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## "Born Every Minute": Reworking the Mythology of the American Medicine Show

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# “BORN EVERY MINUTE”: REWORKING THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE AMERICAN MEDICINE SHOW

by

OWEN CANTRELL

Under the Direction of Mark Noble

## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the historical American medicine show of 1880-1900 through the lens of contemporaneous social and cultural debates, primarily regarding class and race relations. The medicine show pitchmen, the central figure of the medicine show, is the progeny of the confidence man of the mid to late-nineteenth century, best personified through the autobiographies of Benjamin Franklin and P.T. Barnum and novels of Herman Melville and Mark Twain. The confidence man utilized a performative identity directed towards the assumed needs and desires of his audience, which gave him a purely pragmatic orientation. As the confidence man filtered through emerging forms of popular entertainment, he found his place in the traveling medicine show in the figure of the medicine man. In many ways, the medicine show functioned as a cultural arena in which the concerns of rural audiences about the ongoing professionalization of the classes, specifically within the medical profession, were investigated and manipulated.

INDEX WORDS: Medicine show, Patent medicine, Confidence man, Popular entertainment, Medical profession, Class relations

“BORN EVERY MINUTE”: REWORKING THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE AMERICAN MEDICINE SHOW

by

OWEN CANTRELL

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Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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2011

“BORN EVERY MINUTE”: REWORKING THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE AMERICAN MEDICINE SHOW

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**DEDICATION**

To my grandparents, Charles and Doris Cantrell, who inspired my passion about learning the rural past of my ancestors, now long forgotten. This work is a testament to that past and to their love.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I want to acknowledge the assistance of my director, Mark Noble, as well as my readers, Audrey Goodman, and Larry Youngs, in supporting my strange vision of this project. I hope reward their faith in me through this work. Additionally, I am eternally grateful as always to be my beautiful wife Rebecca, for her continual love and support. I am certain that no one knows more about medicine shows at this point than her.

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## 1 Preface

In my first day as a medicine pitchman, I felt intensely disconnected from my nineteenth-century forefathers. Standing in the cool air conditioning at the front door of a mass-market chain drug store, attempting to convince people to receive the latest vaccination offered by their neighborhood pharmacy, I could not quite connect with those faded showmen, standing on the street-corner under torchlight, selling the latest nostrum remedy for unnamed kidney ailments. I could not perform the loquacious stream of verbosity central to their success. Instead, I was forced to make eye contact with every customer, pretend that I was interested in their health and not merely selling them the latest wares. There was, of course, a genuine difference between my selling situation and that of the medicine men: vaccinations were not full of harmful chemicals like morphine and alcohol. They had positive physical effects and were scientifically verifiable as sources of health whereas patent medicines, when not harmful, were often indifferent to medical fitness. Nonetheless, I could not help but feel that I was being disingenuous in pretending that money was not the motivating factor behind my medicine pitch. In the dishonesty between the public face of pharmaceutical concern and the motivating economic forces that drove that concern, this thesis began to develop. My feeling of dishonesty did not originate in the concealment of motivation; instead, it stemmed from the deception that economic incentive was not the true motive, that public health triumphed economic benefits—a fact I knew to be thoroughly false in my career at a mass-market drug store. To that experience, I owe this project and my ongoing interest in the strange and beautiful world of traveling medicine shows.

Recent investigations into popular entertainment have proven that popular culture studies can be an intellectual breeding ground for theorizations of the self, culture, and society in nineteenth-century America.<sup>1</sup> Popular entertainment was a complex system of representations and exchanges.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Lott's *Love and Theft* may be the best example of this type of scholarship. Bluford Adams' *E. Pluribus Barnum*, Rachel Adams' *Sideshow U.S.A.*, and Janet Davis' *The Circus Age* do a great job of synthesizing a great deal of

Nineteenth-century popular culture was particularly invested in depicting and representing the cultural and social tensions of the time. In the case of blackface minstrel shows, as evidenced by Eric Lott's *Love and Theft*, blackface performers and performances dealt with the tension of an emerging middle class and disinherited working class through the depictions of African-Americans and their evolving role in society and the workforce.

While many popular cultural forms have been critically studied in recent years, the medicine show has been relatively unexamined. The major work on the medicine show remains Brooks McNamara's *Step Right Up* from 1976. McNamara's background in theater studies is reflected by his interest in the medicine show as performance. Additionally, he firmly situates the medicine show within popular entertainment. McNamara even helped to organize and participate in a reenactment of a medicine show in 1983 resulting in the film *Free Show Tonight!* McNamara's scholarship has been definitive since little was written on medicine shows prior to the initial publication of *Step Right Up*. His work, along with the few other initial works on medicine shows, touches the surface of the theory of the medicine show but eventually resorts to historical summary and popular anecdote.<sup>2</sup> The majority of scholarship has been either a recovery of a lost popular form, a de-mythologizing of the romantic ideal of the medicine show, or a mere demonstration of the extension of medicine show salesmanship into modern advertising. The work of early medicine show scholars was necessary in bringing this cultural form to scholarly consciousness; however, the medicine show still deserves a critical treatment and assessment, beyond mere historical reproduction or cultural retrieval.

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historical and cultural data. However, Lott's work in *Love and Theft* theorizes about the larger implications of his historical work, something which makes the work so essential in understanding nineteenth-century minstrel shows.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to McNamara's *Step Right Up* also see Mary Calhoun's *Medicine Show: Conning People and Making Them Like It* and Ann Anderson's *Snake Oil, Hustlers and Hambones: The American Medicine Show* for similar work on the history of medicine shows.

With that in mind, I have two primary goals in this project. First, I want to emphasize the attention paid to specific historical detail and context in dealing with popular entertainment. In my second chapter, I discuss how the meaning of the entertainment environment changed depending on the historical environment in which it was situated. This historicizing is also essential because it helps us to avoid the overtly moral reading of entertainment through our own modern moral framework.

Michael Chemers, historian of the freak show, writes

Although the freak show is certainly a highly contestable event, capable of generating many and contradictory meanings, this solemnity, marked by both knee-jerk moralizing and inappropriate sentimentality, is usually inconsistent with the historical evidence available for analysis...it is necessary to historicize the modern discourse of freakery in a way that pokes a few holes in its grim façade (139).

I have entitled my thesis 'Born Every Minute': Reworking the Mythology of the American Medicine Show" for two reasons: the subtitle of the work deals with the inherently mythological nature of the medicine show and its place within the American psyche. In contrast to previous works on the medicine show, I hope to investigate this mythology and place it within a context that will make it infinitely more useful to historians of popular amusement. Instead of making a generalized statement about the inherent absurdity or amorality of the medicine show, I want to make a specific claim about how the medicine show operated within the culture of its time. By reworking the mythology of the medicine show, I hope to bring it closer to actual history, which is also infinitely more useful for scholarship than cultural mythology.

The second reason for the title of my thesis I must illustrate through a brief historical anecdote. "Born every minute" refers to the quote often attributed to P.T. Barnum that "there's a sucker born every minute". This quote is so often used as evidence of Barnum's cynicism regarding his audience or the apparent immorality of nineteenth-century showmen that its historical sources remain largely unchecked. Ann Anderson cites Barnum as the originator without so much as an original source (17). Often, critics assume that if Barnum did not say it, then he would have said it. Of the various rumors of

how the line became attributed to Barnum, one of the more interesting is the theory that the quote originated with David Hannum, a fellow showman, as part of a dispute with Barnum.<sup>3</sup> Hannum was in the middle of his run displaying the 'original' Cardiff Giant in 1869 when Barnum began displaying his duplicate, also claiming it to be the original. The Cardiff Giant was a creation by ardent atheist George Hull, who became so infuriated in a discussion with Christian fundamentalists that he created a ten-foot tall stone statue, cured to look like it had been petrified, to ridicule their notion that giants walked the Earth before mankind. Not only did Hull's hoax become wildly popular, it was even believed for a time, before proving to be ultimately a deception. The alleged comment by Hannum came after both he and Barnum's exhibitions of the Cardiff Giant, happening at the same time in New York City, both stayed busy even when everyone *knew* them to be false. The most interesting aspect of this particular story is not Hannum's cynical evaluation but the fact that people went to see both exhibitions when they *knew* them to be false. I would argue some went to see them *because* they were known to be false. This leads me to the second major point I hope to make in this thesis: the underlying deception of the medicine show, and of nineteenth-century amusement, relies upon complex relationship between pitchmen and their audiences. The deception was not necessarily comprised of a coherent body of knowledge or an ideological tool that could be wielded consistently. In the case of the blackface minstrel show, its racial implications and the use this racism had for the culture in general is relatively obvious. However, as Eric Lott argues, the minstrel show evolved as its "ideological production became more contradictory, its consumption more indeterminate, and its political effects more plural than many have assumed" (20). Popular amusements of the day were not stable ideological constructions, designed towards specific ends of audience pacification or even transgression. For audiences, discovering the machinery of deception implicit in many popular amusements was as important as the purported content of the

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<sup>3</sup> See A.H. Saxon 230-233, 268-270 for a description of this incident in more detail. Joe Vitale attributes the quote to Hannum but the actual veracity of the quote still remains in question, largely because Barnum himself, never one to avoid publicity, refused to disown the saying.

various forms of entertainment. In investigating the logic of deception, I hope to reevaluate the phrase “born every minute” to focus on the historical and cultural flux behind the medicine show as well as the performative nature of the identity of the pitchmen, who constantly reinvented himself according to the desires of his audience.<sup>4</sup>

My treatment of the medicine show focuses on close historical and contextual analysis and attention to the modes of deception. The initial investigation will be towards a genealogy of figures who were dependent on deception for their professional lives: I begin with the figure of the confidence man in the first chapter, move to the popular entertainer in the second chapter, and examine the medicine-show pitchman in the third, and arrive at the twentieth-century figures of the salesman, the businessman, and the public relations consultant in the afterword. I hope to use this investigation to uncover the modes of deception and kinds of activities this deception performed for the audience. My second focus is on the historical context of the nineteenth century, through the lens of class relations. I will also discuss racial relations with both Native American and African-American performers. As I discuss in chapter two, these relationships were in continuous flux throughout the nineteenth century, which caused a great deal of tension for the upper, middle, and working classes. Some of this tension was relieved through changing conceptions of identity—the masquerade of difference which the confidence man was the originator.

In the first chapter, I will describe a genealogy leading to the central figure of the medicine show, the pitchman who sells the medicine on the stage. I begin with a discussion of the confidence man, a socially transgressive figure that plays with identity in order to achieve social and often economic

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<sup>4</sup> My notion of the performative is greatly indebted to the conversation began by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. However, performance as I use it is not necessarily, as it is for Butler, “compelled by norms I do not choose” (345). Specifically, the norms of a society are largely that which performative subjects manipulate and mirror for their own particular ends. The constricting nature of the performative in society as opposed to the more open manipulation of those societal mores can perhaps best be understood through divergent readings of the work of Franz Kafka, specifically the main characters of *The Trial* and *The Castle*, Joseph K. and K. In *The Trial*, Joseph K. is interpellated by authorities into a criminal and eventually executed as a result. However, in *The Castle*, K is acutely aware of the attempts of the Castle to get a grip onto his subjectivity and goes to great pains to avoid the constricting nature of his circumstances and position in the Village. While both *The Trial* and *The Castle* end in failure for the protagonists’ attempt to avoid the constricting gaze of the authorities, it is in the possibilities of shifting and amorphous subjectivity in *The Castle* that I find the notion of performativity most compelling.

success in the world. The confidence man figure is explored primarily through literary examples. Literary authors are able to hone in on the central verbal performance of the confidence-game, the most important aspect of the confidence man for in his later development in the figure of the pitchmen. The autobiographies of Benjamin Franklin and P.T. Barnum, for instance, use verbal performance to recreate themselves and their lives as symbolic of larger cultural values, while Mark Twain and Herman Melville explore the moral and practical implications of the confidence man in the larger social world. The confidence man was a contested figure of class, the obverse reflection of the self-made man who was the model of success for the emerging middle classes. Confidence men threatened the existing class hierarchy of appearances, in which sincerity in interpersonal relationships was valued over the façade of the confidence man. This hierarchy of appearances was important because sincerity became a marker of the social ambition in respectable society as a self-made man, whereas the façade of the confidence man was the terrifying obverse of the sincere social climber since he was the manipulator of appearances. However, the distinction between sincerity and façade breaks apart in investigating the instability of the opposition between the self-made man and the confidence man. In many ways, these two figures were one in the same; the distinction between them was a moral and class valuation rather than one based on social and economic success. In the instability of the opposition between the self-made man and the confidence man, a great deal of the anxiety over class and racial politics of the era were located and navigated in popular entertainment.

In the second chapter, I evaluate the various modes of popular entertainment that emerged throughout the nineteenth century. However, instead of dealing with them in a comprehensive manner, which would be impossible in such a short space, or chronologically, which would only provide a historical overview that is less than useful for understanding the particularities of nineteenth-century popular entertainment, I want to demonstrate how these various forms play with and against the historical context of the nineteenth century, especially on issues of race and class. The emergence of

popular entertainment in the Jacksonian era reflected the class divide over conceptions of high and low culture. Initially, audiences were not divided along class lines in their appreciation of entertainment; only with the advent of class conflicts such as the Astor Palace Riot of 1849 did the upper classes begin the social conditioning of middle-class audiences to conform to cultural standards and the exclusion of working-class audiences from high cultural institutions.<sup>5</sup> In these conceptions of audience prior to class stratification, I find the unique atmosphere of the popular entertainment audience. Borrowing ideas from Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault, I argue that the entertainment space was a carnivalesque heterotopia, a unique space existing for a brief time which acts as a site of transgressive resistance to dominant hegemonies, while also reinforcing *and* working through the ongoing class conflicts in society. However, this transgressive space comes with the caveat that the transgressive element of these entertainment spaces do not exist outside of historical circumstances; they are both reflective of and embroiled in the historical debates of the day, especially on issues of race, class and immigration prevalent in the late nineteenth century. Popular entertainment spaces were neither strictly revolutionary nor entirely a part of the dominating culture. For the most part, they existed in the spaces between, before the various cultural categories surrounding them had become solidified and legitimized.

In dealing with the attraction of the audience to popular entertainment, I separate the attraction into the “operational aesthetic,” as defined by Barnum scholar Neil Harris, and the representation of identity, a conception similar to the changing masks of the confidence man.<sup>6</sup> The operational aesthetic was driven by the desire of the audience to see behind the mask of the entertainment spectacle, to discover how the hidden world of entertainment and deception worked

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<sup>5</sup> See Levine 169-243 for a further explication of this process

<sup>6</sup> Harris’ defined the operation aesthetic as “an approach to experience that equated beauty with information and technique, accepting guile because it was more complicated than candor” (57). While I accept this definition, I also find the term useful in discussing the temptation of the audience into confidence game, in a desire to learn confidence tricks and perhaps become a confidence man themselves.

from within. Through investigation of deception and the representation of identities on the popular stage, audiences often left popular entertainment spectacles with a desire to understand what lay behind the mask of the confidence man and how to enact confidence-games themselves. The inherent temptation of the confidence man figure for the audience in popular entertainment was the desire to become a confidence man oneself.

