over… […]

**Captain:** Politics? Are you a Republican or a Democrat?
**Eddie:** (jumping up and pounding table) I believe that the government should control all public institutions—the rich should share with the poor, and only brotherly love…

**Captain:** Sit down. Socialist. Of course, in the police department politics don’t enter but…
**Eddie:** I’ll be a democrat—give me a chance.94

To the Captain’s five simple questions—name, birthplace, family background, age, and politics—Cantor responds with five common Jewish stereotypes: Jews have unpronounceable Russian names; Jews in New York all come from the Lower East Side; Jews rarely marry out of their ethnic group but if they do, it is to marry Irish women; all Jews have an immigration story…

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94 *Make it Snappy*, script, 1922. Shubert Archive.
(and they happily share it, *over and over again*); and all Jews are Socialist (but they can also support whatever party, if that comes with a benefit). The unpronounceable Russian surname ending in “itch” had been the source for Cantor’s first Jewish joke in “Master and Man” (“then there’s eczema—another itch…”) and several others as Cantor’s nebbish characters were “interrogated” by air force generals or insurance inspectors. Similarly, the Lower East Side, immigration story, and politics lines were not only recognizably Jewish, but also recognizable self-citations for the loyal fans who had seen Cantor in other interrogation settings.

Even the controversial intermarriage stereotype—certainly the hardest in the series to challenge—was tamed by the pleasure of citation-recognition, in fact, while Jewish-Irish unions were still a taboo topic in real life, they had become a very popular dramatic theme. For instance, the love story between the son of wealthy Jewish merchants and an Irish Catholic girl provided the subject for Anne Nichols’ *Abie’s Irish Rose*, at the time the longest run—2,327 consecutive performances—in American theatre history. The couple has married in secret, but to soften the blow for his father, Abe introduces Rosie as a Jewish girl. The father of the girl is also tricked into believing that his daughter is soon to marry a Catholic. The initially funny misunderstanding gives way to a dramatic second act, yet all ends happily with the birth of two twins and the families’ reconciliation.95 *Abie’s Irish Rose* opened on May 23, 1922 at the Fulton Theatre on West 46th Street, just four blocks south on Broadway from the Shuberts’ Winter Garden where *Make it Snappy* played simultaneously.96 It is thus possible that after Nichols’ play opened,

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Cantor’s audiences recognized his intermarriage reference also as a burlesque of *Abie’s Irish Rose* playing next-door.

The taxi driver scene similarly builds its humor on a widespread stereotype, that of Jewish “swindlers” who are ever fair only to other Jews. In a reversal of roles from his delicate applicants, the part that Cantor wrote for himself for this segment is of a cunning bootlegging cab driver who fiddles a farmer from out of town. He steals his passenger’s watch and even beats the poor man, demanding payment for the illegal booze that he forces him to buy. A policeman intervenes, but rather than protecting the victim, he arrests the farmer for allegedly scamming the driver. The passenger begs the officer to send a telegram to inform his wife, “Mrs. Cyrus Shapiro.” This shifts the tone immediately: the police officer introduces himself as Morris Cohen, Cantor returns the watch, and the three men bond over their shared Jewish background. By the end, Cantor’s character “redeems” himself from his illegal dealings by fighting against a worse evil: the anti-Semitism of Henry Ford, which circulated nationally on the pages of Ford’s newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*. The scene concludes with the three speaking in Yiddish as they run after a newsboy selling copies of the pernicious publication.

