3 Disparaging the "Other"

Any discussion of the depictions of people of color in hegemonic American culture must include the concept of stereotyping. The *American Heritage Dictionary* has defined stereotyping as "a conventional, formulaic, and oversimplified conception, opinion, or image." In the broadest sense, stereotyping has been employed as a literary and dramatic device from the earliest beginnings of those art forms. It is a means of quickly bringing to the audience's collective consciousness a character's anticipated value system and/or behavioral expectations. Audience members are then able to assess the character against their own value systems and categorize the character as, for example, "the villain" or "the heroine." Stereotypes, therefore, are shortcuts to character development and form a basis for entertainment and literary fare.

Stereotyping can be a useful device when used without prejudice. A simplistic example would find a White villain brought to justice by a White hero in an entirely White social environment. The message transmitted to the audience would be that good overcomes evil. However, negative stereotyping of non-White cultural groups in a White-dominated environment transmits a far different message when done historically and persistently with prejudice.

Because the concept of prejudice is central to our discussion, let's use the term as James M. Jones has defined it in his book *Prejudice and Racism.* Prejudice, he wrote, "is a negative attitude toward a person or group based upon a social comparison process in which the individual's own group is taken as the positive point of reference."[1] In that context our example would transmit the notion not only that good (the dominant cultural group) overcomes evil (the socially subjected culture) but that the latter *is* evil. Thus, while stereotyping *per se* may have merits in popular literature and the arts, when combined with prejudice it poses a devastating obstacle to human development and understanding in a multicultural society.

Before examining racial portrayals in American mass entertainment, we will look at the social historic context and attitudes in which certain stereotypes were cultivated. This will provide insight into whether the stereotypes

were prejudiced and the degree to which social historic factors have been influential in their development and use. We shall consider the social historic experiences of several racial and cultural groups with hegemonic Whites in the United States to illustrate the causal relationship between those experiences and their marginalization in communication media.

Native Americans as Barriers to "Civilization"

Native Americans (colloquially known as "Indians") were the first peoples of a different ethnicity to confront European settlers on the American continent. Anglo European settlers were at once faced with a dilemma of how to coexist with people they saw as primitive but who also had some qualities they admired. Writings of early settlers referred to what they considered to be the natives' primitive innocence, their willingness to share food and other essentials of life in a communal environment, and their dark, handsome physical appearance. To the White settlers these attributes were "noble." At the same time the settlers also observed the natives' proclivity for nudity, open sexual relationships, and incidents of cannibalism. These traits were considered "savage." Thus emerged in colonial era literature the concept of the "noble savage."

Harvard professor Frederick Jackson Turner popularized his "Frontier Thesis" that included the notion that Native American Indians were merely obstacles that tested the mettle of White settlers during westward expansion and fulfillment of "Manifest Destiny."

Source: Used by permission, Utah State Historical Society, all rights reserved.

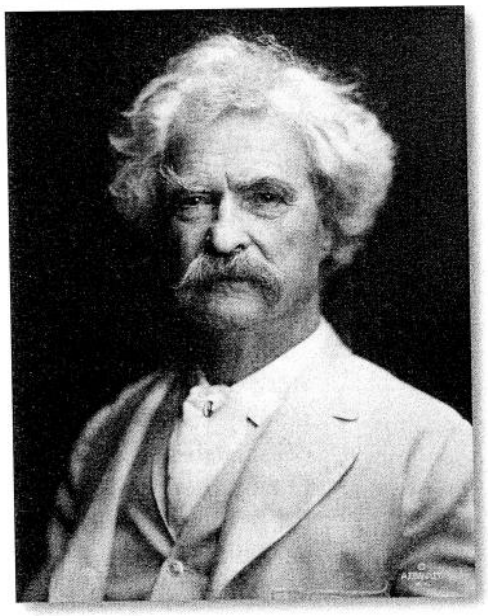
Initially the English colonists decided to convert the natives to Christianity in an attempt to assimilate them while the process of creating a European-style society was under way. Religious conversion was eventually seen, however, as an impossibility, and the colonists rationalized that the natives had to be removed as a barrier to the "civilization" of the continent.