In my third and final chapter, I bring the contexts of the literary confidence man tradition and nineteenth-century popular entertainment to bear on the traveling medicine show, which has its own unique historical background and class conflicts, primarily focusing on the professionalization of medicine that took place during the heyday of the medicine show in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Medicine shows were part of the larger deregulation and decentralization of the medical profession resulting from the Jacksonian revolution. The medical profession was stripped of its licensing requirements during Jackson's reign, opening the doors for many lay practitioners, until medical licensing was reestablished towards the end of the century. The increasing professionalization of society was unsettling for the largely rural audiences for which the medicine shows performed, since the class stratification of doctors and medical knowledge from home remedies and rural society impinged on their own local autonomy. The medicine shows performed this conflict by borrowing the carnivalesque gestures of popular entertainment, in particular by adopting the "operational aesthetic" and the play of identities central to confidence-games. What made the medicine show particularly unique was the figure of the pitchmen, who enacts, in verbal performance, the very literariness central to the confidence man tradition itself. The focus of the medicine show is, in many ways, the manipulation of language to create action in the audience. The pitchmen manipulated the unconscious



fears and desire of his audience using the rhetorical, poetic and environmental tools of his verbal performance. In this performance, and the contradictions it entailed, the evolution of the confidence man tradition into the selling situation became manifest fully into the cultural area of the medicine show performance.

The Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 forced medicine shows largely underground. Additionally, the medical field as a professional and authoritative body of knowledge became legitimated, leaving pitchmen forced into various other professions. The energies of the confidence man tradition and his various modes of unconscious deception were funneled into the emerging fields of traveling salesmen in the early twentieth century, as well as business and public relations as the century progressed. These often divergent bodies of knowledge were guided by the general principle that human beings can be manipulated by playing upon their unconscious fears and desires. However, the emergence of capitalism midway through the nineteenth century made the confidence man into no longer a model of success for social climbing but rather a method of buttressing the capitalistic system of class and social hierarchy. The confidence man was incorporated into the system of capitalism as no longer a figure of societal transgression, but instead a predominant model of the reality of social relations under corporate capitalism. The social ethic of these emergent capitalist figures, the public relations man of Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud, and the mid-level business men, guided by the principles of gurus like Dale Carnegie, personified the manipulation of appearances in order to achieve practical and economic ends. Confidence men and snake oil salesmen did not simply disappear as relics of the past. Instead, they became institutionalized as part of the capitalist system in the early and mid-twentieth century. Uncovering this entangled relationship is essential to understanding the lineage behind these

professional bodies of knowledge and the historical and cultural assumptions that lie behind such important conceptions as confidence, selling, identity, and deception in nineteenth and twentieth-century American life. The goal of this study is to begin investigating those assumptions through a focus on the American traveling medicine show.

## 2 Chapter One: “It’s Good to be Shifty in a New Country”: Confidence Men from Benjamin Franklin to Mark Twain

In his 1843 tale “Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences”, Edgar Allan Poe wrote, “Man is an animal that diddles, and there is *no* animal that diddles *but* man....A crow thieives; a fox cheats; a weasel outwits; a man diddles. To diddle is his destiny” (367). However, Poe specified that “your *true* diddler winds up all with a grin. But this nobody sees but himself. He grins when his daily work is done—when his allotted labors are accomplished—at night in his own closet, and altogether for his own private entertainment...a diddle would be *no* diddle without a grin” (368). Poe’s diddler was a close relative of the confidence man, who made his first appearance in print in New York newspapers during the summer of 1849.<sup>7</sup> A man reportedly named Samuel Thompson asked strangers on the street if they would put their confidence in him. After they consented, Thompson asked for their watch or money, the stranger complied and Thompson disappeared. The press covered the story extensively and popularized the term “confidence man” to describe him. However, Poe’s diddler and the New York confidence man were not new figures in American consciousness. Masquerade and “humbug” were national pastimes in the early Republic. The game of deception and impersonation was often used by the confidence man for his own private benefit. Simon Suggs, hero of Johnson J. Hooper’s tales of the Southern backwoods, took as “his favorite aphorism—‘it is good to be shifty in a new country’—which means that it is right and proper that one would live as merrily and as comfortable as possible at the expense of others” (12). In this chapter, I will outline what I view as the two primary characteristics of the nineteenth-century confidence man, demonstrated in the work of Benjamin Franklin, P.T. Barnum, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain. In my conception of the confidence man, I believe he is guided by two main principles in these texts: epistemological pragmatism and fluidity of social identity. By explicating these characteristics through literary and historical examples, I hope to come to terms with

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<sup>7</sup> See Michael Reynolds, Johannes Bergmann for a more thorough description of this ‘original’ confidence man

the status and foundational importance of the confidence man within the genealogy of the popular showmen and medicine show pitchmen. Additionally, through explication of literary examples of confidence man, I want to draw attention to the explicit literariness central to the confidence man tradition, a facet that will carry through popular entertainment and find essential to the performance of the medicine pitchmen.

While my discussion of the confidence man tradition cannot hope to be exhaustive, I have chosen four seminal figures who tell us a great deal about the scope and breadth of the tradition in nineteenth-century American letters and culture.<sup>8</sup> Each of these figures uses written texts to create the confidence man persona. The autobiographies of Benjamin Franklin and P.T. Barnum serve both as methods of self-creation and models for enterprising young men who wish to achieve material success. For Herman Melville and Mark Twain, fictional representations are utilized in the service of uncovering the nature of the confidence man, through his deception, self-creation, and his place within the social world of the novel. Before beginning, however, there may be a few foreseeable objections to the examination of the confidence man as anything other than moral pariah: first and foremost, his ultimate motive for deception. While one could casually answer that he is after material reward, it would be mistaken to use this incentive as a sole criteria. I agree with Melville who writes in *The Confidence-Man*: “Money, you think, is the sole motive to pains and hazard, deception and deviltry, in this world. How much money did the devil make by gulling Eve?” (41). Considering the confidence man purely in moral terms is adverse to studying him. Epistemological pragmatism and fluidity of identity do not interpret well morally; or, a moral interpretation misses the point of the confidence man as a model of

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<sup>8</sup> The literature on the confidence man in American literature is immense and interesting. While I will make use of a few of these secondary source within my analysis, my focus differs since I am attempting to trace the genealogy of verbal performance for the medicine man, instead of investigating the confidence man model itself in depth. For a further analysis of the confidence man, see Warwick Wadlington’s *The Confidence Game in American Literature*, Harold Beaver’s *The Great American Masquerade*, Susan Kuhlmann’s *Knave, Fool, Genius: The Confidence Man as He Appears in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*, and Gary Lindberg’s *The Confidence Man in American Literature*. Richard Hauk’s *A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and “the Absurd” in American Humorous Fiction* and Kathryn DeGrave’s *Swindler, Rebel, Spy: The Confidence Woman in Nineteenth Century America* are also interesting sources that are more focused on comedy or gender.

personhood. While the often-disreputable ends of the confidence game cannot be completely discounted, morality is not necessarily an obstacle for the confidence man to overcome. Instead, morality imposes a judgment that the pragmatism of the confidence man does not consider. While the appearance of morality can often be important, morality itself is not an objection to which the confidence man adheres. When studying the confidence man, it is important to study him on his own terms; no other terms will show the full complexity of his character, or characters.

Investigations of the nature of the confidence man demonstrate that he is, above all, a pragmatist. This pragmatism may be drawn toward material or social rewards, either “his pocket or yours” as Poe wrote, but it is generally focused on the flexibility of identity, perspective, and knowledge that guides the confidence man. The confidence man is no idealist; beliefs are, in general, flexible for him. The ways in which knowledge is created or used is dependent upon the situation and how the confidence man can use knowledge to his advantage. This pragmatism is best shown at work in the textual creation of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin stands at the origin of two conceptions of American selfhood, the self-made man and the confidence man. His plan of virtuous self-improvement places him in the genealogy of the self-made man, while the winking irony behind his plan places him within the confidence man tradition. Franklin’s *Autobiography* is both a guide for self-improvement and a guide for making that self-improvement evident to your neighbors. Additionally, the *Autobiography* is a self-consciously *written* text, of a written life. A written life is in many ways preferable over the lived life because it can *always* be written again. When Franklin states he would gladly live his life over again, he only asks “the advantage authors have in a second edition to correct some faults of the first” (1). What he considers the major mistakes of his life are called “errata,” the term for printing errors (16, 27, 34, 56). But the most essential aspect of the text as written is when Franklin is talking to the Michael Welfare of the Dunkers. The Dunkers are a Protestant sect who refuse to publish the articles of their belief because “we fear that if we should once print our confession of faith, we should feel ourselves as

if bound and confined by it, and perhaps be unwilling to receive farther improvement” (97). Welfare will not write down the doctrine of his faith because the act of writing codifies belief into law. In Franklin’s own words, he argues that while “the spoken word passes away, the written word remains” (90). The written word is itself an act of creation, an act of creation that is for Franklin synonymous with the creation of the self. Franklin writes himself, creating a textual identity that serves as a model, which, as his friend Abel James writes, “leads the youth to equal the industry and temperance of thy early youth” (58). The *Autobiography* is an instructional work, written for Franklin’s son, youths of America, and a Europe that was still doubtful of the legitimacy of the new nation. However, the *Autobiography* is also an instructional work that must be viewed with an eye towards the literary persona of Ben Franklin that the text performs. This creation, this performance, is the “appearance” that Franklin values because “in this world, appearance is sufficient” (Ward 334). Whatever Franklin’s metaphysical speculations, he was living firmly within the world of appearances or, as he wrote, has “contrived to fix it on Earth” (89). The world of appearances had a direct social and material correlation for Franklin. As a young printer, he “sometimes brought home the paper...purchased at the store through the streets on wheelbarrow,” making sure the townspeople noticed his industriousness. Franklin writes that he “took care not only to be in *reality* industrious and frugal but to avoid all *appearances* of the contrary” when he was seen by his neighbors and creditors (54). To be in reality industrious was important but it was *as important*, “in order to secure...credit and character as a tradesmen,” to create the appearance (54). For Franklin, silent virtue cannot serve one’s social and material needs. It is important for the community to recognize virtues, in order to reap the benefit of those virtues.

Nevertheless, Franklin is not a strict materialist. He is conscious of his own self-creation and his own pragmatic Yankeedom. However, his material pragmatism is often taken as the sole principle of Franklin’s textual project. D.H. Lawrence’s famously infuriated essay on Franklin asks, “Why then did Benjamin set up this dummy of a perfect citizen as a pattern to America? He thought it simply was the

true ideal...Either we are materialistic instruments, like Benjamin or we move in the gesture of creation, from our deepest self, usually unconscious” (30). While this brand of materialistic pragmatism is pervasive in Franklin, it cannot be mistaken for signifying only the material self-restraint with which his name became synonymous. In many ways, the great irony of Franklin’s pragmatism is demonstrated by his list of thirteen virtues, a list which winks towards the absurdity of such a project. After all, Franklin’s solution to humility involves imitating both Jesus *and* Socrates. Franklin has a deep sense of humor about moral perfection. Regarding the fallen status of his newly-adopted vegetarianism, for instance, he declares it “so convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable creature* since it enables to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do” (Franklin 28). Ultimately, Franklin’s list of virtues points less toward a rigid standard of living than toward the *usefulness* of virtue. He contributes his success “to the joint influence of the whole mass of the virtues,” which “even in the imperfect state he was able to acquire them, all the evenness of temper, and that cheerfulness in conversation” made “his company still sought for, and agreeable to his younger acquaintances. I hope therefore that some of my descendents may follow the example and reap the benefit” (74). There is public benefit to virtue and social advantages that result from virtue. And, as Franklin demonstrates, the *appearance* of a virtue is as important as its reality. For Franklin, much of appearance is in the method. A certain method, such as his insistence on the usefulness of Socratic humility in argumentation, can have practical use in the world. These methods, or virtues, are taken up as useful pragmatic tools for living in the social world. A virtue that was not pragmatically useful would not be of much use to Franklin. His thirteen virtues reiterate the point that *The Autobiography* is “not about success. It is about the formation of character that makes success possible” (Ward 329). Franklin has found his mode of living useful and hopes to serve as a model for future Americans. As the representative American, he is careful to stay fully on the side of representation. Franklin slides along the surface of appearances, never allowing us to see behind those appearances; readers can only appreciate Franklin’s textual performance and his insistence on the

practicality and usefulness of his performance. It is hard to deny Franklin's success. His pragmatism always keeps in mind its audience. When he was the American diplomat in France, Franklin dressed in simple clothing with his signature coonskin cap. He knew the French wished to see the Americans as rustic, newly arrived from the fresh wilderness of the New World. Franklin, as a respectable English citizen, certainly never dressed in such a way. But he knew, as he wrote an associate, "how this must appear in France among the powdered heads of Paris" (Ward 329). His costume was *useful* because, as he wrote, "one does not dress for private company as for a public ball" (Franklin 8).

P.T. Barnum followed closely in Franklin's footsteps. Barnum began his career as the very epitome of "humbug" in the early nineteenth century. By the end of his life, he called himself "a public benefactor, to an extent seldom paralleled in the histories of professed and professional philanthropists" (*Life* 400). He wrote two "official" autobiographies *The Life of P.T. Barnum* and its radical revision *Struggles and Triumphs*, as well as the "fictional" autobiographical sketch "Adventures of an Adventurer." Barnum took his cue from Franklin and other autobiographies of the day by using these writings to create versions of him that would reflect upon the audience to meet the social or moral requirements of a respectable showman. According to historian James Cook, "to one degree or another, everything he [Barnum] ever published was a form of spin, an attempt to re-present himself and his products in ways that would appeal to his latest public" ("Architect" 3). Barnum's journey from the self-proclaimed "king of Humbug—the king among princes" to the "solid, respectable image he wished to project to his fellow citizens and the world in general" was largely a matter of textual creation through the pages of his various autobiographies (Barnum "Adventures" 20; Cook "Architect" xv). In taking a few incidents from the autobiographies and tracing their textual evolution, it becomes clear how Barnum recreates himself from within their pages.



Barnum's career as a showman, and "birth date of modern American popular culture" began with his association with Joice Heth, the allegedly 161-year-old former nurse of George Washington (Cook *Arts* 3). Barnum displayed Joice Heth from 1835 until her death in 1836 as the former nurse of the founder of the country. When public interest waned, he placed a suggestion in the press that she was an automaton, made of whalebone and rubber, sparking another round of visits from the public. Upon her death, Barnum submitted her body for a public autopsy, at which point her age was discovered to be closer to eighty than one hundred and sixty. After this exhibition, Barnum disappeared into the South as an itinerant showman for a number of years before reemerging as the proprietor of the American Museum in New York City and eventual exhibitor of the Swedish opera sensation Jenny Lind. At this point, Barnum shifted his career, or rather the perception of his career, from showman for the masses to the proprietor of entertainment for public benefit. By the end of his life, he had been a state representative, and the mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut. He died in 1891 as the kindly grandfather of his latest innovation, the American big-top circus.