The chase was extremely funny in its rough physicality reminiscent of the osteopath’s scene, which also ended with the doctor running after Cantor. Yet the motive behind this moment of knockabout comedy was intrinsically ideological and its result an explicit political stance. As debates around immigration restriction laws intensified and the “100% American” movement contributed to turn patriotism into nativism, Cantor’s Jewish cabbie takes an active, “running” stance against anti-Semitism. He is not really after the newsboy, of whom only a voice

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97 Cantor retained the rights for this sketch too. With the title “Maxi the Taxi,” it became popular on the *Colgate Comedy Hour* in the 1950s.
98 *Make it Snappy*, script, 1922. Shubert Archive.
can be heard from off stage, but is hunting down a destructive ideal. The political resolution “propelling” Cantor’s run did not go unnoticed. In his review for the *Boston Jewish Advocate*, Max H. Newman used the appropriately corporeal expression “to assail” anti-Semitism to emphasize the link between performance and political activism in Cantor’s work. He wrote: “Cantor is a sincere and earnest Jew and has a way of assailing anti-Semitism in his plays that is more powerful than the written word.”

IV.

The instant Florenz Ziegfeld realized how much the Shuberts were profiting from Cantor’s work, he put aside old resentments and called Cantor back into his ranks. Cantor and Ziegfeld’s collaboration lasted until the producer’s death in 1932: it involved two more editions of the *Follies* (1923 and 1927) and two musical comedies turned Hollywood blockbusters, *Kid Boots* in 1924 and *Whoopee* in 1928. In the space of five years, Cantor’s characters multiplied exponentially. In the *Follies of 1927*, he starred in seven scenes: he was an uncommonly minute transatlantic pilot, his signature blackface intellectual, the victim of a femme fatale, a pushy assistant at a dog shop, New York City’s mayor James John Walker, and the lover in two metatheatrical sketches, “A Ballet Master Idea of the Spoken Drama” on the craze for scantily-dressed chorus girls, and “The Star’s Double,” a scene that imagined what would happen if the Hollywood practice of employing doubles were to be used in theatre. Here, Cantor’s role as the “double” of a lover is surprised by the husband and has the take on the consequences. It was a *tour de force* for Cantor. Libbey for *Variety* wrote: “Ziegfeld has most of his eggs in one basket

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this time in the matter of Eddie Cantor, both as a name and as a comedian, carrying the show on his back.”\textsuperscript{101} In J. Brooks Atkinson’s summary for \textit{The New York Times},

Mr. Cantor pops around brightly all evening, in one or two wooden numbers, but mostly in skits designed for his eccentric, animated comedy. To see him in blackface again clapping his white hands and strutting breathlessly across the stage, or to see him in his racial vein of selling maladroit dogs to amused costumers, cracking his straw hat in sheer vexation at an unwilling purchaser, is to see the Eddie Cantor who is justly famous. These are perhaps his best numbers. And as our “Jimmy” on the City Hall steps, blandly welcoming Channel swimmer, aviators and Queens in the same grave words, and distributing keys to ‘this great big city’ of ‘six and a half million people’ of which he is the ‘chief magistrate’—this, too, is a capital sketch. For Mr. Cantor is something of a mimic as well as buffoon.\textsuperscript{102}

The “skits designed for [Cantor’s] eccentric, animated comedy” were based on some of his Shuberts’ hits: the pilot test scene in “The Transatlantic Flight” and the tailor shop scene, here set in a dog shop.\textsuperscript{103} In interpreting the latter, Atkinson noticed Cantor’s “racial vein:” this was a direct reference to the explicit Jewishness of the preceding tailor shop scene; in fact, although no ethnic allusions were made in the dog shop, the scene’s genealogy was easy enough to reconstruct for a theatre critic of Atkinson’s experience. Finally, in his imitation of mayor Walker, Cantor was worth the title of “mimic.” In Atkinson’s appraisal, it was easy for a comedian to be a “buffoon,” but being a good mimic involved a whole different set of skills. Cantor reminisced: “Before the show opened, Jimmy [Mayor Walker] took me to his tailor, a little fellow on Fifth Avenue, who made me a morning suit exactly like Jimmy’s. […] So in Jimmy’s clothes, I burlesqued Jimmy.”\textsuperscript{104} As this recollection suggests, the suit helped Cantor

\textsuperscript{101} Libbey, “Review,” \textit{Variety}, August 10, 1927.
\textsuperscript{103} The same concept was also used in \textit{Kid Boots}. In one scene, a golf club member wants to buy a blue sweater from the pro shop. After making the man’s head spin, Cantor as Boots, the golf club caddie, persuades him to buy a red cap instead.
\textsuperscript{104} Typescript draft of autobiography, 6. Eddie Cantor Papers, box 33, UCLA.
dress the part, but it was his experience as racial impersonator that taught him to be “a mimic as well as buffoon.”