By the mid-1800s the policies for dealing with the "Indian problem" had found their justification in popular literature, which helped to establish the myth of the monolithic "Indian" without regard for the distinctions of more than 2,000 different cultures, languages, and value systems that the concept represented. The literary stereotype was part of the Western frontier writing formula developed after the Civil War. Writers of this genre included Francis Bret Harte and Mark Twain. Readers of this fare were

already conditioned to see the natives portrayed in a manner that justified their elimination as a barrier to Western expansion. Twain, Harte, and others wrote of the picturesque scenery and romantic lifestyles of the frontier in contrast with the "savages" who occupied the land. In *Roughing It* Twain described the Gosiute Indians as "scrawny creatures," "treacherous-looking," and "prideless beggars." It remained only for dime novel author Edward S. Ellis to write during the 1880s and 1890s of Native American Indians as merely a prelude to a more enlightened White civilization.

Stories of actual and exaggerated atrocities by Indians upon White settlers, who pushed ever westward into the frontier, firmly established a hatred against them that clearly made them an enemy both in warfare and of the progress of civilization. Literature during the Indian wars is rife with tales of natives burning, looting, raping, and scalping the pioneers who were fulfilling the fervor of "Manifest Destiny." It was against this backdrop that Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis," presented in 1893, argued that American (White) character had been molded by the experience of the Western frontier. Turner's ideas were accepted to the extent that they pervaded history textbooks into the middle of the 20th century. Elimination or subjugation of Native Americans was seen as merely an evolutionary step in the development of industrial America.

Legendary American novelist Mark Twain was among writers who created literary stereotypes that denigrated Native American Indians and other cultural minority groups.



Source: A.F. Bradley, New York, 1907.

Justifying African Enslavement

In 1619, a year before the arrival of the *Mayflower* on the shores of the American continent, 20 Africans were brought to Jamestown aboard a Dutch pirate ship. The ship's captain offered to exchange his human cargo for a supply of foodstuffs. The young Black men and women with Spanish names such as Isabella and Pedro were probably originally headed for the West Indies on a Spanish vessel before being intercepted by the Dutch ship.[2] The 20 Africans became the genesis of a Black population that was to have a major impact on the development of the future United States.

Although the facts of slavery in America and its legacy of human indignity have been well chronicled, the roots of its underlying psychosis have been less explored in popular literature. The general notion regarding the treatment of Blacks and their African ancestors has tended to focus on slavery as a phenomenon of Southern White culture based upon geographic and economic factors. What is often overlooked is that slavery was a part of the Northern experience in America from colonial times. It is clear that racism against darker-skinned people was a factor in English Calvinist and Puritan religious ideology even before those influences were brought to the New World. This affected colonial-era attitudes toward Black people in two ways. First was the Anglo Saxon belief that the color white represented things that were pure, clean, good, and reflective of the spiritual light. The color black, on the other hand, represented impurity, filth, evil, and spiritual darkness. Both concepts persist to this day. Second, the Puritan concept of predestination relied upon observation to distinguish the "elect" from the "damned." Those who seemed relatively prosperous and self-sufficient were deemed superior to those who were enslaved. Against this religiously seated and strongly held attitude the posture of the English colonists toward Blacks in the New World is predictable even among inhabitants of the Northern seaboard. In fact, the trading of slaves was the predominant commodity on New York's Wall Street into the 1700s partly because Puritan law was ambiguous on the subject. One such law enacted in 1641 is revealing:

> There shall never be any bond-slavery, villenage or captivitie amongst us; unlesse it be lawfully captives taken in just warrs, and such strangers as willingly sell themselves, or are sold to us: and such shall have the libertyes and Christian usages which the law of God established in Israel concerning such persons doth morally require, provided this exempts none from servitude who shall be judged thereto by Authoritie.[3]

Whites in New England were first to establish what later would be called "Jim Crow" laws in the South as a means of codifying their prejudices against Blacks although slavery never became a widespread practice there for economic reasons. In the South the mythology of the "happy slave," who was content to serve his or her master as the ultimate fulfillment of life, grew as a justification for the exploitation of Blacks. Much of the post–Civil War literature paints a negative image of Black people designed to reinforce institutional and social racism. Many of the accusations against Black integrity that emerged during Reconstruction are now too familiar: laziness, slow wit, loose standards of morality, fondness for alcoholic beverages, and so on. Lynching and other acts of violence against Blacks and those sympathetic to them are ample evidence of the attitudes held by White Americans toward them at the dawning of the 20th century.