The process of Barnum becoming respectable was partially accomplished through the continual rebranding of major events in his career. The Joice Heth exhibition shows this process at work. In "Adventures of an Adventurer," Barnum portrays the exhibition as a massive humbug and writes, "the world is fairly inoculated with the system, and can't get out of it no way you can fix it" (22). He portrays himself as creating Joice Heth as Washington's nurse, trading his training of Heth for sips of whiskey on the sly. He claims that her recreation as an automaton of whalebone and rubber was also his idea, as well as the public autopsy. Barnum claims he knew her age all along, and that his various diversions were merely meant to further the art and practice of humbug. In comparison, he writes of the incident in *Life of PT Barnum*, claiming that, when asked who taught Joice Heth the story of Washington's nurse, "I do not know. I taught her none of these things" (156). When she is discovered to be nearly half the age reported in the press, Barnum protests innocently "I had hired Joice in perfect good faith, and relied

upon her appearance and the documents as evidence of the truth of her story” (172). By the time of *Struggles and Triumphs*, Barnum calls the Joice Heth episode “the least deserving of all my efforts” and one which was “in no sense of my own devising” (73). Barnum distances himself from what he eventually viewed as the ungentle nature of the showman as confidence man. He would instead become a public benefactor, the showman meant to lift the classes through the exhibition of “high art” figures such as Jenny Lind the opera singer and the teetotaler plays, such as *The Drunkard*, which ran continuously in the lecture room of his American Museum. To instruct the mind of all classes became his mantra; he removed himself completely from the humbug of his early career.

However, Barnum is neither a mere hypocrite nor man who attempts to disguise his youthful transgressions. Popular culture historian Constance Rourke suggests critics read Barnum as a man who “in a strict sense...had no private life” (277). Barnum lived his life in public; his public persona was his livelihood and his attraction. Barnum made a spectacle out of himself and was, in many ways, his own top-selling attraction. In a visit to the American Museum in New York, one man reportedly paid money for his ticket, went inside to take a look at Barnum, and left, simply stating “‘I’ve got my money’s worth’” (Rourke 300). When Barnum exhibited a “live Yankee” at his American Museum, he could have merely put himself on display. Barnum took Franklin’s method of writing as self-creation to its literal end. Barnum was nothing but text, text from his autobiographies, from his advertisements, and his exhibitions. When he sought to re-create himself as a respectable citizen, he also did this textually. All of his humbugs could be written over, crossed out, existing instead as a palimpsest under his new self-manifestation. Ultimately, Barnum argued, “the greatest humbug of all is the man who believes—or pretends to believe—that everything and everybody are humbugs” (*Struggles* 5). This “greatest humbug” lacks the essential confidence that leaves him open to the experiences of the world. This confidence is in many ways the theme of Melville’s *The Confidence Man* and the underlying danger that Barnum’s assertion places into the world.

Constance Rourke wrote of the prototypical figure of the Yankee that, “he was a symbol of triumph, of adaptability, of irrepressible life—of many qualities needed to induce confidence and self-possession among a new and unamalgamated people” (35). Her Yankee is a joyous celebration of the virtues of a new country. His shifting identities, his pragmatic assertion, and his handiness with the tools of knowledge were “symbol[s] of triumph.” In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville makes this “symbol of triumph” into a much more difficult and problematic figure. If Franklin and Barnum are early purveyors of the confidence man tradition, their closeness to the self-made man is evident; both consciously incorporate that motif into their written lives. Melville, writing in 1857 after the “confidence man” moniker had been coined in 1849, had begun to see the death of the self-made man as a model in antebellum America. Additionally, Melville was less inclined towards joyous celebration of triumphant play and more towards critical reflection, which is demonstrated in his own conception of the confidence man.

Melville’s confidence man is a multiplicity. The changing cast of characters that appear as avatars of the confidence man performs the pragmatic identity Franklin found so useful. While the confidence man’s varying identities may appear arbitrary, there is a certain logic to their progression if he is viewed with an eye towards “winning” the confidence game. When Pitch, the Missourian, is not won over by the herb doctor, the Philosophical Intelligence Officer appears, convincing Pitch to hire a new boy as a hand and reversing his formally misanthropic view of the inherent depravity of men and boys. The confidence man “wins” over the Missourian partially by changing himself into a form that Pitch will find agreeable; namely because he needs hired hands, and an employment officer is just the man for him. The confidence man’s identity presents problems for his interlocutors. His appearance as an object of charity, of business success, of personal success, and of grief is presented as desirable, pitiable, or challenging to others on the *Fidèle*. The confidence man is, in a word, tempting. His identity, whichever one it may be, is part of his appeal. It is also an essential part of his personhood. As Melville

writes, “life is a pic-nic *en costume*; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool. To come in plain clothes, with a long face, as a wiseacre, only makes one a discomfort to himself and a blot upon the scene” (139). The assumption of identity is the only method of identity: “to do, is to act; so all doers are actors” (40). This is a radical instability of identity, in which assuming an identity is all there is to that identity. According to Mark Winsome, Melville’s imitation of Emerson, “Nobody knows who anybody is. The data which life furnishes, towards forming a true estimate of any being, are as insufficient to that end as in geometry one side given would be to determine the triangle” (194). This is linked to the theory of fiction Melville offers us in the novel. As the cosmopolitan objects to Winsome’s conception of identity as being “inconsistent” with his theory of labels, Melville the author objects to the prevalence of the idea of consistent characters as being the epitome of great fiction since “no writer has produced such inconsistent characters as nature herself has” (75). Inconsistency in fiction is not a defect but instead the “good keeping” of an author who depicts the inconsistency of the natural world (76). By this logic, “acting” in the world is the only consistency available as an identity which can be said to have agency. In *The Confidence-Man*, the method of playing a part is playing it, as the Cosmopolitan tells Charlie Noble, “to the life”(186).

However, in this novel of ever-fluid identity, it is difficult to determine what the confidence man is after. Considering our earlier discussion of confidence men, it seems reductive to think that “money...is the sole motive” (41). The confidence man does not get much money nor any other material or social success out of his multiple confidence games. However, perhaps both the Confidence Man in general and Melville’s *The Confidence Man* in particular are part of a dual destabilization of identity. On the one hand, the novel and the character radically destabilize identity and what a consistent character would truly look like: namely, a fabrication. This is something the confidence man understands thoroughly. Regardless of his potentially supernatural qualities, he affirms the use and method of identity as acting, an acting that has use and value in the world. Additionally, Melville seems to be

battling against the assertion of his friend Evert Duyckinck's *Literary World*, who claimed that "it is not the worst thing that may be said of a country that it gives birth to the confidence man" (quoted in Bermann 311). "[I]t is a good thing," according to Duyckinck, "and speaks well for human nature, that, at this late day, in spite of all the hardening of civilization and all the warning of newspapers, men *can be swindled*" (quoted in Bergmann 311). Melville's confidence man preys upon the "confidence" of those aboard the *Fidele* because confidence is essential to the goals of the confidence man. A man who does not, or will not believe, cannot be subject to the confidence man. There is a necessary complicity to those who agree to participate in the confidence game; they have affirmed their belief, they are willing to have "confidence". An epistemological uncertainty emerges here: a destabilized identity and a method of appearances that is designed towards pragmatic ends would seem to battle against transcendental concepts such as "beliefs" or "confidence". For Melville, however, this is the only method of living in the world: one must choose and have confidence and at the same time realize that uncertainty, even radical uncertainty, is unavoidable. In *The Confidence-Man*, "all are led in a dance by the idea of confidence itself: they must make some commitment of their confidence about the nature of things, whether or not they remain conscious of the final arbitrariness of that commitment" (Blair 50). The confidence man sparks this commitment; he is the man who "will take steps, fiddle in hands, and set the tickled world a' dancing" (183).

In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the most obvious confidence men are the "low down humbugs and frauds," the King and the Duke (142). From Shakespeare to the Royal Nonesuch and their ultimate swindle of the Wilks family, these characters clearly make their living at the expense of others. However, the more interesting confidence man is Huck himself. Once Huck leaves St. Petersburg, he spends the rest of the novel juggling a variety of shifting identities, presenting himself to strangers in the matter least likely to entice them to interfere with his plans. As the novel progresses, Huck increases his ability to present himself according to the desires and fears of his audience. This is

largely a process of unlearning Tom Sawyer's idealized schemes of creation and deception. Sawyer's world is constituted by elaborate, romantic stories. One of Huck's first attempts at deception, his encounter with Judith Loftus as "Sarah/Mary Williams" is immediately penetrated because the history Huck invents for himself is a romantic background that can be picked apart. Huck is able to learn a lesson from this failure; namely, his impersonation of a young girl is beyond his acting abilities. Huck's knowledge of human nature is often keen enough that he is aware of what he can achieve in his encounters with people; with Judith Loftus, he knows that "if this woman had been in such a little town two days she could tell me all I wanted to know" (66). Rumors and gossip travel across town before truth gets out of bed. However, in his creation of Sarah/Mary Williams, he forgets this pragmatism and tries to be someone he does not have the background or skills to accomplish. In his encounter with the watchmen on the ferry near the wreck of the *Walter Scott*, Huck's deceptions, while still encompassing a large back-story, are more successful. This is largely because he begins utilizing the desires of his audience in his self-performance; he relates himself to the wealthy "Hornback" which immediately triggers the reaction in the watchman to give Huck all the directions he requires. When he encounters the men on the skiff looking for runaway slaves, Huck begins to use what he learns from the "Hornback" episode. As the raftsmen row ever closer to Jim, Huck slowly lets out that his "family" is sick but lets the raftsmen decide it must be smallpox. They project their own fears into his persona, allowing Jim and Huck to go free. This becomes the model for Huck's "stretchers" in the novel, by giving just enough information to allow others to fill in the details with their own fears and desires, such as with the raftsmen looking for slaves, and to use his knowledge of human nature to nudge people towards preferable decisions. When he forgets his name at the Grangerfords, Huck craftily dares Buck to spell the name he gave out the previous night, so that Huck can remember the name he gave. Huck learns to survive in this dangerous world by becoming the mirror which dares others to name it and reflects back their desires and fears.

Huck is deeply pragmatic and realistic, in both his thought-processes and actions. He immediately sees through the pretensions of the King and the Duke but reasons “the best way to get along...is to let them have their own way” (142). However verbose Huck may be at times, he finds it best to stay silent if it will avoid trouble. When Joanna Wilks asks him to swear that his story of England was truthful, he thinks, “it warn’t nothing but a dictionary, so I laid my hand on it and said it” (167). If certain silences or oaths will cost him nothing and keep trouble at bay, Huck is willing to engage in other types of creation when necessary. By the time he reaches the Phelps farm, Huck has reached the pinnacle of his abilities of self-creation, often frighteningly so. In making up a story for Aunt Sally about a “steamboat” accident, he mentions that nobody was hurt, the accident only “killed a nigger” (230). Huck has by this point become so accustomed to telling people what they want to hear that it is difficult to determine if Huck or his version of Tom Sawyer is talking to Aunt Sally. He becomes Tom Sawyer in this dialogue, taking on the values that will earn him acceptance. Huck devalues the life of blacks in the dialogue, all the while with the intention of freeing one from slavery. While certain values are assumed and others are seen as intrinsic, a certain tension regarding the potential dangers of the confidence man mask for its wearers has become apparent, one that will come to full fruition in Twain’s depiction of Hank Morgan in *Connecticut Yankee*.

For Huck the confidence man, his reunion with Tom Sawyer is where Huck’s growth can be determined. Through his utilization of the romanticism of Tom’s storytelling, Huck initially came into danger when he lit out on his own. When he meets up with Tom again on the Phelps farm, Huck is seemingly thrilled at the prospect of Tom’s elaborate plan to free Jim. However, it also seems Huck realizes that, like the King and the Duke, “the best way” to get along with Tom is to let him have his way. Huck associates Tom’s plan with some of the other humbugs in the novel; when he suggests using a “rusty saw-blade” instead of kitchen knives to dig out Tom, he asks if that would be too “irreligious” (252). Huck associates Tom’s schemes with the formal rituals that he derides. Nonetheless, Tom’s world

is the world in which Huck lives; he must find a way to survive in it. Huck's greatest confidence trick is perhaps the one he plays on Tom Sawyer. While Tom thinks he is having a great adventure and a romantic time, Huck indulges Tom in romance in order to free Jim. For Huck, this could be because Tom is in a position of authority over Huck; he is the rightful Phelps, he is the "respectable" boy, and he is not "dead" and on the run from the authorities. While it seems unlikely that Tom would turn in Huck, or foil his plan to free Jim, Huck's indulgence in Tom's romantic games also resembles a strategy for getting his own way while giving the appearance that others are getting their way. Even though Tom's romance goes too far and nearly leads to violence and death, his success must be measured in relationship to Huck, the encounter of one confidence man with another. On one hand, Huck's self-creation is purely negative; he allows others to speak for him, by reflecting what they desire. Tom, on the other hand, more closely resembles the character from Twain's later novel, Hank Morgan of *Connecticut Yankee*. The death and destruction from which Tom and Huck escape at the end of *Huckleberry Finn* is fully imagined, in the holocaust that concludes *Connecticut Yankee*, as the consequence of Hank Morgan's rigidly pragmatic approach.

Twain's Hank Morgan is heart and soul a Connecticut Yankee, hailing from the land of Barnum. He introduces himself as "a Yankee of the Yankees—and practical; yes, and nearly barren of sentiment, I suppose—or poetry, in other words" (4). When he first sees the sees "a vast gray fortress, with towers, and turrets," he assumes he is in Bridgeport, the town Barnum built, rather than Camelot, the palace Arthur built. Morgan is an eternal pragmatist. His reaction to finding himself in the Middle Ages is a surprising non-reaction: "Wherefore, being a practical Connecticut man, I now shoved this whole problem clear out of my mind till its appointed day and hour should come, in order that I might turn all my attention to the circumstances of the present moment, and be alert and ready to make the most out of them that could be made" (11). Morgan would either "boss the asylum" of the Middle Ages or "know the reason why" (11). He immediately gets down to brass tacks; practical success is his goal. Twain's



“Connecticut Yankee” has no concern for how or why he wound up in the Middle Ages. His goal is to rule his situation, and not allow the situation to determine his actions. He quickly takes over as the magician-in-residence in King Arthur’s Court, due to his nineteenth-century knowledge of science and machinery, setting into motion his plans for domination and improvement over what he views at the antiquated social, political, and moral models of the medieval world.