In *Whoopee*, Cantor took his exploration of mimicry and racial hybridity to the dramaturgical level. The show’s life began as a short story by E. J. Rath called *The Wreck*. Owen Davis dramatized it in 1923 and, with the more descriptive title of *The Nervous Wreck*, the play run on Broadway until the end of spring 1924. In 1928, William Anthony McGuire rewrote the play into a musical comedy for Cantor. The show opened at the New Amsterdam Theatre on December 4, 1928 and played for 379 performances. Disregarding the two preceding texts, McGuire reframed the story around Cantor’s racial disguises. Even the central character of Wanenis, a Native American young man who is in love with a white girl, was created to provide the excuse for a character in redface for Cantor.\(^{105}\)

Cantor is Henry Williams, a hypochondriac who goes to spend some restful time at a Californian ranch. His vacation is soon interrupted when he becomes accidentally involved in the romance between Sally and Wanenis. From Cantor’s typical nebbish weakling, Henry develops into the hero of the play. He helps Sally escape from her promised husband, Sheriff Bob Wells, and manages to save their skin multiple times thanks to some brilliant ploys.\(^{106}\) His tricks involve a series of racial disguises, thus racial impersonation is here “for survival” in the literal sense. As Rowland Field recapped for the *Brooklyn Times*,

The various episodes show him in many guises. In turn he is an amateur hold-up man, a white-coated ranch cook, a synthetic Indian chief and, in a flaming red suit for a few moments in blackface, singing his characteristic songs. He flits through the action in many disguises that are necessary in order to save himself from an


angry sheriff and others with harmful intent. It is the best comedy role that Eddie Cantor has ever had, and he again proves himself to be a prince of funmakers.\textsuperscript{107}

Cantor had his unavoidable blackface segment built in the plot. A thin premise set the scene: to hide from the sheriff, Henry dresses up as a cook and eventually hides inside a gas stove oven. When Bob turns on the stove, Henry pops out covered in soot. Cantor interpolated popular songs and jokes into this segment throughout the run. When Sheriff Bob recognizes Henry, he tries to wipe off the soot: in the film adaptation, he rubs Cantor’s forehead and cheeks, leaving behind what look like Orthodox Jewish earlocks and a beard.\textsuperscript{108}

After many twists and turns, Henry and Sally arrive at Wanenis’ reservation. Disguised as a “synthetic Indian chief” at a trading post, Henry barter s with Underwood, a rich landowner (fig. 8). As they haggle, Cantor’s stereotypical “stage Indian” character morphs into a Jewish one. The scene turns into another revival of the tailor shop sketch. Henry is even made Chief of the tribe, but rather than taking on a Native name, he wants to be called “Big Chief Izzy Horowitz” (fig. 9). An unexpected revelation brings the play to its close. Chief Black Eagle informs Henry and Sally that Wanenis has no Native American blood but was only raised by natives. This would clear the way for Sally to marry Wanenis, yet the other cowboys are not ready to accept Wanenis as a white man and their equal. In the play’s final scene, Henry talks to the ranch residents against racial prejudice. No racial costume is needed to win here, only the courage to speak up. Considering that to deliver this message is a nervous hypochondriac, Henry’s words resonate even louder: “What’s so terrible about being a little bit Indian? Look at Senator Curtis, our newly elected vice-president. He’s part Indian. And what is wrong with my

\textsuperscript{107} Rowland Field, “Whoopee.” \textit{Brooklyn Times}, December 5, 1928.
friend Will Rogers, you got to love him. And who in the world is not to walk up to Jack Dempsey and say ‘to Hell with the Indians?’”