Fighting Mexicans for "Independence"

There was little mention of colonial Mexico in North American literature until the 19th century. Spain ruled Mexico for 300 years (1521–1821) before Mexico won its war for independence. In 1803, however, the Louisiana Purchase removed the vast buffer of territory between the United States and Mexico. The expansionist movement by U.S. settlers into the West and Southwest not only precipitated conflict with Native Americans, as discussed previously, but also led to war with Mexico in 1846.

Central to the development of relations between Mexico and the United States was the Santa Fe Trail, which was legally opened as a commercial trade route in 1821. The trail ran from Independence, Missouri, to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and became the focal point of friction between White settlers and Mexicans. When some inhabitants of the newly formed Republic of Mexico became disenchanted with their new government, Anglo American settlers were there in significant numbers to spur the movement for independence by the mid-1830s. In fact, there is much to suggest that American literature of the period was primarily designed to stir up local sentiment for overthrow of the Mexican government in Texas and New Mexico. Thus, Whites engaged in hostilities against Mexicans with Mexican allies during the war for Texas independence. At the same time popular literature portrayed in vivid terms the perception of a "cruel" massacre by General Antonio López de Santa Anna of the "gallant" defenders of the Alamo in 1836, who included folk heroes David Crockett and James Bowie. Americans were generally persuaded to visualize the Mexican as an inhuman enemy a decade before war with Mexico was officially declared.

Cruelty was not the only negative trait ascribed to Mexicans. Cecil Robinson, in his 1977 book *Mexico and the Hispanic Southwest in American Literature,* chronicled the origins of several stereotypes, which began to appear in Anglo writings before and during the U.S.-Mexican War.[4] During that war American naval Lieutenant H. A. Wise wrote that Mexicans were "beyond comparison the laziest and most ignorant set of vagabonds the world produces."[5] George Wilkins Kendall penned: "Give them but tortillas, frijoles, and chile colorado to supply their animal wants for the day, and seven-tenths of the Mexicans are satisfied; and so they will continue to be until the race becomes extinct or amalgamated with Anglo-Saxon stock."[6]

When Mexicans were not being portrayed in Anglo American literature as lazy and indolent, they were assailed for uncleanliness. Texas romance writer Jeremiah Clemens gave his version of the origin of the term *greaser* and why he felt it was appropriate: "The people look greasy, their clothes are greasy, their dogs are greasy—everywhere grease and filth hold divided dominion, and the singular appropriateness of the name bestowed by the western settlers, soon caused it to be universally adopted by the American army."[7] In the 1834 short story "The Inroad of the Nabajo" by Albert Pike, the women of Santa Fe are described as "scudding hither and thither, with

their black hair flying, and their naked feet shaming the ground by their superior filth."[8] It should be noted, however, that several American writers found Mexican women quite charming and wrote at length about their feminine virtues that contrasted sharply with puritanical customs of American women of the era in dress and social demeanor.