Nevertheless, despite Morgan’s pragmatism and ability to manipulate his knowledge and the knowledge of others towards the goals of his project, the novel ends in a horrific genocide of the medieval world. This failure of Morgan’s rigid pragmatic method is linked to Morgan’s lack of “poetry” and his inability to reflect on his own “training”. Morgan is appalled when noticing the influence of “training” on the inhabitants of the medieval world: their supplication towards royalty, their inability to see the depravity of their situation, and the unreasonable miraculousness with which they see the natural world. He repeatedly argues “training—training is everything; training is all there is to a person” and claims that “the power of training! Of influence! Of education! It can bring a body up to believe anything” (107). While he also attempts to understand the medieval mind and its backwards ways, in order to improve upon it, he doesn’t realize that he himself is implicit in his own critique; the Connecticut Yankee fails to recognize the significance of his own training. When Hank and Sandy stop for the night shortly after embarking on their “knight errantry” quest, Hank calls his guests “modified savages” though he qualifies by stating this is “measured by modern standards” (61). The night before, Hank was unwilling to take off his horrifically uncomfortable and stifling armor because “I could not get it off by myself and yet could not allow Alisande to help, because it would have seemed so like undressing before folk” (60). He realizes the silliness of this but admits, “the prejudices of one’s breeding are not gotten rid of just at a jump” (61). Hank is continually judging the medieval world by his own standards and breeding, without recognizing that this too is a form of “training.” He solidifies his own judgment into law without recognizing the temporality and arbitrary nature of that judgment and

of his “training.” This is linked to Hank’s lack of “poetry.” When Melville calls Benjamin Franklin “everything but a poet” in *Israel Potter*, he does not intend it as a slight; Franklin simply hadn’t the time or the talent, according to the *Autobiography*, for poetry (81). However, Morgan lacks poetry not in the sense of being exclusively pragmatic but instead lacks the perceptual flexibility a poetic nature would allow. He is poetic with respect to the fluidity of facts, in his masquerade of appearances, and in his love of spectacle, which he calls the “crying defect” of his character (227). But he lacks the poetic pragmatism that allows him to see the use as well as the arbitrariness of a rigidly pragmatic approach. When his second-in-command Clarence demonstrates to him the unwillingness of the knights to surrender, he finally realizes “how empty is theory in the presence of fact! And this was just fact, and nothing else” (266). All of his theories, his “training” on the “modern standards” he wished to impose on the medieval world, are blasted away in the presence of the particular “training” of the knights. Hank Morgan is a failure as a confidence man, not simply because the slaughter that results is a consequence of his actions, but because he lacked the necessary pragmatic flexibility essential to the confidence man tradition. Morgan was fully “trained” in the nineteenth century; it was only his displacement into the 6th century that allowed him to forget it. Pragmatism is not, for the confidence man, the cold, hard, calculating method of the Yankee, the “champion of hard unsentimental common sense and reason” but rather the poetic pragmatic flexibility of Huck Finn, which allows him to move within the world, to survive amid the dangers of a dangerous world. Hank Morgan’s rigid pragmatism only blinds him to the possibilities that he too is subject to the confidence game.

Confidence men and confidence games were common tropes in the nineteenth century, often used to indicate the presence of growing societal and cultural tensions.<sup>9</sup> As the United States became increasingly industrialized and incorporated throughout the century, models of individual success, such

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<sup>9</sup> Most of this discussion is drawn from Karen Haltunnen’s *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture, 1820-1850*. In the next chapter, I will go further in depth on the particular Jacksonian historical context against which these models played. Also see David S. Reynolds’ *Waking Giant: America in the Age of Jackson* and Jim Cullen’s *The Art of Democracy: A Concise History of Popular Culture in the United States*

as Franklin's self-made man, did not explain the explosion of individual success on the scale of the new corporate capitalists. Men such as J.P. Morgan and John Rockefeller made such extravagant amounts of money that the frugality and industry displayed by Franklin ceased to work as a reasonable explanation for their success. Therefore, an exploration of the confidence man also necessarily investigates models or methods of individual success. The confidence man served as a model, both positive and negative, for nineteenth-century Americans. Poetic pragmatism, fluidity of identity, and epistemological relativism are linked together in ways that come to bear on the changing conception of the self, knowledge and society during these tumultuous years. One cannot dismiss the confidence man model because the confidence man exemplifies a social model upon which many societal conventions of success were founded. As the self-made man model lost its historical possibility during the rise of corporate capitalism, the confidence man model gained influence as a controlling metaphor for the material dominance of society by the ultra-wealthy. Industrialists like Andrew Carnegie were held up as exemplars of the self-made man, through the possibility that his rags-to-riches success story proved the necessity of this model for striving lower and middle-class Americans. The self-made man remained useful because it maintained the hegemony of the upper classes via the ideological fiction that wealth was necessarily deserved or earned. But this too misses the larger implications of the confidence man model of personhood and success. The confidence man is also a radical destabilization of the traditional model of the self-made man, which calls the hegemony of the traditional success narrative itself into question. Through this movement of pragmatic success underlined by destabilization of notions of identity and knowledge, the confidence man model became a model of the type of instability that constituted emerging conception of American societal identity, in contrast to the stability seemingly offered by the self-made man.

Social historian Karen Halttunen, in her study on middle-class advice manuals, argues that the self-made man model of success was based on a “fundamental assumption...that all Americans were liminal men, in passage from a lower to a higher social status” (29). The liminality of the rising middle-class made the confidence man model a potential temptation for men on the make. The dominant temptation and fear was that for “the youth to become successful, he himself might have to learn the tricks of the confidence man” (32). In this respect, the notion of the confidence man as a dominant societal model of success and self-creation was excluded from dialogue as an alternative to the self-made man due to the moral abhorrence with which the middle-class held his deceptive methods. But, in fact, the confidence man was merely the shadowy reflection of the self-made man, as seen in the grasping onto this model by corporate culture. In figures such as Franklin and Barnum, we can see how the line becomes increasingly blurred between the two models. Additionally, as corporate capitalism became predominant throughout the nineteenth century, the confidence man became preeminent as a success model, albeit one that was seldom acknowledged. In the “success mythology of twentieth-century corporate America” we can see how the confidence man has become intrinsic to “the mainstream of American middle-class culture” (Halttunen 210). However, the adoption of this model into the corporate world fails to retain the larger destabilization of knowledge and identity within the confidence man model. In other words, the confidence man model holds its own critique implicit in its construction. Hank Morgan is a failure as confidence man, while Huck is a success, because he does not realize that he is subject to the confidence game as well. His own unwillingness to admit the instability inherent in his performance is his ultimate downfall; however, it is also this instability and implicit critique that is also denied by the grasping of corporate capitalism onto the confidence man as a stable model of operating within the world. This remained, as it was for Melville, purely a fiction.

### 3 Chapter Two: Popular Entertainment: Audience, Class, and Aesthetics

Confidence men were purveyors of nineteenth-century popular entertainment. The social devaluation of the confidence man meant that being a showman of entertainment was a disreputable profession. Barnum, the most well-known showman of his day, continually fought against this stigma, as he demonstrated in his constant rewriting of himself in his multiple autobiographies as a “respectable” middle-class figure. This was largely because “popular entertainers existed outside the boundaries of polite society. In fact, traveling show-people were generally felt to be “immoral, quick to cheat, and slow to pay” (McNamara “Popular” 383). Despite whatever truth may lie in this accusation, this led to the general isolation of the community of show people, forcing them to become “more dependent on themselves for direction and values” (Bogdan 77). As the confidence man model had shown itself to be a pragmatically useful model throughout the chaotic nineteenth century, showmen often took up many of the tactics of confidence men, with the explicit aim of making money through popular entertainment. Additionally, as the country became increasingly embroiled in the controversies over big business in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, showmen often made the argument that “they did nothing that was very much different than what other businessmen did” (Bogdan 92). In this chapter, I want to demonstrate how show men and popular entertainers took the tools of the confidence man and expanded them into popular entertainment, using them as an avenue to discuss ongoing societal struggles, with a specific focus on race and class. The historical context of the emergence and widespread success of popular entertainment, from the 1840s through the 1900s, was a highly contentious time socially and culturally for the United States.<sup>10</sup> This period saw the collapse of traditional authority, as well as the influx of immigrants, free African-Americans, and the emergence of a middle class anxious for social legitimization. Through popular entertainment, social issues were

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<sup>10</sup> See Jim Cullen aforementioned *Art of Democracy*, Lawrence Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, and Robert Toll’s *On with the Show: The First Century of Show Business in America* for further discussion of the relationship between culture and entertainment in the late-nineteenth century.

addressed, avoided, reinforced and undermined. Only through a close historical analysis of the varieties of popular entertainment can one understand the way that contentious social issues of the mid to late-nineteenth century revealed themselves against the backdrop of amusements such as the freak show, circus, minstrel show, dime museum, Wild West show, and other emerging entertainments. However, in understanding the political world that made widespread popular entertainment possible means first investigating the Jacksonian revolution and its effect on class and the social relations of its time.

The Jacksonian revolution in American politics presented a number of a problems to the ruling classes of the nation, many of which they would struggle to resolve until the end of the nineteenth century. As a nation founded by social and political elites on democratic principles, the mixed purposes of the American democracy posed a problem for the upper classes. This problem asserted itself in the idea of radical democratization that spread across the nation as a result of the election of Andrew Jackson, the first president of the “common man.” Jackson was the first president who was neither an aristocrat nor a member of the revolutionary generation. His supporters latched onto his status as an “outsider” and linked his anti-aristocratic tendencies to signify the “age of the common man,” in which all forms of authority would be questioned or devalued as a source of knowledge. Some saw Jackson’s leveling of aristocracy as the culmination of the American Revolution. The rebellion against established authority would have its reverberations for the rest of the century, until it could be sublimated into the larger cultural psyche and eventually force the lower classes to internalize this authority.

Central to the division between the common man and upper classes was the confidence man. For the upper and the emerging middle classes, he became the “scapegoat for the loss of a mythical era when American social relations had known nothing but integrity, harmony, and obedience to legitimate authority” (Halttunen 22). The destabilization of social relations that came about as a result of the confidence man model was disruptive to the upper classes because this model could not be reinforced through ethical training, in contrast to the self-made man. Karen Halttunen argues that the ethic of the

self-made man was that “by exercising self-possession, self-government, and, above all, self-reliance, he placed himself beyond evil influences and became a law unto himself” (25). However, this self-reliance and self-government was not divorced from traditional authoritative sources. Self-made men could potentially become part of the cultural aristocracy, thereby reinforcing the dominant modes of success. In other words, self-made men would beget other self-made men. The self-made man, in its tradition ranging back to Franklin, was personified in the public figure of Andrew Jackson, who had *seemingly* come from the Tennessee woods directly into the White House. However, a closer look at Jackson demonstrates that his ascension to the American presidency was more likely the result of “careful planning, tight organization, and well-timed mudslinging” (D. Reynolds 72). Jackson was indeed an aristocrat, but one made, not born. His aristocratic predilection for dueling underscores his tenuous class status, as a man who adhered to the Southern code of honor, but also a firebrand who could not adopt the coolness of aristocratic authority. The public face of Jackson as the champion of the people obscured not only his aristocratic pretensions but what Jackson’s opponents claimed was the fact that he was “ignorant, violent, politically inexperienced, [and] even immoral” (D. Reynolds 72). This is not to say that Jackson’s opponents were right in their assessment but instead that the public representation of Jackson’s “democratic” ideals was much more important to his election than the intricate and nuanced reality of his political position. After all, Jackson did in fact ascend from the Tennessee woods directly to the presidency; his home was the massive plantation in Nashville named the Hermitage, where he owned over a hundred slaves.<sup>11</sup>

The oscillation of identity between the confidence man and the self-made man became the story of class in nineteenth-century America. The aristocracy and the emerging middle classes, under siege in the years following the Jacksonian revolution, found their model of the self-made man increasingly outdated as industrialization and urbanization led to the migration of people away from

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<sup>11</sup> For a well-rounded and overall fair portrait of Jackson, see H.W. Brands’ *Andrew Jackson: His Life and Times*

their ancestral homes. In contrast to the small communities of the early nineteenth century, in which all men were known to one another, population migration meant that strangers became much more common. These strangers' representations of themselves were all a community had to rely upon, replacing family history, connections, or personal wealth as sources of authority. These two conceptions of selfhood blur into one another: the ways in which the confidence man is a self-made man, in the sense of completely creating himself, but also how the self-made man is a confidence man, in the sense that the confidence of others was essential to his success. As Barnum and Franklin show, the public face of the self-made man often conceals the private methods of the confidence man. However, the upper classes backed the model of the self-made man, since it fell within as well as supported traditional moral and social boundaries. However, after the Jacksonian revolution, it became increasingly difficult for the upper classes to restrain the confidence man model from the next generation in this new and freshly democratic society. In an increasingly unknown and chaotic social world, "appearances were valued more than realities, and surface impressions proved more important than inner virtues" (Haltunnen 34). For the young man coming of age, the mastery of appearances personified by the confidence man was immensely tempting because his "own success at manipulating surface impressions for selfish gain was unquestionable" (34).

As urbanization became more of a fact throughout the nineteenth century, newly arrived immigrants and city dwellers grappled with new ways to create community. A land of strangers and possible confidence men was not always conducive to forming communal relationships. In this world, Barnum began his career. Barnum came into the public consciousness at just the right moment in the nineteenth century to begin his career as a showman and purveyor of popular entertainment because certain members of the public were desirous of communal experience in its newfound isolation in urban environments. After his first exhibition of Joice Heath, Barnum's career began a wild trajectory of success, from his American Museum in New York City to the traveling exhibition of Tom Thumb and later



Jenny Lind, and the coda to his career, the Barnum and Bailey traveling circus. Barnum's career was largely a shift from his role as a popularizer of democratic, classless amusements designed purely for profit and entertainment to purportedly high cultural events which were meant to educate and enlighten. The shift in Barnum's career, parallel with his shift in class status, can be seen in his tour with Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind in 1850-51. Barnum's tour with Lind was meant to bring high culture to America. It also had the added benefit of making a great deal of money for Barnum. Jenny Lind was portrayed as the ideal of femininity, polite and demure, while singing mostly American popular songs and German operas, precisely the opposite of the typical presentation of the highly sexualized operas of Italy.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to his usual amusement strategy, which was to keep prices reasonable for all classes, Barnum sold tickets so high for Lind's appearances that much of the working-class could not afford tickets to the shows. At many of Lind's shows, a large crowd, priced out of the opera house, would gather outside and clamor to hear her perform. The roar of the crowd outside at some performances was often loud enough to drown out Lind's voice. With his tour of Jenny Lind, Barnum made evident that he had chosen his "audience" and his role as the educator of all classes, an educator for all to become one of the middle and upper classes.

One of the best examples of the class divide between high and low culture came in 1893 at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In the midst of a landscape dominated by classical Greek architecture and pristine white buildings, the organizers of the Columbian Exposition were met with the crude reality that the world's fair must be profitable; therefore, it was unavoidable to include popular amusement in the White City (Bogdan 49). The Midway at the Columbian Exposition was full of sideshows, scientific specimens from exotic locales in their "natural habitat," and a consortium of showmen from all around the country. Although the images of the White City had a certain cultural fascination for visitors, it was the Midway which remained both the economic and metaphorical heart of the Columbian Exposition. At

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<sup>12</sup> See Bluford Adams' *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture*, pg. 41-74 for an excellent analysis of the Jenny Lind phenomenon and its relationship to class-based authority.

the midway, even “if the hustle-and-bustle of the multiracial, multiethnic Midway did not embody a white businessman’s ideal of America” the chaotic and diverse scene “was closer to, if still far from, a true cultural democracy” (Cullen 90). Additionally, a short ways away from the fairgrounds, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West had set up their own exhibition, which the organizers of the fair had refused to admit into Columbian Exposition. Buffalo Bill set up his troupe next door and had a successful run throughout the fair, costing the organizers money in lost customers and lost revenue from his potential exhibition at the fair. Despite the literal ivory towers which dominated the landscape of the fair, it was impossible for organizers to keep the less desirable elements of society out of the White City.