In these unconventional blackface and redface characters, Henry never stops being the cunning, recognizably Jewish, hero of the play. In fact, as Michael Rogin argued, Cantor’s red and blackface do not disguise, but rather call attention to the Americanizing Jew underneath the costume: while “race is the assimilating vehicle for ethnic disappearance in other movies, in this one it supports Americanizing ethnic self-assertion.” Here Rogin implicitly sets Whoopee against Al Jolson’s contemporaneous The Jazz Singer, in which the title character’s blackface is meant to hide his Jewish identity. Conversely, Cantor’s racial disguises not only emphasize his Jewishness, but clearly represent transformism as intrinsically Jewish. Cantor’s racial disguises can thus be interpreted as triumphing over what Jewish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has dubbed “proteophobia,” or the fear of racial ambiguity. In Bauman’s words, Jews became visible in the modern world as

ambivalence incarnate…In the mobile world, the Jews were the most mobile of all; in the world of boundary-breaking, they broke the most boundaries; in the world of melting solids, they made everything, including themselves, into a formless plasma in which any form could be born only to dissolve again…They embodied incongruence, artificiality, sham and the frailty of the social order and the most earnestly drawn boundaries.

As a “formless plasma” in the world of melting pots, Jews subverted “the cognitive categories by which the world is organized” and confused the established social order with their “artificiality” and “sham.” Nativist political writer André Siegfried mobilized the idea of an “inner-outer

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109 McGuire, Whoopee, script, NYPL.
112 Ibid.
split” to explain Jews’ “insidiously protean” nature: being able to separate their outer white appearance from their Jewish inner beliefs and allegiances made Jews successful in both passing (often even marrying outside their ethnicity) and preserving their culture of origin.\(^{113}\) Consequently, as the stereotype goes, Jews are “naturally skilled” at masking their internal racial otherness with external mimicry.\(^{114}\)

When asked to provide her opinion on the alleged Jewish propensity for mimicry, Jewish comic and *Ziegfeld Follies* veteran Fanny Brice confirmed the phenomenon as self-evident:

> I believe it’s because I’m Jewish that I have been a steady climber on the stage [...] the versatility with which I have been credited, is peculiar to Jews. There is no need of my giving historical justification for my statement, as scholars have long determined that a variety of experiences, and a constantly changing environment have produced an adaptability in the Jew, rarely possessed by other people.\(^{115}\)

In recent years, Andrea Most has historicized this idea of “peculiar versatility” from a Jewish standpoint. Siegfried’s split between the inner and the outer Jew is for Most comparable to W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of African American double consciousness, or the awareness of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of the white majority. But while Du Bois emphasized how double consciousness cripples the internal development of African Americans, Most focuses on the Jewish sense of control over their modes of behavior. Being able to switch modes deliberately and elegantly from “Jewish” to “non-visorly Jewish” improved adaptability to the American metropolis, where, according to Most, distinguishing between reality and scam was a


\(^{114}\) We can see this concept pushed to its extremes in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*, where being an actor is equated to being Jewish due to Jews’ “known” adaptability and performativity.

\(^{115}\) Fanny Brice, “As I See Myself and Others,” *Jewish Tribune*, June 12, 1925.
matter of survival. Once adaptability skills were fully developed, transitioning to conscious performativity especially in non-Jewish spaces became natural. According to Fanny Brice, performativity in the everyday could even turn into explicit theatricality for the artistically inclined. In this context, the nativist theory of the Jew as “insidious protean” paradoxically acquires a positive value to validate Jewish theatrical aptitudes.