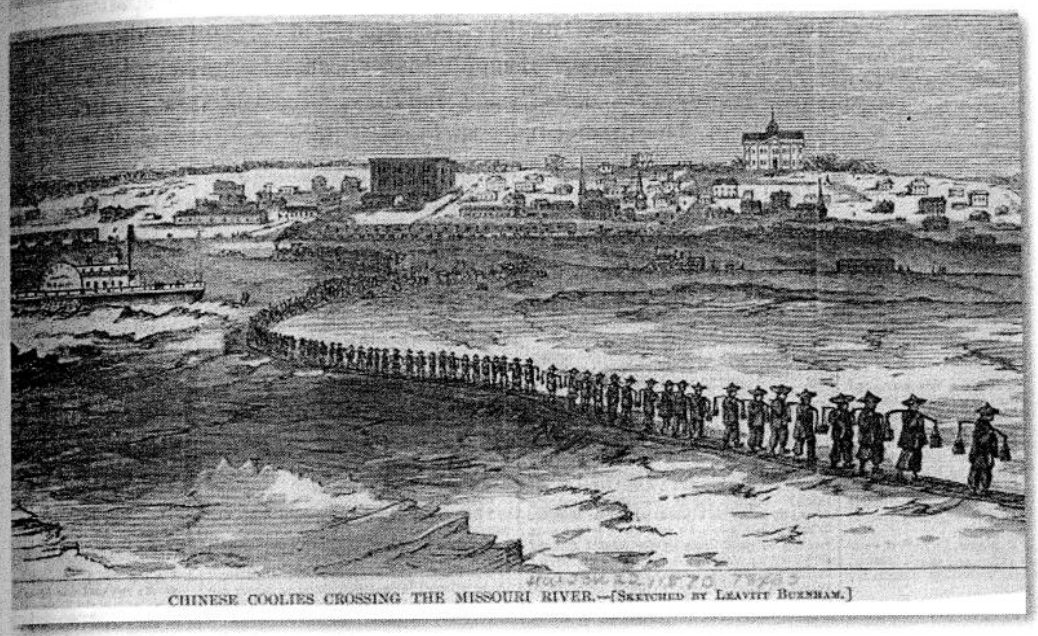
A major factor in the attitude of Whites toward Mexico and its people was the negativism toward Mexican ethnicity. Most of the population was either full-blooded native (Indian) or mestizo (mixture of Spanish ancestry and Indian). Anglo American writers routinely referred with disdain to Mexicans as "these mixed races." But it was the sizeable body of popular literature that grew out of the lore of the Santa Fe Trail that set the tone for American imagery of Mexicans and the Southwest. Works such as *The Time of the Gringo* by Elliott Arnold, *Anthony Adverse* by Hervy Allen, and *Adventures in the Santa Fe Trade* by James Josiah Webb established the basic stereotypes by 1900.

Importing "Peril" From Asia

The Asian experience in America has a short history prior to 1900 because Chinese immigration didn't begin until the California gold rush in 1848. Japanese people didn't begin to arrive formally until after 1855 when the Japanese government passed laws enabling its citizens to emigrate. We are concerned in this discussion with the Chinese and Japanese because other Asian and Pacific island peoples were less a social factor in the United States before 1900 and because American attitudes toward the two groups were similar enough as to be virtually indistinguishable. In fact, many Americans never bothered to take note of any differences between Chinese and Japanese people and later came to prejudiciously lump them together as simply the "Yellow Peril."

Since the overwhelming majority of Asian immigration was to California and other states on the West Coast, their social history in America during the 19th century is focused there. By 1870 there were more than 60,000 Chinese in California who had settled into farming, mining, factory work, and domestic labor after railroad jobs became scarce. Whites, who had come west to seek quick wealth in the gold rush, came to resent the Chinese because they had jobs while many Whites were unemployed. Denis Kearney, leader of the California Workingmen's Party, orchestrated an anti-Chinese movement with the backing of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Kearney ended every speech with the slogan "The Chinese Must Go." Kearney and his followers stirred a sentiment of prejudice against Chinese workers who were highly visible because of their adherence to traditional customs of dress, pigtail hairstyle, and communal living. Suddenly after 20 years of serving as a welcome source of cheap labor and having enjoyed a reputation for industry, honesty, thrift, and peaceful disposition the Chinese were the object of scorn. Whites now saw them as debased, clannish, and

Chinese laborers called "coolies" were brought to the United States during the California gold rush era to work farms, build railroads, and perform domestic tasks. Soon, however, they were denigrated as the "Yellow Peril" in American newspapers.



Source: Leavitt Burnham, *Harper's Weekly*, 1870.

deceitful. In the 1870s a series of racially motivated incidents of violence occurred in several western towns resulting in the deaths of numerous Chinese inhabitants.

Finally, in 1882 the first Chinese exclusion law was passed, and in 1887 only 10 Chinese people immigrated to the United States. Ironically, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 made possible the increase in Japanese immigration. The decline in Chinese immigrant labor proved the fact of White racism because those jobs went unfilled and a serious farm labor shortage developed in California and other western states. Soon there was a demand for Japanese immigrants who had proven farming skills and were willing to work for low wages. Between 1899 and 1904 nearly 60,000 Japanese came to America to meet the labor demand that had previously been met by Chinese workers.