The debate between high and low culture was a recent development during the emergence of popular entertainment beginning in the 1830s. Barnum’s burgeoning entertainment industry, through his American Museum, traveling exhibitions of oddities such as Joice Heath and Tom Thumb, and circus ventures, demonstrated that there was a market for popular entertainment in the United States. When populations gravitated towards the cities and urban centers, people found themselves with increased leisure time but divorced from the family structure that would have occupied their time in a traditional community. During the emergence of the popular entertainment industry, in order to make shows more affordable, “new theaters were built with much larger seating capacities and much lower ticket prices” (Toll *Show* 4). Because of this new affordability and the initial lack of class segregation in these urban spaces, the audience “cut across racial, class and gender lines” (Cullen 47). The class exclusion which eventually became a feature of opera, theater, symphony and high art museums had not yet begun to formalize.

The overwhelming popularity of Shakespeare throughout the nineteenth century is a striking example of the lack of class distinction in popular entertainment. As Lawrence Levine points out, Mark Twain’s use of Shakespeare in *Huckleberry Finn*’s famous soliloquy scene with the king and duke “relies on his audience’s familiarity with *Hamlet* and its ability to recognize the duke’s improbable coupling of

lines from a variety of Shakespeare's plays...Everywhere in the nation burlesques and parodies of Shakespeare constituted a prominent form of entertainment" (13). Shakespeare was not a property of high culture but instead a central part of American culture. In fact, Levine suggests that "Shakespeare was performed not merely alongside popular entertainment as an elite supplement to it; Shakespeare was performed as an integral part of it. Shakespeare *was* popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America" (21). The distinction of Shakespeare as a high cultural event did not yet exist. Much as in his own time, Shakespeare's plays were performed before a mixed audience. It would be relatively safe to assume that working-classes from the Bowery and rich socialites from uptown were both intimately familiar with Shakespeare's words and plays.

The initial audience for popular entertainment was different not just in its lack of class distinction but also in their highly communal experience of the theatre. Attending the theatre was an interactive experience. Audiences "felt entitled to comment on the entertainment by hissing at the performers and the crowd's wishes often determined which pieces the orchestra would play" (Cullen 48). Additionally, physical interaction with the performance was also common, as "some members of the audience would throw objects at those actors and musicians who had provoked their scorn" (Cullen 48). An 1875 satirical pamphlet entitled "Rules for Visiting a Place of Amusement" by Duprez and Benedict's Minstrels gave their tongue-in-cheek instructions on "proper" behavior at the theater, closely resembling the actual behavior of theater-goers in the nineteenth century: "As soon as you have been seated...eat peanuts, whistle and stamp your feet so everybody will know you're an old theatre-goer...If you recognize anyone in the gallery holler to them" (quoted in Toll *Blacking* 12). The pamphlet also advised patrons to "spit all over the floor, if there are any spittoons they're meant for ornamentation...spit so a lake will form at your feet. If there be many ladies and children in the audience, take out your pipe or segar [sic], smoke, enjoy yourself; you paid to come in, didn't you?" (quoted in Toll *Blacking* 12). This type of behavior was also prevalent in cultural institutions, such as New

York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1891, the Met opened its doors on Sunday afternoon to the general public for the first time. Since Sunday was the only day off for many working-class patrons, the attendees were largely unaccustomed to visiting high cultural institutions such as the Met. Canes and umbrellas were checked at the door so no one would be able to use them as a weapon or instrument of destruction towards the valuable artwork. Mark Twain reportedly ridiculed these stipulations when, during a visit to the Met, "he was requested to leave his cane in the cloakroom, to which he responded: 'Leave my cane! Leave my cane! Then how do you expect me to poke holes through the oil paintings?'" (quoted in Levine 185). The attendees were reportedly "armed with baskets of lunch and restless babies," had "repulsive and unclean" habits, and "took the liberty of handling every object within reach; some went to the length of marring scratching, and breaking articles unprotected by glass; a few proved to be pick-pockets" (quoted in Levine 183). In other words, the attendees at the Met acted in much the same way that they would have at other popular amusements of the day. For the upper classes and the cultural elite, it was essential these classes were taught to realize the difference. They had to be taught *how* to be a proper audience, a parallel process that ran along with the development of popular entertainment in the early nineteenth century and one that would not become fully legitimated until the emergence of mass entertainment in the early-twentieth century.

One of the first instances of these class-based audiences coming into conflict with one another is the Astor Palace Riot of 1849. The riot was, in many ways, "a dispute about the correct way to perform the lead role in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*" (Cullen 49). The main disputants were Edwin Forrest, an American, and William Macready, an Englishman. Forrest, as a native, was the favorite of the lower classes. He was a strong, muscular type whose *Macbeth* oddly matched these robust qualities. Macready, on the other hand, was a classically trained Londoner who became famous for returning to the text of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, as opposed to the "happy ending" adaptation by Nahum Tate. His acting style was significantly more subdued and he was generally more well-considered abroad than

Forrest. When Macready came to the Astor Palace in May 1849, he was met with scorn from the top level of the Opera House, where Forrest's supporters had bought out the tickets and were pelting the stage with rotten vegetables. When Forrest performed a few days later, he was heartily cheered and lauded by the audience. Macready decided to return to London but was dissuaded by a number of prominent New Yorkers, including Herman Melville, to continue his run at the Astor Palace. On the night of his performance, a riot ensued in which twenty-two people died, and over one hundred and fifty were wounded (Levine 65). While the riot was a dispute over the audience's preference between Forrest and Macready, it was also, a "struggle for power and cultural authority within theatrical space" (Levine 68). Although it was a slow process, the cultural and class-based distinction of popular entertainment had begun, in which "theater no longer functioned as an expressive form that embodied all classes within a shared public space, nor did Shakespeare much longer remain the common property of all Americans" (Levine 68). In the Astor Palace Riot, the upper classes had learned the potential dangers of a classless audience in which authority reigned in the majority. The Jacksonian revolution made manifest in the cultural arena posed a potential threat, a threat which had to be reined in by the cultural and social elite in order to maintain their position as the legitimate rulers of American society.

Having outlined the distinct class battle taking place within the culture, and specifically within popular entertainment, I want to examine the internal arena of popular entertainment and how these forms of cultural exchange functioned in their own environment. In order to properly explain this environment, I borrow Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. I believe that popular entertainment was frequently a carnivalesque environment, what Bakhtin called a "second world and second life outside officialdom" (*Rabelais* 6). However, I must qualify this use of the carnivalesque by saying, with Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, that "the politics of carnival cannot be resolved outside of a close historical examination of particular conjectures: there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression" (16). This is essential to understanding the carnivalesque within nineteenth-

century entertainment and my particular adaptation of the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque element in popular entertainment changes over time and becomes reformulated depending on the historical situation, audience reaction and specific performance. In other words, the carnivalesque is often a historically-reactive element in popular entertainment. For example, in the early nineteenth century, when the audience remained of a mixed class, I find a stronger carnivalesque element when, as Bakhtin writes, “people who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact” (*Problems* 123). However, as the upper classes struggled to legitimate their own authority against the emerging threats of an unsettled working class, immigration, and free African-Americans, popular entertainment began splitting apart into its respective class spheres. According to Lawrence Levine,

Theaters, opera houses, museums, auditoriums that had once housed mixed crowds of people experiencing an eclectic blend of expressive culture were increasingly filtering their clientele and their programs so that less and less could one find audiences that cut across the social and economic spectrum enjoying an expressive culture which blended together mixed elements of what we would today call high, low, and folk culture (208).

Eventually, popular entertainment, like Bakhtin’s medieval carnival, “continued and still continues to exist...but they have lost their former significance and their former wealth of forms and symbols” (*Problems* 131). But, as this process of class bifurcation entered various stages, popular entertainment changed to react to it. As Eric Lott argues about the minstrel show, “one of minstrelsy’s functions was precisely to bring various class fractions into contact with one another, to mediate their relations, and finally to aid in the construction of class identities over the bodies of black people” (67). Later minstrel shows and the increasingly violent racism of the 1890s represented a working class attempt to alleviate “an acute sense of class insecurity by indulging feelings of racial superiority” (Lott 64). A close historical and cultural analysis of popular entertainment will help locate the carnivalesque in the forms it takes within a particular historical period. The reactivity of popular entertainment to larger social and cultural debates is essential in locating its potentially transgressive elements.

Also essential to understanding popular entertainment is the fundamental concept of space. Entertainment environments were separate spaces for patrons, where many of the traditional societal rules were temporarily suspended. Michel Foucault's concept of the heterotopic space can be helpful in understanding this cultural arena. Foucault describes a heterotopia as "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (24). The trait of the heterotopic space that I want to highlight in popular entertainment is its capacity for creating "a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory" (Foucault 27). In the entertainment environment, the unspoken could be mixed with the spoken in ways not possible in regular life. Often, this space worked to undermine the delicately constructed hierarchies of social relations. The space of popular entertainment is also a space which has a changing and often contradictory relationship with society at large; these spaces are "capable of juxtaposing in a single space several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 25). The meaning of the entertainment space may change over time, in response to the greater needs or manipulation of society: "a society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion" (Foucault 25). The unique heterotopic space of nineteenth-century amusements, within its historical context, is a space that "belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play" (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 6).

In the entertainment environments themselves, there are two interrelated categories of attraction of the entertainment between and to the popular audience. First, there is what Neil Harris calls the "operational aesthetic," meaning "an approach to experience that equated beauty with information and technique, accepting guile because it was more complicated than candor" (57). This is intimately related to the attraction of the confidence man, not just as a mode of social mobility but as a trickster figure in which the audience has "an interest in trying to discover the underlying logic of

trickery” (Cullen 67). For example, Barnum’s Joice Heath exhibition, where he changes the interest in her from her status as George Washington’s ancient nurse to the possibility that she may instead be an automaton composed of rubber and whale bone. This brought the audience back for a second look at Heath, since their interest now was not in the truth or falsity of Barnum’s claims about Heath but instead how any such trickery would be accomplished. The certain pleasure of being humbugged can also be seen in Barnum’s buffalo hunt in 1843. Spectators would be ferried over to Hoboken, where they could witness cowboys hunting live buffalo brought in from New Mexico. When they arrived, they were witness to malnourished miniature buffalo Barnum had bought from a nearby merchant. However, instead of being outraged at the deception, the audience reportedly “gave three cheers for the author of the humbug, whoever he might be” (Barnum *Struggles* 355). The pleasure they felt by being deceived outweighed their derision over being duped. To be fooled was enjoyable to many nineteenth-century Americans, largely because they hoped to grasp onto the “logic of trickery” for their own uses. Similar to the temptations of young men becoming confidence men when they arrived into the dangerous city, the tricks of the confidence-game were something appreciated by audiences largely because they wanted to know how the game worked so they could play it themselves.

To those who found this type of humbuggery disreputable, there was also an answer for that challenge: entertainment as education. If audience members wanted to know how a trick worked or how an exhibit could fool them as part of an “operational aesthetic”, this could also be education, or could at least be reconfigured in that way. In the case of Barnum’s American Museum, “by blurring the line between edification and entertainment, [Barnum] was able to greatly expand the range of popular culture and the market for it” (Cullen 67). The American Museum billed itself as an educational institution, albeit an institution which contained minstrel shows, melodramas, freak shows, and other exhibited oddities. However, Barnum tapped into the middle-class ideal that “leisure time should not be spent in idleness and frivolity but in edifying and constructive activities” (Dennett 6). If one was learning



about other cultures (through exoticized displays), other races (through minstrel impersonation), social issues (through melodramatic performance), or gender (through sentimentalized portrayals of men and women in plays) then popular culture could serve as an educational experience. In this way, Barnum's American Museum could be visited by both the middle and lower classes, each of which got a distinct experience out of the visit.

The perception of these exhibitions and performances is also tied to the concept of the "operational aesthetic." The second major attraction for audiences of popular entertainment was the performance of identity by exhibitions and entertainers. These performances were often either racial or cultural performances. African-Americans, Native Americans, disability and gender were understood in popular entertainment as performed identities, often in stark contrast to the realities of these historically contentious identities. Cross-dressing performances, for instance, were wildly popular in the late nineteenth century. Male performers dressed up as women were often so convincing that they received love letters from their male admirers, who thought of them as women. In many cases, male performers were more convincing as women than actual women. This was largely because, as Robert Toll argues, "the serious female illusionist, whether consciously or not, addressed and capitalized on the public's concern about women's role in society (*Show* 245). Female illusionists portrayed femininity, or the ideal femininity, more *accurately*, according to nineteenth-century standards of gender, than women. For some nineteenth-century audiences, the best woman was in fact a man. These performances could be made to reinforce societal standards, as in the case of women, or to severely complicate them, as in the case of blackface minstrel performers. Social commentary "became the primary concern of white minstrelsy in the late nineteenth century" due the tension that "immigration, urbanization and modernization" placed upon the populace, forcing it to "undergo fundamental institutional, social, and moral changes" (Toll *Blacking* 160). The blackface minstrel had a unique social position because he could "express serious criticism without compelling the listener to take them

seriously" (Toll *Blacking* 161). Minstrels performed an African-American stereotype, but one that both wore the mask and enabled the performer to speak powerfully from behind it. The minstrel mask was "a derisive celebration of the power of blackness; blacks, for a moment, ambiguously, on top" (Lott 29). From this vantage point, Mark Twain's love of the minstrel show can be understood. According to Sharon McCoy, Twain's affection for the minstrel show was tied to the particularly risqué show of the San Francisco Minstrels, who "reveled in social and political satire and burlesque, improvising biting routines on current events and public figures or performing skits and songs that transgressed accepted boundaries of race, class, and culture" (233). The minstrel mask was ambivalently directed at both the authoritative culture and the audience themselves. In the particular situation of the working-class minstrels in the New York bowery, as Jim Cullen points out, "for white workers losing hope of ever moving beyond wage-earning status, there was a kind of pleasure in figures who exposed the contradictions of U.S. life" (67). The minstrel show fulfilled a need for its audience, in its performance of race and the underlying carnivalesque gesture towards class relations in working-class neighborhoods. Minstrel performers could indulge in subversive social critique regarding the economic oppression of the working man, while at the same time reinforcing the racial argument of the superiority of white working men over their black counterparts.

However, the functional aspect of population entertainment's representations of identity would change over time. In the sideshow, for example, the reaction of audience to the freak show is, according to Bogdan, a "result of our socialization, and of the way social institutions managed these people's identities"(x). For Tom Thumb, his constant costuming in Napoleonic outfits and other royal attire was meant to reformulate his small stature as ridiculous in comparison to his grandiose garments. For freak shows, considerations of "how they were packaged, how they were dressed, how they acted, and what the audience was told about them" were essential in "determining their success, in making them a freak" (Bogdan 95). Barnum's famous display, "What Is It?" resembles a perfect marriage of the

operational aesthetic and representation as identification. The original exhibition, in his American Museum, displayed William Henry Johnson, a “small, retarded black man...with a large nose, protruding eyes, and no hair except a little tuft near the center of his pointed head” (Dennett 31). Barnum placed the onus of responsibility for configuring the exhibit’s identity onto the audience. This meant not only was the audience in part “responsible” for their conception of the exhibition and any alleged “misrepresentations” of the exhibit (Dennett 31). The representations were often contradictory, even within the same character and show.