What Fanny Brice dubbed Jews’ “peculiar versatility” is the supporting element carrying Whoopee’s plot forward. In fact, beyond its obvious comic effect, Cantor’s versatility as a quick-change artist saves the heroes from their misadventures and even defeats the white male antagonist by taking his future bride away from him. In other words, Jewish peculiar versatility becomes the plot’s substitute for self-invention, initiative, and courage. In J. Brooks Atkinson’s assessment, this feature contributed to raise Cantor’s comedy above Al Jolson’s: “Mr. Cantor has never been so enjoyable a comedian. From the blackface singer of mammy songs, with a strong dash of Al Jolson in his style and an embarrassing devotion to soiled jesting, he has developed in Whoopee into a versatile and completely entertaining comic.” Again, Atkinson’s word choice is noteworthy: from market-driven, peculiarly Jewish novelties, Cantor’s racial impersonations have developed into “versatile” comedy. Versatility is here synonym with self-confidence in the way it replaces Cantor’s “embarrassing devotion to soiled jesting” (fig. 10). In his many hybrid guises, Cantor is proudly Jewish but also a “completely entertaining comic,” for the pleasure of both his Jewish fans and the expansive Broadway/Hollywood publics.


TAPS workshop
V.

*Whoopee* played until the day both Cantor and Ziegfeld had to retire temporarily from show business. The 1929 Wall Street crash critically affected both men’s finances and morale to the point that neither knew whether they would ever go back to the theatre.\(^{118}\) In these dark times, Cantor became increasingly more vocal in his commitment for the equality cause. In a draft of his autobiographical writings he reasoned: “There are those who feel that an actor has no right to speak his piece politically! I can’t see it. We’re citizens, aren’t we?”\(^{119}\) Cantor owned his “citizenship right” to speak his mind publicly against all forms of racism. He did not do it *despite* being an actor, but *because* of it. He was aware of the mediatic reach of his public persona and was able to exploit his position to help in the best way he could, by turning speeches like the one Henry Williams delivered at the closing of *Whoopee* into broad mediatic phenomena.

Cantor spoke against racial prejudice on a variety of occasions. In particular, he devoted an entire chapter of *The Way I See It* to the issue of immigration restriction and racism in America. To explain diversity and unity—the accepted idea of the American “melting pot”—he used two powerful analogies, America as a “blood transfusion” and as variety theatre. “Have you ever had a blood transfusion? Felt strength flow in with every precious drop? If so, you’ll understand. Each immigrant is fresh blood for America.”\(^{120}\) The melting pot has only one purpose, “to dissolve all differences […] that’s not America.”\(^{121}\) On the other hand, every drop in a blood transfusion is essential to the recovery of the patient. Cantor’s bloodstream metaphor stands in opposition to the bloodlines rhetoric of contemporaneous racial theory: different

\(^{118}\) Cantor, *Take My Life*, 136–8.

\(^{119}\) Typescript draft of autobiography, 15. Eddie Cantor Papers, box 33, UCLA.

\(^{120}\) Cantor, *The Way I See It*, 64.

\(^{121}\) Ibid.
bloodstreams constitute the strength of America, while bloodlines only separate and fuel hatred. Cantor was a few decades ahead of his time with this thought, which we can now read in light of Werner Sollors’ distinction between American citizenship by “consent” or “descent.” Two different form of nationalism, the former liberal, based on free choice and where politics come first, and the latter primordial, based on bloodlines and where family ties take precedence over political affiliation. According to Sollor’s historical argument, what in America was originally going to be citizenship only by consent, became tainted by racism and turned into the privilege of citizenship by descent. Cantor continued: “I’d rather think of us in terms of theatre […] where any act is welcome if it helps the show in toto. Where merit gets you billing—not bloodlines. Where variety is recognized—not as the spice of life, but life itself.” Here, theatre provides a positive example to model: inclusion is not based on identity or provenance, but contributions to the success of the “show in toto,” while diversity is not just the spice of life”—“novelty” in vaudeville jargon—but the way things are and for which they should be valued.