History repeated itself when, between 1901 and 1906, the corrupt administration of San Francisco Mayor Eugene Schmitz and his political boss Abraham Ruef used the Japanese as scapegoats when public attention was turned on their own dubious activities. Schmitz's regime was backed by organized labor, which claimed the Japanese worked for lower wages and were driving Whites out of the job market. At the same time, Japan was quickly defeating the Russians in the Russo-Japanese War (1904) and

going on to eventually seize Korea. Japan's military successes created apprehension in America that Asians were a threat to Western civilization.

Once again it was the *San Francisco Chronicle* that crusaded in front-page articles against immigration, this time with the Japanese as objects. The *Chronicle* urged and supported a citywide boycott of Japanese merchants in San Francisco. The paper charged the immigrants with maintaining loyalty to the Emperor of Japan. Mass meetings were held denouncing Japanese immigrants, and acts of assault and other violence soon followed against them. The official reaction to what became known as the Yellow Peril was a series of laws restricting Japanese immigrant rights in America. This culminated with passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 banning entry to the United States for all aliens not eligible for citizenship although the legislation was clearly targeted at the Japanese.

During the height of Yellow Peril hysteria Chinese and Japanese persons were viewed as devious and vicious. Popular literature warned of the dangers of intermarriage with Asians and charged openly that Asian men purposefully sought White women. These attitudes also found their way into entertainment media, as we shall see.

Asians from India did not officially arrive as U.S. immigrants in significant numbers until 1946 with passage of the Luce-Celler Act. However, as early as the turn of the 20th century, about 2,000 Sikhs (members of a religious group from the Punjab region of India) had settled in the western United States where they worked as farmers, day laborers, and merchants. Accordingly, they have a media image history in the United States that dates from virtually the beginning of the motion picture industry.

The Middle Eastern Presence in America

The history of Middle Eastern peoples in the United States dates back to the turn of the 20th century. New York's Ellis Island was then a major point of entry into the United States for immigrants who were mostly from Europe. But a significant number of Christian Arab immigrants from the Middle East also came to America to escape religious discrimination they experienced under rule of the Ottoman Empire. The new arrivals came mostly from the greater Syrian region of the empire that encompassed what is now modern Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the Israeli-occupied West Bank. The Ellis Island Immigration Museum has archived photographs of the newly arrived immigrants wearing turbans and burnooses.

The first wave of immigration from the Middle East ended in 1924 with passage of the National Origins Act, legislation that severely restricted non-European immigration to the United States. By the time

the National Origins Act was terminated in 1965, Middle Easterners had long since taken their place among other cultural minority groups as fodder for stereotypical representations in the U.S. media. Much as was the case with people of African descent, the Anglo European notion of Arab people was cultivated long before White settlers came to America. History reveals that in the 18th and 19th centuries European writers and artisans categorized people of the Middle East through colonization of their lands and presented an image of a culture rife with bearded thieves, corrupt leaders, and practitioners of a heathen religion.

In modern times, many thousands of Middle Easterners have come to America and contributed to society as professionals in the fields of medicine, science, and academia as well as semiskilled workers, retail clerks, and small business owners. But their media stereotypes have ranged from villainous sheiks, to violent thieves, to exotic "belly dancers," to wealthy scions of the desert, and, worse, to purveyors of sinister acts of terrorism. Much of the earlier media content concerning Middle Easterners centered on stereotypical portrayals of them within their own nations and created an image of inferior but exotic cultures. But the 21st-century versions have generally shifted into more brutal and sinister characterizations.

An American media staple among ethnic stereotypes is the Arabian "belly dancer," an image that dates from at least the early 20th century.