In the case of the representations of Native Americans in both the Wild West and the Indian medicine shows, Indians became both the representation of unsullied nature, health, and purity of the western experience, *as well as* incapable of competing with the superior prowess of white civilization and shown to be unchristian heathens. The representative Native Americans would often spend the first part of the show making medicine for the white man and the second part of the show engaged in violent combat with him. This seeming contradiction fit seamlessly into the audience’s preconceived notions of Native American savagery, which meant both closeness to nature and dangerous brutishness. The relationship between Indians and whites was “framed in particular contexts of power” made evident through “participatory exchanges between audience and exhibitor” that made Indian medicine “into a desirable, manageable and salable commodity” (Bellin 27). The Indian medicine show performance was based on the simultaneous “cultural fulfillment” and “cultural lack” of the “audience perceiving itself to be in the need of some essential quality that could be met through the consumption of Indian-themed spectacle or the merchandise affiliated with it” while also maintaining the appropriate hegemony of the “cultural superiority of the white man” by focusing on “his domination of the space through managerial direction and physical violence” (Bellin 27). The Wild West and the depictions of Indians in Indian medicine shows increased in popularity after the “closing of the frontier” by Frederick Jackson Turner at the Columbian Exposition in 1893. In his Wild West next door to the Exposition, Buffalo Bill actualized

Turner's thesis by demonstrating the centrality of the Wild West experience to traditional American virtues. His show was one of the first to link "national identity and popular culture, between Americans' understanding of their history and their consumption of spectacularized versions of it" (Kasson 18). Native Americans were forced to fit into that history, as versions of themselves that reinforced conceptions of their savagery while also fulfilling the role of nostalgia for the frontier and "natural" ways of life which they represented for white audiences. In this way, Native Americans were symbolically castrated as actors within American history, as ultimately the "losers" of history, but were reinscribed as tied to the natural world of the land, a world which white Americans were forced to leave behind in the name of industrial and economic progress.<sup>13</sup>

The world of nineteenth-century entertainment was a cultural spectacle; it was impossible to divorce popular entertainment from social and cultural debates going on at the time. Additionally, the diversity of responses to those debates was often subject to a number of influences from the demands of the audience, to the external pressure exerted by cultural authority, dominant ideologies, or racial hierarchy. However, popular entertainment often subverted the dominant ideology through its use of ridicule and impersonation and, in many cases, through the figure of the confidence man. In the next chapter, I examine one entertainment form in close detail, the traveling medicine show. The medicine show had its heyday from 1880 to 1900, with the last major medicine show shutting down by the 1950s. The medicine show has a complex history, engaging in critical cultural debates about professionalization of medicine and class authority. The medicine show pitchmen are the direct progenitor of the confidence man tradition, through the lens of popular amusements. More than any other actor in popular entertainment, he makes his living from the manipulation of language and his audience. As Fred 'Doc' Bloodgood, former pitchman himself, once said, "I have always loved words and I am grateful that

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<sup>13</sup> My use of the term castrated is meant to indicate the way in which Native Americans were removed as actors within their own culture and history, as subservient to the dominant white culture. Namely, castration meant that Native Americans lost all autonomy in these shows and filled only functional symbolic roles for white audiences.

I was able to build my life around them” (McNamara “Talking” 56). Through the medicine show, the particular contexts of popular entertainment, cultural history, and models of class persona come to bear on the literariness central to the medicine show pitchmen. As with the confidence man, the medicine show pitchmen is a written and performed persona, one that, through the performance of the cultural spectacle of the traveling medicine show, plays with the predominant social tensions entailed both in that performance and the historical context surrounding the medicine show. A close examination of how the mantle of the confidence man is performed by the medicine show pitchmen will be immensely useful in situating the traveling medicine show within nineteenth-century popular amusements as well as the surrounding culture. The inherent instability of the confidence man model offers a unique opportunity to the medicine pitchmen for performing within the heterotopia of the show itself, gesturing towards that instability as well as the possibilities of carnivalesque transgression.

#### 4 Chapter Three: “Never Use One Word Where Four Will Do”<sup>14</sup>: The Life and Eventual Death of the Traveling Medicine Show

As the eighteenth century drew to a close on the deathbed of George Washington, professional medicine was in trouble. Washington had come down with a bad case of pneumonia, from riding on horseback through freezing rain to survey the daily operation of Mount Vernon. His physicians attempted bloodletting in treating him, which drained a majority of Washington’s blood from his system. On December 14, 1799, Washington died at the age of 67.<sup>15</sup> Although he had been in robust health for a man of his age, the bloodletting treatments of his doctors, if they did not kill Washington outright, at the very least greatly aggravated his condition. However, it would be thoroughly ahistorical to blame Washington’s physicians for poor judgment. Bloodletting was a preferred and well respected treatment option. In fact, Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the original signers of the Declaration of Independence and the nation’s premier doctor, emphasized bleeding and purging as essential to medical health. He thought it would be useful to even remove eighty per cent of the body’s blood when the situation was dire enough (*Young Toadstool* 37). This was not uncommon in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, when a doctor’s treatment for disease generally consisted of “a combination of three methods: bleeding, blistering and purging” (Calhoun 65). The primary medicine Lewis and Clark took on their expedition were the so-called “Rush’s thunderbolts”, a combination of jalap and calomel, both strong laxatives. The pills were thought of as a purgative for any disease the expedition would come across.

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<sup>14</sup> This quotation comes from Fred “Doc” Bloodgood, one of the more colorful and interesting former pitchmen, interviewed by Brooks McNamara. Bloodgood’s saying, which was “I have always made it my practice never to use one word where four will do”, exemplifies the verbosity necessary to the medicine pitchmen, in focusing on both the selling situation and the audience itself (McNamara “Talking” 39).

<sup>15</sup> See Joseph Ellis’ *His Excellency: George Washington* for a more thorough discussion of Washington’s death and modern explanations for his demise

The professional standards, methods, and class status of doctors changed significantly over the course of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> While the assumption may be that the intellectual and scientific progression of medicine over that time eventually led to the increased professional and class status of doctors, a closer historical look reveals the inner tensions and historical moves the medical profession made throughout the nineteenth century. Despite the well-respected Dr. Rush, most doctors were not held in high esteem. In fact, most medical care had nothing to do with doctors; treatment “took place within the household or through quasi-familial relationships” (Starr 588). Hospitals, in the days before widespread knowledge of antisepsis, “were regarded with dread, and rightly so. They were dangerous places; when sick, people were safer at home” (Starr 592). However, the low status of doctors in society was not entirely due to the often-unfavorable outcomes of their treatment. Doctors were not thought of as great healers or necessarily having special knowledge. The reverent and class conscious relationship with doctors had to be learned, much like the training of the nineteenth-century audiences to appreciate opera etiquette. In trying to draw comparisons to the status of doctors during this time, medical historian Paul Starr argues “the less ‘medicalized’ lower social strata of recent decades may reflect beliefs, attitudes, and necessities that were once far more widespread” (593). Because of their low status in society, most doctors were unable to fully support themselves in their salary; many doubled as either farmers or laborers (Starr 592).

It should be no surprise then that the Jacksonian revolution, in its war against social and cultural privilege, would side against the professional classes of doctors, whose “superior” knowledge set them against the “age of the common man”. In Jacksonian America, “deference to superiority” was destroyed and instead “provincialism and aggressive individualism” reigned supreme (Kett ix). The intense aversion

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<sup>16</sup> Much of this discussion draws from Paul Starr’s work on the social history of medicine, as well as James Harvey Young’s invaluable work on patent medicine *Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in America Before Federal Regulation* and his series of essays *American Health Quackery*. Robert Wibe’s *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* has also been immensely useful in understanding the chaotic environment of the late nineteenth century and the desire for the emerging middle classes to impose profession order on social and cultural life.

to class and professional authority eventually led to the destruction of licensing requirements for physicians. By mid-century, nearly anyone who called themselves a doctor ostensibly was one (Wiebe 114). The hostility towards professional authority opened the floodgates of the medical profession. Distrust and dislike of doctors led the “common man” to believe anyone could be a doctor, or at the very least had the same potential healing powers as a physician. Coupled with the American inclination towards home care and their “eager eclecticism with respect to medical remedies,” American medicine largely took place within the home, not under the care of a professional physician or often even under the guidance of a doctor at all (Young *Toadstool* 8).

Besides deconstructing the medical profession as a cohesive body of knowledge, the decentralization and egalitarianism of medicine also brought patent medicines to the forefront. Patent medicines were largely a mixture of home remedies produced and sold by individual sellers or a business entity which made remedies sold at the local pharmacy. The case of Lydia Pinkham provides an interesting example. Pinkham’s husband was financially ruined in the Panic of 1873. In desperate times, Lydia decided to package her home remedy for “female troubles” and start a family business. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound was wildly successful. Lydia herself became the face of the company, a friendly matronly figure who was counsel to troubled young women. She answered letters and testimonials from satisfied customers. When Lydia died in 1888, she continued to answer customer letters until 1905, when it became publically known that she had actually died nearly twenty years prior. But the shift from Lydia Pinkham’s home remedy on the stove to the mass production of her medicine in a factory was symbolic of the emerging business of patent medicines. While patent medicines were not a new phenomenon, the opening up of the medical profession to unlicensed and faux-doctors, along with the American proclivity toward home remedy, made the conditions perfect for the patent medicine



industry.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the fact that many patent medicines, like Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, contained either alcohol, morphine or both made for many satisfied and repeat customers. Patent medicine makers and their vendors provided patients with an alternative to the often brutal and dangerous therapy of doctors (Young *Toadstool* 37). The production and distribution of patent medicines became a big business. Newspapers were flooded with advertisements for blood pills, liver nostrums, kidney remedies, and drugs for male and female *problems*, the polite word for impotence, pregnancy, and menstruation. The close relationship between the newspapers and patent medicines would be a major factor in maintaining the patent medicine business. Newspapers often relied on the extensive advertising of patent medicines to pay their bills. As James Harvey Young argues, newspapers "were not apt to bite with vigor the hand that fed so lavishly. So the quantity of criticism was small and the purpose frequently not so much a sincere attack on quackery as a means of lambasting a rival journal" (*Toadstool* 83).<sup>18</sup> Not until the writings of the muck-raking journalists of the progressive era, led by Samuel Hopkins Adams, would patent medicines begin to take a beating in the popular presses. For the time being, it was left to the deregulated, decentralized medical profession to rail against patent medicines, in the face of public opinion and government deregulation. It was a fight they would continue to fight, but would not win until the very end of the nineteenth century.

While the selling of patent medicines took place through the mail, in pharmacies and over the kitchen counter, the most infamous seller of drugs was the traveling medicine show.<sup>19</sup> The medicine show was revolutionary in a number of ways but one of its most important contributions was its unique

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<sup>17</sup> This trend went as back as the colonial days and the Old World. Ben Franklin's mother-in-law Widow Read advertised for her own remedy in his *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Young *Toadstool* 18).

<sup>18</sup> This is not a trend that ended with the banning of patent medicines from the United States. Some of most important rock n' roll stations in the 1950s and 60s were so-called "border blasters", broadcasting high-frequency signals from Mexico. These stations were funded by quacks such as John R. Brinkley, who was famous for transplanting goat glands into humans, and Norman Baker, who claimed to be able to cure cancer without radiation or surgery. The relationship between quackery, advertising and mass media is long and continues to this day (Anderson 163-64)

<sup>19</sup> In my work on medicine shows, I am greatly indebted to James Harvey Young for his work on patent medicines and Brooks McNamara for his important work on the theatricality of medicine shows. Young's *Toadstool Millionaires* and McNamara's *Step Right Up* and assorted articles throughout the years are essential to anyone hoping to understand nineteenth-century medicine and the traveling medicine show.

combination of popular entertainment and commodity consumption. Ann Anderson calls the medicine show a “hybrid of popular culture and confidence game” (2). The entanglement of economics with entertainment on a grand scale set the template for the future of radio and television. However, to merely discuss medicine shows in their relationship to the marriage of consumption and entertainment is to whitewash it in a way that misses the point of the medicine show. The driving force behind the traveling medicine show was, of course, to sell medicine. But the medicine show was also an extension of the confidence man tradition in nineteenth-century literature and history, coupled with the injection of popular entertainment. This made the medicine show a thoroughly unstable environment, full of multiple meanings for its audience. There was a great deal more going on in medicine shows than rubes being duped into buying dangerous medicines by hucksters. This is a moral judgment that makes it impossible to actually *understand* what happened in the medicine show, how the performers and the audience engaged with one another in a much more diverse and contradictory way than a simple explanation of economic exploitation. As in the case of popular entertainment in the nineteenth century, a closer historical look into the history of American medicine is necessary to understand how this phenomenon became so popular in its day, its historical importance for the lessons it can teach us, and its lasting impact on modern American culture.

While traveling medicine men pitching homemade and factory-made nostrums existed throughout the nineteenth century, the heyday of the mass traveling medicine show was in the 1880s and 1890s (Young *Toadstool* 191). As I have suggested above, this was a contentious period in American culture, due primarily to mass immigration, professionalization, and the participation of freedmen in daily American life, both in the North and South. The most popular period of the medicine show was also the time in which it became the greatest threat to the re-professionalization of the medical industry, which regained licensing privileges in the United States during this period. The last two decades of the nineteenth century were vital to the emergence of the medical profession (Kett vii). As

the medicine show struggled and eventually succumbed to the pressures put on it by the medical industry and the progressive impulse to professionalize society, it also performed these class and social tensions for its audience.

In contrast to most of the entertainment discussed in the previous chapter, medicine shows were primarily rural, a fact essential to understanding its performance. In many rural areas, medicine shows were nearly the only form of professional entertainment locals enjoyed all year (McNamara "Indian" 431). The largely rural audience has made it significantly easier for critics to argue that the audiences were merely rubes taken advantage of by the slick medicine show salesmen. However, the relationship between audience and performer had not yet become one of passive reception on the part of the audience. As discussed in the previous chapter, audience participation and exchange was an essential part to any medicine show performance. According to folklorists Amanda Dargan and Steven Zeitlin, the sales pitch was largely in "response to the demands of the selling situation" (Dargan 31). The medicine pitchmen had to adapt to his audience; audiences had yet to be culturally trained to be passive receptors of entertainment or consumption. Additionally, while the medicine pitch was the primary part of the show, the various forms of entertainment, in contrast to many other forms of popular entertainment, was free. For most large medicine shows, which often contained minstrel songs, vaudeville acts, country humor and music, money was made solely on medicine and candy sales. Candy sales were a unique phenomenon in medicine shows and one that has only rarely been discussed, largely because it does not fit within the narrative of the passive, swindled audience. Medicine pitchmen would have a main medicine pitch, sandwiched within the show, but would often come out again to sell candy, which also comprised a significant portion of the medicine shows' profit.

While medicine shows were often welcomed by small-town audiences, things were not quite as friendly with the local officials. Some local communities, especially in the South, had deep aversion to medicine shows, mainly because they were part of the thoroughly disputable tradition of theatre, widely

thought to be full of immoral and corrupt characters. As additional pressure from the fragmented medical profession, came down on communities, performance licenses were increasingly difficult to obtain without resorting to bribery (McNamara *Step 22*). Medicine shows were sent out of town, which was preferable for many medicine show pitchmen, who often refused to perform in small-town opera houses because they simply couldn't get the number of people necessary to make a profit off the show.