Eddie Cantor reached the position and confidence to be able to voice these opinions in segregated early-twentieth-century America. From a poor Lower East Side orphan, he became one of the most popular American entertainers: the multiethnic streets of lower Manhattan and the integrated world of popular theatre were his school, in fact, his racially hybrid characters were both street-savvy and brazenly theatrical. These characters mocked those who suffered from “proteophobia” by insinuating Jewishness in a variety of other races and ethnicities. With “peculiar versatility,” Eddie Cantor broke aesthetic and social boundaries by shaping his Jewish “formless plasma” into modern American heroes.

122 Werner Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987)
Figures:

Fig. 1: Young Eddie Cantor (sitting, bottom right) at Surprise Lake Camp. Photographer/date unknown. Eddie Cantor Papers (Collection 861). Box 47. UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

Fig. 3: Eddie Cantor (background, standing) as the blackface butler in *Kid Kabaret*. Photographer/date unknown. Eddie Cantor Papers (Collection 861). Box 47. UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

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Fig. 4: Promotional photograph for 20th Century Fox of Eddie Cantor in blackface. Photographer illegible, date unknown. On the back, a typed note reads: “By 1916, Eddie Cantor was among the top notchers in vaudeville, but outside of the show world, his name was virtually unknown. Canary Cottage settled that matter. Cast for his first role in a legitimate musical comedy, after Earl Carroll had seen his vaudeville act, Cantor scored sensational, and an offer came from Florenz Ziegfeld to appear in Midnight Frolic, the first of many Ziegfeld shows in which the comedian was to appear.” This caption must have accompanied the photograph in one of Cantor’s published autobiographies. The vaudeville act Earl Carroll saw before signing Cantor for Canary Cottage must have been “Master and Man.” Eddie Cantor Papers (Collection 861). Box 47. UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.
Fig. 5: Promotional photograph of Eddie Cantor in his “feminine” blackface character. Apeda Studio, undated. He is wearing a polka-dot foulard tied with a bow around his neck and a tight-fitting suit with pants so short they show white striped socks. The shot might be capturing what the anonymous reporter for Indianapolis News described as Cantor’s “slap-me-on-the-wrist imitation.” Eddie Cantor Papers (Collection 861). Box 47. UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

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Fig. 6: Eddie Cantor and Bert Williams. Photographer/date unknown. This is the only photograph in Cantor’s personal collection that captures him so intimately hugging a colleague. Eddie Cantor Papers (Collection 861). Box 47. UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.
Fig. 7: Stage photograph of Eddie Cantor as the tailor’s assistant (left) with Lou Hern and Joe Opp. Tailor’s shop scene, *Midnight Rounders*, 1920-21. Reproduced in *My Life is in Your Hands*, New York, N.Y.: Blue Ribbon Books, 1932.
Fig. 8: Promotional photograph of Eddie Cantor as “Big Chief Izzy Horowitz” in front of a cigar shop. Eddie Cantor Papers (Collection 861). Box 47. UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

Fig. 9: Eddie Cantor in Whoopee’s bartering scene. Clipping in scrapbook, Chamberlain and Lyman Brown Papers, *T-Mss 1961-002, box 181 folder 8, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
Fig. 10: Cartoon of Eddie Cantor’s redface character “killing” his signature blackface character. The caption reads: “The shadow is, symbolically speaking, the shadow of his former self, for in this show he wears but for a brief time his old familiar blackface makeup.” With a menacing “Indian Cantor” raising a machete against old blackface Cantor, the anonymous cartoonist captured an idea akin to what Atkinson described as Cantor’s evolution from “embarrassing devotion to soiled jesting” to versatile comedy. “Two Triple A’a,” The Theatre, January 19, 1919. Clipping in Clipping in scrapbook, Chamberlain and Lyman Brown Papers, *T-Mss 1961-002, box 181 folder 8, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.