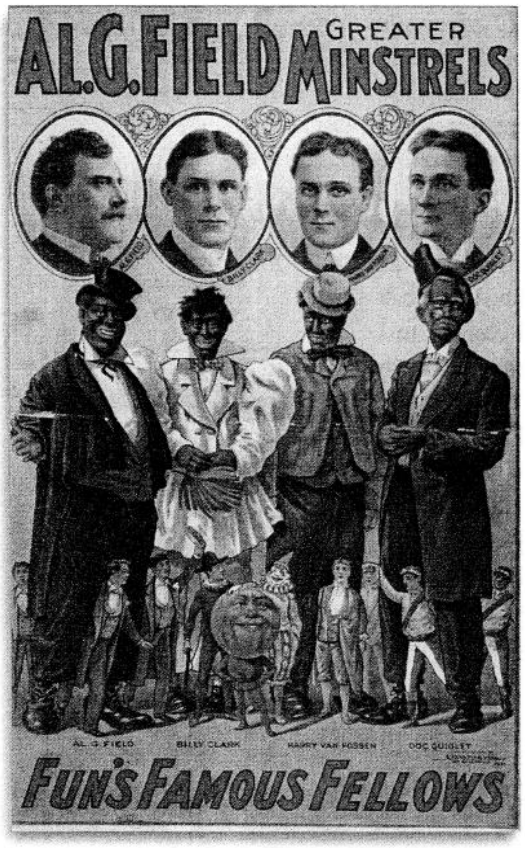
Source: Photos.com/PhotoObjects.net/Thinkstock.

Racial Legacy of the Live Stage

The historic social relationships between Anglo European Americans and the marginalized groups under consideration in this volume reveals hegemonic attitudes were molded negatively toward each of the groups from the earliest stages of intercultural contact. In each case the definition of prejudice (a negative attitude toward the groups based upon a comparison process using the dominant White society as the positive point of reference) was operative. We shall now see how these prejudicial attitudes became the fiber of mass entertainment and popular culture in America.

It is no accident that the rise of American mass entertainment coincided with the populist movement that began in the 1820s and 1830s. The election of Andrew Jackson to the Presidency in 1828 marked the ascension of the "common man" as a political and social force if not general economic prosperity. Cities became population centers, and laborers

The minstrel show, featuring White entertainers in blackface, was a pop-culture fixture that rendered caricatures of Black people in 19th-century America.



Source: The Courier Co. of Buffalo, 1907.

moved there from the farms to become wage earners. Upper-class, socially elitist Americans with refined cultural tastes were inundated by the onrushing tide of the populist movement.

The pivotal year 1833 marked the beginning of the penny press newspaper ushered in by Benjamin Day's *New York Sun* and its symbolic motto "It Shines for ALL." Just as Day's unsophisticated newspaper became the reading fare of an audience that clamored for "news" of gossip, sensationalism, and crime, so did live entertainment change to accommodate the tastes of the working class. It was also 1833 in New York City's Bowery Theatre when an uninhibited audience shouted down the orchestra's symphonic overture and hollered instead for a rendition of "Yankee Doodle"; the audience got its wish. Just as the penny press made newspapers affordable for the masses, ticket prices for live entertainment plummeted from several dollars to 25 cents or less.

From the middle of the 19th century to the 1920s, the live stage became the first major mass entertainment medium in America. People in the cities were filling large, ornate theaters, and rural dwellers attended traveling shows housed in tents. Theatrical agents quickly came to understand the imperative of catering to the public's taste. Their reward was a full cash box and lusty cheers; those who failed suffered the wrath of hostile catcalls, hisses, and financial loss. People of color played a figurative, if not literal, role in the development of mass entertainment because the populist audience demanded their inclusion in theatrical performances. The terms of that inclusion, however, were accommodating to the attitudes and values of the prejudiced masses. In general, the audience wanted plays with common people (themselves) portrayed as heroes. They wanted foot-tapping music and dance and maintained a strong desire to see anything that fulfilled their perceptions of Black American culture. Perhaps above all, they wanted comedy, and people of color were a convenient foil. "Leave 'em laughing" became an early show business axiom.