Brooks McNamara describes the stage for these traveling entertainments:

Typically, the old open-air show platforms stood in a vacant lot or a field in a small town or rural area. Seating arrangements varied, but often some spectators stood, other sat on benches or chairs, and, in some places, still others watched the show from their cars or trucks, parked in the rear of the lot. The shows tended to take place at night, with the platform brightly lit by strings of light bulbs, sometimes augmented by a floodlight or two ("Log" 76).

The medicine show environment was thoroughly informal. Besides the platform or small stage where the performance took place, it would be difficult to define where the performance began and ended. In this environment, the heterotopic and carnivalesque converged. The traveling medicine show was a transitory space; most medicine shows would stay "in small towns at least a week and preferably two. Large important companies that could draw huge crowds would work cities for as long as two months at a time" (McNamara *Step 47*). No medicine show could or would set up shop as a continuously present entertainment. It would lose the essential urgency of the medicine pitch and the pervasive strangeness of its attractions which made it desirable for an audience. As with the carnivalesque, the medicine show was also a momentary suspension of daily life and normal social relations. Going to the medicine show for rural audiences was an event, a break from the daily life of farm work that consumed their lives, sunrise to sundown. In the arena of the medicine show, audiences saw a world of entertainment that was completely different from daily existence. In this heterotopic space, daily existence could be deferred into widely divergent cultural modes that reflected and refracted the difficulties of life for rural audiences.

The most important medicine show performer was the pitchman. As Amanda Dargan and Steven Zeitlin observed in their study of occupational “talking” groups, “it is often the talker who makes the show for the viewers. His is the best performance and often the most memorable” (28). In most medicine shows, pitchmen were careful to couch their pitch between entertainments; it would not be prudent to begin selling to people before they had been entertained. This led many pitchmen to claim that people were not swindled by their shows. Former pitchmen Cliff Mann argues that “people got their money’s worth when they bought our medicine. We never had anything to do with those real con artists, the carnies, who took your money and didn’t give you a blamed thing for it” (quoted in Calhoun 12). Leaving aside for the moment moral objections to the medicine show selling situation, the verbal performance of the pitchmen illustrates Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, in the “borderline between art and life” (*Rabelais*7). His, or in rare cases her, performance was the central aspect of the medicine show, capable of inspiring a kind of trance-like frenzy towards the selling situation. Archie Moody, an auctioneer, claims he once auctioned off a trash can by mistake (Dargan 30). The verbal performance was so deeply entrancing that sometimes *what* was being sold was inconsequential. The artistic creation in the moment of the selling situation by the pitchmen often was a welcome rhetorical reprieve from daily life for rural audiences.

Pitchmen often utilized two primary modes of manipulation towards their audience: rhetorical and poetic. All of these modes of manipulation were designed towards convincing the audience to enter into the selling situation. The rhetorical function of medicine shows was environmental and visual, as well as verbal. The rhetoric of the medicine show was not only the argument the pitchmen made, but also the argument the environment made, in its performance, performance space, and performers themselves. The medicine show performance space was a liminal space, usually on the outskirts of a rural community. In these tents, showmen had complete control of the environment. While most of the funds would be devoted to the exterior of the show environment, since that would be the first thing

seen by audiences, the overall environment was designed to disorient the audience and take them even further outside of their daily life (McNamara "Scenography" 18). In addition to the bizarre and unusual attractions in between pitches, pitchmen would often display massive tapeworms preserved in mason jars full of alcohol, as supposedly successfully purged from the bodies of patients who had taken the available medication. In fact, the tapeworms were often scavenged from the meat stockyards as frightening exhibits to put on display. The environment was designed to spark interest and curiosity more than anything else. Pitchmen would go to extraordinary lengths to elicit this curiosity, a tradition mastered by P.T. Barnum. During the heyday of the American Museum in the 1850s, a man went around the neighborhood near Barnum's American Museum with five bricks. The man laid four of the bricks on nearby street corners, making a circuit between them, without a word to anyone, with a serious face all the while (Saxon 115). This created a great deal of curiosity in the public, who began following the man, soon attracting a crowd of nearly 500 persons. With the fifth brick in hand, the man walked into the front entrance of the American Museum. He would spend fifteen minutes in the museum, and then began his rounds once again. This publicity stunt by Barnum, who paid the man to make the circuit with his bricks, caused quite a stir and gave his museum free publicity. The basic sort of curiosity that pervades human nature even without spectacle was essential to the pitchmen. Historian Stewart Holbrook tells a story about Doc Black which illustrates the curiosity that pitchmen hoped to cultivate:

Doc Black was a lone worker, with neither band nor banjo player to attract a crowd. He set up his tripe and keister on a vacant lot, then displayed his ballyhoo on a second table. This consisted of a human skull, a big black Bible, and a short length of hemp rope. What these objects were supposed to mean was never known, for Black never once mentioned them. He merely stood there, his back to the sidewalk, moving first the skull, then the Bible, then the rope, rearranging them ever so little, as passers-by stopped to see what he was up to. He was most patient. He would stand there making no sound for half an hour or longer, moving the oddly assorted objects, frowning, moving them again, until a sidelong glance told him enough yokels had gathered to start his lecture. Then he would suddenly whirl to face the crowd, and instantly go into his pitch (202).

Amanda Dargan and Steven Zeitlin share a similar story told to them by Bronco West, which illustrates the essential point of involving the audience within the selling situation. His father, a magician and medicine pitchman in the early twentieth century, “would get a volunteer from the audience, ask her to hold a deck of cards wrapped in a handkerchief, and instruct the audience to watch the cards to make sure that they did not leave the hand of the volunteer. He would then proceed with his pitch, never performing a trick with the cards” (18). Entrancing the audience with mystery was essential to drawing them into the pitch itself.

The rhetorical situation of the medicine pitch was also essential to the selling situation. Traditionally, pitchmen would focus on the imminent danger of disease that was bearing down on the audience. In one of the more metaphysical speeches, one pitchmen attempted to frighten his audience with their impending death:

You are all dying, every man, every woman and child is dying; from the instant you are born you begin to die and the calendar is your executioner. That, no man can change or hope to change. It is nature's law that there is no escape from the individual great finale on the mighty stage of life where each of you are destined to play your farewell performance. Ponder well my words then ask yourselves the questions: Is there a logical course to pursue? Is there some way you can delay, and perhaps for years, that final moment before your name is written down by a bony hand in the cold diary of death? Of course there is, Ladies and Gentlemen, and that is why I am here (McNamara *Step Right Up* 43)

Pitchmen also had the problem of their reputation generally preceding them, usually in a negative way. To combat their reputation, pitchmen tried “to gain the confidence of the audience and to convince them of the talker’s honesty and authority” (Dargan 23). Often this would be accomplished through conscious masquerade, and manipulating figures of honesty, authority, or secret knowledge. Medicine woman Violent McNeal summarizes that “medicine men were divided roughly into three categories—the Indian doctors, the “Quaker” doctors, and the oriental doctors, of whom Will [McNeal’s husband] was the founder” (53). In many cases, the most knowledgeable and well-educated member of the medicine show was the pitchmen; the troupe would follow his lead in thematic consistency. One of the more popular pitchmen troupes were the Quakers, who were universally known for their trustworthy

and honest nature. McNeal theorizes this was because they “were understood to be a group activated to a high degree by the motives of gentleness and honesty” and people had a “fundamental faith” in Quakers (55). Quaker pitchmen were careful to never break character, by swearing or even breaking the supposed “accent” of their lineage; in fact most “pitchmen in somber Quaker garb vended remedies with much thee-ing and thou-ing” (Young *Toadstool* 199). The Oriental medicine show starred McNeal, who was an Iowan farm-girl but was featured as Princess Lotus Blossom, capitalizing on popular conceptions of “the Orient” as mysterious and exotic.

However, the most popular type of medicine show masquerade by far was the Indian Medicine Show. John Healy and Charles Bigelow ran one of the biggest of the late nineteenth century, the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Show. The major focus of Kickapoo was on the exotic remedies of the Kickapoo Indians, whose “noble medicine men deigned to leave the reservation only for the benefit of suffering mankind” (Anderson 62). Their best-selling remedy was Sagwa, which was shrouded in a Wild West legend featuring “Texas” Charlie Bigelow and his escape from death due to the healing remedies of Indian medicine men and their mysterious potion. Kickapoo focused on the dual nature of the Indian expected by white audiences, as discussed in the previous chapter, of both savage villain and sagacious healer. For the purposes of Healy and Bigelow, the Indian “became whatever he needed to be at the moment—perpetuator of lurid and blood-curdling acts of cruelty or benign and lofty forest creature from the patent medicine labels” (McNamara “Indian” 436). However, many of the “Indians” in the show, traditionally run by a white Western “scout,” were actually Native Americans, though not usually from the Kickapoo tribe. Healy and Bigelow often “contracted with federal Indian agents for their performers, offering thirty dollars a month and room and board to their wards” (McNamara 437). While this is a cultural tragedy, forcing Native Americans to act out their stereotypes in order to reinforce them for white audiences, Indian medicine shows, as well as Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, did for a time give Native Americans a financial outlet within the white world. The actual Kickapoo tribe remained on the



Deep Forks Reservation while their imitators were able to make money off of their projected image. Indian medicine shows provided a forum for Native American performers, who would act out this image for white audiences. It is difficult to determine who the trickster is in this situation: the white men who wished to see their ignorance performed, or the Native Americans, who at least knew better.

Performing as doctors was also quite common, but often done in a way that bordered on the comic. Fred Bloodgood appeared in front of audiences in a “doctor’s outfit, with a rattlesnake in one hand and a leghorn chicken in the other” (McNamara “Talking” 42). However, this was done primarily to spark customers’ curiosity. Professional physicians had little to do with the medicine show. Although most pitchmen would claim at least some medical knowledge, they would spend more time in their pitch degrading doctors than reinforcing the importance of professional medical knowledge. The difficult and painful treatment of many nineteenth-century doctors, inspired by Benjamin Rush, was an easy target for medicine shows, who promised easy remedies in a bottle for a price. Most medicine shows would keep a doctor on staff, just in case they were asked to meet licensing requirements by the nearby town, but these doctors were traditionally disgraced from their professions and often substance abusers. In fact, the staff doctor for medicine shows was more commonly known by his nickname, “The Boozer” (Anderson 144). The only image of professional medicine available in the medicine show was a weak former doctor, stuck on the bottle or the pipe. However, even this type of masquerade was important to the rhetoric of the medicine show and fit within the existing framework of Jacksonian rebellion against traditional authority.

When it came to the guidelines of the pitch itself, Fred Bloodgood had two primary rules: “always admit the obvious” and “be specific” (McNamara “Talking” 48, 50). Bloodgood argues against pitchmen attempting to claim their medicine was a panacea, a cure-all, because audiences would know “that if you had a cure-all it wouldn’t be necessary for you to be out with a medicine show” (“Talking” 48). While not all medicine men were as humble in their proclamation, and in fact many were even

more bombastic about their nostrums than seemed reasonable, most pitchmen relied on the conceptions of the exotic and the dangers of not buying the remedy as their primary rhetorical selling points (Dargan 19, 22). Patent medicines had to be, as a rule, exotic in some way. While some shows did this through masquerade and spectacle, the sale would often rely upon the individual relationship between the pitchmen and his audience. The nature of the rural late-nineteenth-century audience was interactive, as opposed to the passivity trained into audiences in urban environments by the end of the nineteenth century, which had yet to solidify in rural audiences attending medicine shows. Pitchmen were uniquely aware of their audience, which may account for the divergent opinions on the best way to handle an audience. Violet McNeal recounts a medicine pitch in which, after having been frustrated by the local authorities, she told the audience “Come up and buy it if you want to. Personally, I don’t care” (159). However, she quickly adds, “they surged up and bought lavishly” (159). Much of the rhetoric of the pitchmen was dependent upon their own particular viewpoint on the veracity of the pitch. When working as a carnival barker at a freak show, Fred Bloodgood was insistent to never see the inside of the freak show tent because “going into the tent and seeing the reality of the show might cause me to be unconvincing in my outside lecture...the reality was not precisely as I described it” (McNamara “Talking” 46). However, Violet McNeal would allow herself to indulge in the same fantasies regarding his exotic background as a “Oriental” healer as her audience when she writes, “I even let myself believe, just a tiny bit, that I had done what it said I had” (37). In the same way, pitchmen would employ various methods for demonstrating the danger of not buying the remedy. It was common for all medicine shows to feign a shortage in nostrums in order to put the pressure on the audience. This part of the pitch was traditionally called “the grind,” the goal of which was to “to maintain the momentum of the sale” (Dargan 25). The grind was looked down upon by many pitchmen at being less artistic than the full medicine pitch, since it was merely “continuous improvised patter designed to encourage the sale” (McNamara “Talking” 53). The grind was also the most chaotic part of the medicine show, resulting in

“controlled pandemonium”; however “in the space of three or four minutes close to a hundred bottles [had] been sold” (McNamara “Talking” 53). During the grind, men handing out the bottles in the audience would often call out to the pitchmen, “All out, Doc!” to reinforce the shortage of the remedy and the necessity of buying it before anyone else did. During the grind, the pitchmen would retire to the back of the tent and watch the resultant chaos of his verbal performance.

However, before the grind and after the audience had encountered the fantastical and exoticized nature of the entertainment environment, and most likely after a few minstrel, vaudeville or musical sketches, the pitchmen would come alone to the stage. His placement in the show was quite conscious. According to medical historian James Harvey Young, the entertainment before the pitchmen arrived “drove from their [the audience] minds extraneous concerns, and focused attention upon a novel and entrancing spectacle” (*Toadstool* 195). His pitch was for many the highlight of the show, the point at which the environmental and rhetorical arguments would converge. For the most part, medicine show pitchmen were known to “use an ornate style characteristic of 19<sup>th</sup>-century style writing and oratory” and to “employ extended metaphors and sustain a single train of thought” (Dargan 19). The goal of the pitchmen was to create images in the mind of their audiences that would induce them to make decisions about buying their product. Fred Bloodgood called this a “word picture” and claimed he “always tried to use alliteration and euphonious phrases” (McNamara “Talking” 52, 49). What was said was often less important than how it was said. One of Bloodgood’s freak show exhibitions he named “Neola” because the ‘long e’ and the ‘ah’ sounds...carried well over the noise of the midway” (McNamara “Talking” 44). The power of words, the combination of their sound and the images they painted, performed a sort of trance over the audience. The showmen “helps them [the audience] see the attractions on the inside differently than they might have had they not gone in with his images still in their minds. Through the power of his words, the talker can transform paltry attractions into unforgettable images, [and] the medicine show “doc” can convince audiences that they have been cured

by his tonics” (Dargan 28). In other words, the medicine show pitchman preps the audience for the resulting medical experience through his convincing language and images. The trance-like experience of the audience “liberates the listener from the restrictions of socially imposed ways of thinking and allows the free reign of the imagination” (Strum 293). In this “free reign of the imagination,”<sup>20</sup> pitchmen persuaded the audiences to believe a medicine *could* cure all their ailments, that such things *were* possible. Persuasion through imagination and desire was the genius of the medicine show and the reason for its massive popularity. The medicine show was not making rational arguments based upon the scientifically verifiable facts of their nostrums; instead they played upon the desires of the audience to be rid of the difficult worries of health posed the medical profession. The pseudo-scientific veneer of the medicine show was rhetorically useful but was not the definitive interpretation of patent medicine consumption for the medicine show. The pitchman, like the confidence man, used identity as a mirror to reflect the audiences’ fears and desires. In utilizing desirable forms of masquerade, pitchmen implicitly stated they could be trusted. Through the manipulation of the entertainment environment, they argued that the medicine show was a place of fun and entertainment. And finally, through their verbal performance, pitchmen entertained and entranced their audience into suspending their disbelief on the medical success of patent medicines. Through the manipulation of the confidence man tradition, with its focus on fluid identity and the pragmatic use of knowledge, medicine show pitchmen successfully integrated popular entertainment and big business, as well as changing conceptions of social class. Understanding the class basis for this integration, however, requires revisiting the medical profession and its eventual organization and triumph over medicine show and nostrum makers.