One early favorite play had a Native American theme and was titled "The Original, Aboriginal, Erratic, Operatic, Semi-Civilized and Demi-Savage Extravaganza of Pocahontas." Stereotypical myths of Native Americans, which had been spread by writers such as James Fenimore Cooper and pulp novelists, easily made the transition to the stage. After the Civil War live entertainment took to the outdoor theater arena with "Buffalo Bill" Cody and his "Wild West" show leading the way. Cody played out the American myth of the taming of the West and its Native American Indian population to Eastern audiences while the real Indian wars were being fought across the country. Cody legitimized himself by periodically returning to the West to serve as a scout and Indian fighter. His show played to packed audiences in the United States and Europe for several decades. Other traveling shows including circuses and variety acts spread racial stereotypes across America by 1900.

Minstrel shows featuring Anglo American actors in blackface appeared in the 1830s after an itinerant White actor, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, borrowed a song and dance routine from a little Black slave boy he had seen perform on a street corner. Billing himself as "Daddy" Rice, he applied burnt cork to his face, dressed in tattered clothing, and performed the borrowed routine as the "Jump Jim Crow" dance to the delight of audiences from New York's Bowery Theatre to the London stage.

Edwin P. Christy, a traveling salesman from Buffalo, New York, launched his career as a show business promoter after his travels took him through the South in the 1830s and 1840s. In Louisiana, Christy saw Blacks perform at a public gathering where they were allowed to gather for the amusement of Whites. Impressed with the musical and dance variations he saw, Christy went back to Buffalo and developed his own caricatures of Black personalities for an entertainment variety act, and the minstrel show was born. For decades Blacks could neither perform in nor attend these shows, which were based on their musical and dance traditions. Ironically, when Black minstrel troupes did become acceptable to White audiences, they, too, were compelled to perform in blackface.

For 80 years the minstrel show was the most popular form of live American entertainment. In its classic form the minstrel show consisted of two acts. Part one employed a minimum of 15 men on stage in a semicircular seating arrangement with gaudily dressed comedians at the end seats. A nattily attired "interlocutor" stood in the center, and a comedic exchange took place between him and the comedians. Singers and banjo and tambourine players composed the rest of the troupe, and songs, dances, rapid-fire jokes, and gags came without pause. Part two of the show (often called the "olio") was composed of recitations, monologues, specialty songs, comedy skits, and burlesque routines. After minstrel shows faded in popularity the olio concept was expanded

into a separate group of acts and became known as vaudeville. Vaudeville launched the careers of some of America's most honored performers including George Burns, Bob Hope, Jack Benny, and Abbott and Costello. It remained only for Al Jolson to refine minstrel show affectations to indelibly stereotype Black people in American entertainment. With renditions of "Mammy," "Rock-a-bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody," "Swanee," and others, Jolson was being called "Mr. Show Business" as early as 1915, but he had been a popular fixture since the turn of the century. Jolson was unquestionably the most popular entertainer in America during the period. By the time motion pictures began to supplant the live stage show in popularity, the quintessential stage musical *Show Boat* opened the Broadway season in 1927 with a favorite White American theme at its core: the interplay of Blacks and Southern Whites set against an idyllic romantic background along the Mississippi River.

Although there are many differences between and among the racial and cultural groups under consideration here, a close examination of their treatment in American mass entertainment reveals remarkable similarity. Our review earlier in this chapter of the social historic experiences of these groups shows that in most instances Whites held negative prejudicial attitudes against each of them well before those attitudes manifested themselves in popular media. This notion of disparaging other racial and cultural groups in popular media established a pattern that continued—as we shall see—into and through the 20th century.

Notes

1. James M. Jones, *Prejudice and Racism* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1972), 3.
2. Lerone Bennett, *Before the Mayflower* (New York: Penguin, 1966), 30.
3. Cited in W. D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (New York: Penguin, 1969), 7.
4. Cecil Robinson, *Mexico and the Hispanic Southwest in America Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977).
5. H. A. (Henry Augustus) Wise, *Los Gringos* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1849), 148.
6. George Wilkins Kendall, *Narrative of the Texan Santa Fé Expedition, Vol. II* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1844), 46.
7. Jeremiah Clemens, *Bernard Lile: An Historical Romance: Embracing the Periods of the Texas Revolution and the Mexican War* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1856), 214.
8. Albert Pike, "The Inroad of the Nabajo," *Prose Sketches and Poems Written in the Western Country* (Boston: Light and Horton, 1834), 150.