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<sup>20</sup> One possible place to still locate the type of audience relations of the carnivalesque and heterotopia available within nineteenth-century entertainment spaces are mass sporting events. Whereas audience participation was silenced in most popular amusements, sporting events retained the cultural spaces of allowing behaviors not accepted within everyday society. However, sporting events do not retain the central figure of the confidence man; this creates a cultural space in which the carnivalesque functions as cathartic societal element without the possibilities of transgression inherent in the confidence man figure.

In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, middle-class Americans began forming communities surrounding occupational identities, resulting in occupational societies for teachers, lawyers, doctors, and other members of the professional classes. These occupational groups became “forces of general social division” between “the major cities and rural-small town America” (Wiebe 130). Nonetheless, their major impact was only to solidify the educational, social and cultural differences that had already been in place (Wiebe 130). For the medical profession, this began with the restoration of medical licensing in the 1870s and 1880s (Starr 592). This resulted in the gradual shrinking in the supply of doctors, whose numbers had exploded when licensing was stripped away during the Jacksonian revolution (Star 602). The primary rival to the increasing occupational prestige of professional doctors, largely fueled by the increased status of science in society, was the patent medicine industry and the assorted industries it supported, such as the traveling medicine show (Starr 592). Additionally, the social reform movements that swept through American newspapers during the Progressive Era finally settled on patent medicines as a target. Even though patent medicines had been overlooked for years by newspaper reformers, mostly due to the massive advertising revenue it generated, the reform movements, backed by the new professional class of doctors, began the deconstruction of the patent medicine industry.

Samuel Hopkins Adams published “The Great American Fraud” in *Collier's Weekly* in 1905. Adams focused on the dangerous evils of nostrums and false doctors. He also provocatively pointed out the close relationship between the press and the patent medicine industry that fueled the general lack of criticism on the part of the press. Patent medicine makers decried they were being made out to be the villain in the newest social reform cause and societal forces were blaming them unfairly. However, they were not wrong; in fact, “there was a plot against them” that was spearheaded by “not only muckraking writers and doctors, not only pharmacists and chemists” as well state legislators who were feeling under increased pressure during the wave of Progressive reform and legislation (Young

*Toadstool* 225). In 1906, the Pure Food and Drug Act passed as the first in a series of legislation that would ultimately cause the demise of the patent medicine industry and the traveling medicine show as a result. Even though the medicine show would continue on for a number of years in some illegal fashion, the governmental pressure on them was too much. Violet McNeal claims that during this period she “hired a lawyer to keep me posted on new legislation that was passed. I made him write me a letter whenever a new drug law went into effect, and kept a file of them to show that my intent was to remain within the law” (105). As pitchmen were legally allowed to claim less and less for the medical worth of their products, they were many times forced to abandon their more vivid modes of presentation. Rural audiences were drawn away by the radio and eventually film and television industries. Medicine shows became a relic of the past, as new technologies and entertainment became more available, widespread, and easier to find in a radio box or a movie theater.

In many ways, the traveling medicine show represented to its audience was the rural Jacksonian ideal of the hostility towards professional and authoritative classes. The pitchmen, through his verbal eloquence, dethroned the authoritative figure of the doctor through his insistence on the ease of the panacea compared to the difficult and dangerous solutions of modern medicine. The fact that the medicine pitchmen were selling nostrums that were more or just as dangerous is not really the point. The struggle in the medicine show is in many ways the struggle over who has control over the most intimate relationship, control over one’s own body and health. As Robert Bogdan points out in his discussion of the freak show, doctors “were beginning to lay claim to authority over a wide range of human processes and conditions, including many forms of human difference. Human differences became medicalized as pathological—as ‘disease’” (Bogdan 63). The medicalization of all human difference had not just racial or disabled implications, but rather held implications for society at large. Rural audiences who still held firm belief in their control over their own bodies preferred the nostrum cures because it fit with their Jacksonian conception of the abilities of the “common man”. Medical

professionals, however, were insistent in their superior abilities over the body and the resultant superiority in class. As opposed to the poverty endured by doctors in the early nineteenth century, the relative shortage of doctors, due to the establishment of professional schools and standards, led to the increased status and income of the profession. According to Paul Starr, “as physicians’ incomes have risen relative to the population at large, patients have had an increased incentive to substitute their own time for that of the doctor’s by traveling to his office instead of paying him to visit their home” (598). Additionally, the dissolution of the importance and size of the family due to industrialization and urbanization made families less able to handle medical care as they had in the past. Because of “the separation of work from residence that came with the growth of the market economy and factory system”, there was less time and ability to care for the sick in the same way possible in a family-centered, agrarian economy (Starr 599). The outlawing of nostrum makers and medicine shows was due not just to the danger of their systems of care; it was also in a large part due to the threat they continued to pose to professional medicine. The alternative approach they offered, fitting in so well with the rural public’s Jacksonian conception of the dignity of the common man, was an approach that had to be delegitimized before the medical profession could become fully legitimated as both a system of care and a set of professional class relations.

As medicine shows began closing en masse in the early twentieth century, this erasure was indicative of the larger change into the age of the medicalization and professionalization of society, effectively ending the Jacksonian revolution in society, politics, and culture. The three primary factors of the medicine show, heterotopia, carnivalesque, and the figure of the confidence man, were broken apart into various cultural spaces, since they were threatening to the project of class professionalization. Carnivalization and the heterotopic spaces continued to function within society, but became invested

with the work of mass entertainment, which remained significantly more hegemonic in its cultural force.<sup>21</sup> The figure of the confidence man became a point on which the twentieth century began to grasp, as medicine pitchmen and showmen left popular amusement for other forms of employment.

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<sup>21</sup> One possible place to still locate the type of audience relations of the carnivalesque and heterotopia available within nineteenth-century entertainment spaces are mass sporting events. Whereas audience participation was silenced in most popular amusements, sporting events retained the cultural spaces of allowing behaviors not accepted within everyday society. However, sporting events do not retain the central figure of the confidence man; this creates a cultural space in which the carnivalesque functions as cathartic societal element without the possibilities of transgression inherent in the confidence man figure.



## 5 Afterword

Medicine shows continued throughout the first half of the twentieth century, but never on the grandiose scale or with the popularity they enjoyed during the 1880s and 1890s. The last traveling medicine show, run by Louisiana state senator Dudley LeBlanc, had its final show in 1951. LeBlanc corralled a fantastic assortment of celebrities to put on a show, from Bob Hope to Lucille Ball to Hank Williams and Jack Dempsey. LeBlanc's innovation in the medicine show was to actually sell the Hadacol, his professed cure-all, *before* the show. Two Hadacol box-tops were required for entry to the show. Additionally, LeBlanc would often send vouchers for free bottles of Hadacol into untapped markets. When customers, who wanted to get into the show, would go to their local pharmacy, they were unable to find anyplace to buy Hadacol. Under the intense pressure of consumer demand, the pharmacist would contact LeBlanc, who would have a truckload shipment of the medication unloaded by the next day, usually at a significant markup. However, the ability to sell the medicine before the show commenced did mean the show more closely resembled a country vaudeville or variety show than the medicine shows of old. LeBlanc had a great run for two years from 1950-51, before he went into bankruptcy and abandoned the show in Atlanta. The Hadacol Caravan fell apart and the last of the traveling medicine shows faded into history.<sup>22</sup>

However, medicine show pitchmen, even if they were unable to pitch medicine anymore, still retained the necessary skills for a changing economy in the early twentieth century. Fred Bloodgood, one of the last medicine pitchmen himself, went into sales, utilizing his medicine pitches "could be applied to other selling situations" ("Talking" 54). Bloodgood would use the same sort of ornamented language, now antiquated, to sooth angry customers' passions. When customers would complain of a

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<sup>22</sup> See Anderson 147-155 for a more thorough discussion of Hadacol and LeBlanc's Caravan. However, a more exhaustive study of LeBlanc's Hadacol show is still needed. The Hadacol Caravan, coming at such a late date and taking advantage of the notion of celebrity, as well as pre-selling the medicine, is extremely innovative and important in the history of medicine shows.

product's unnecessary noise, Bloodgood would argue that the contraption "sounded more like butterflies with rubber heels tiptoeing over damp moss" or that perhaps he "did hear a slight rippling, like a handful of pearls being cast into a chalice of champagne" (54). He thought that "such things added a little humor to the situations and also took the customer's mind off the beef" (54). The traveling salesmen became another professional outlet for the medicine man who hoped for "a path to prosperity and a cultural touchstone that skirted institutional boundaries" (Spears 529). The profession of traveling salesmen was an easy transition for many pitchmen, because salesmen "see the self as capital that could be manipulated" (539). The performance of identity that was essential for audience's trust in the medicine pitchmen was brought down to the personal level with the individual salesmen selling to the individual merchant or customer. Performance was an essential part of salesmanship; the salesman must become a mirror for their customer in order to make the sale. According to historian Timothy Spears, salesmen were expected to be "consummate performer, determined to absorb—and project—everything his commercial audience knew and loved" (548). For medicine pitchmen, the transition from patent medicine to commercial products was a simple one: both focused on selling of personality rather than products.

However, as the country became increasingly connected through improvements in infrastructure and communication, standardization of selling practices became more important to businesses than the highly individualized performances of the traveling salesmen. When traveling salesmen began being pulled off the road, businesses began "replacing the collective customer with the collective consumer" moving into creating demand on a much larger scale, primarily through advertising and public relations (Spears 549). In the world of mass markets, advertising continued the work of salesmanship on a large scale through "the gradual leveling of the market as a place, the standardization of selling techniques, and, perhaps most radical of all, the transposition of face-to-face dynamics onto paper" in ways that made the interpersonal relationships the salesmen developed obsolete (549). The

delicate interrelationship between the customer and the salesmen had to be replicated on a mass scale, standardized so that all selling practices were as technically proficient as possible.

One of the more successful attempts at this standardization was Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, first published in 1936. Carnegie's work professed to be a guidebook to human nature and understanding that nature so it can be manipulated for personal and economic gain. Carnegie purports that human beings are driven by their vanity or "feeling of importance" (22). He argues that "when dealing with people, let us remember we are not dealing with creatures of logic. We are dealing with creatures of emotion, creatures bristling with prejudices and motivated by pride and vanity" (14). Nonetheless, a tension exists in Carnegie's work between openly manipulating the "pride and vanity" of humanity and maintaining the ideal of open and honest relations with other people. This tension echoes the tension of the middle-classes, in dealing with the historical emergence of the confidence man in the 1840s. Middle-class gentility longed for legitimizing success, the type of success that being a successful businessman would bring them. However, they were also concerned with the maintenance of complete sincerity in social relationships. The potential conflicts between the two modes of interpersonal relations, while not mutually exclusive, were often problematic for the middle-class, both in the 1840s and in Carnegie's work. Additionally, the success that exemplified the confidence man tradition reigned supreme by focusing on success in managing and handling people. However, they also demanded transparency in human relations, that the inner workings of other men were immediately present to all those dealing with them. This led them to walk a difficult line between becoming a confidence man and a self-made man, of which there remains little practical difference in actuality. Carnegie encounters the same problem, making the rather weak argument regarding the type of flattery useful for winning a person over was distinctive, that "the difference between appreciation and flattery" is that "one is sincere and the other insincere" (Carnegie 31). The difference between the confidence man and the successful man of business here was a matter of perception, largely founded on

an assumption that a type of deep sincerity that marked the businessman was not present in the confidence man. Even though the intention of gaining confidence through manipulative means was the same for both, there was an ancillary morality to the actions of the businessman; he, at least, would not seemingly manipulate one *insincerely*.

This distinction was also important in the work of Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud and the father of public relations in the United States. Bernays saw the work of public relations as that of interpreting “the client to the public, which he [the public relations agent] is enabled to do in part because he interpret[s] the public to the client” (*Crystallizing* 14). It was important that the public saw the represented client in the correct light, especially since “persons who have little knowledge of a subject almost invariably form definite and positive judgments upon that subject” (*Crystallizing* 63). Since the mass public would form opinions, opinions on which they would perform actions, it was important that those opinions were managed through the lens of public relations. This was because, en masse, “the established point of view becomes established by satisfying some real or assumed human need” (*Crystallizing* 120). This desire of the public relations agent to satisfy a “real or assumed human need” is the same sort of relationship that is seen in Huck Finn’s manipulations of adults throughout Twain’s novel. This is the driving force behind the Confidence-Man’s success in Melville. The spectacles of nineteenth-century popular entertainment manipulated, acted out, and transgressed the needs and desires of their audience for both entertainment and to display cultural tensions. However, the type of tension permitted and performed in nineteenth-century entertainment and under the guise of the traveling medicine show had, in Bernays formulation, become part of the manipulation of his audience. The tension and unavoidable remainder that was present throughout the nineteenth century had now become the point from which manipulation begins. While the spectre of the critical function of the nineteenth-century confidence men remained within this model, in regards to the unstable nature of knowledge and identity, twentieth-century businessmen and public relations agents attempted to

manipulate knowledge and identity while denying the inherent instability in their model of manipulation. However, the type of manipulation present in Bernays' concept of public relations and in the medicine pitchmen is in many ways identical in content and method. Bernays writes that the success of the public relations man depends upon

his ability to create those symbols to which the public is ready to respond; his ability to know and to analyze those reactions which the public is ready to give; his ability to find those stereotypes, individual and community, which will bring favorable responses; his ability to speak in the language in the audience and to receive from it a favorable reception are his contributions (*Crystallizing* 173).

While Mary Calhoun writes of the medicine show pitchmen that,

the pitch doctor has played on the potential customer's anxiety about health; he has stimulated the customer to imagine a marvelous cure; he has turned need into desire for his product; he has convinced the customer to believe his half-truths about the body, the ailment and his medicine. He has made a sale (62).

The major difference between these two forms of manipulation, besides that between micro and macro levels on which they take place, is that the former has reached a layer of abstraction which erases the tension and instability at the core of the manipulation of the individual. By releasing the individual from the interactive experience, from the thrill of manipulation, the public relations man has erased the individual from the experience. In this way, the person without the person is the easiest to manipulate; behind the pasteboard mask, is found, at best, the willing consumer and the malleable political agent of twentieth-century America. Through the confidence man tradition, the contradictory forms of nineteenth-century entertainment, and the medicine show pitchmen, audiences were implicit in their own mass manipulation. In many ways, the nineteenth-century model was more *honest* in its chicanery. The institutionalization of the confidence man tradition was not a direct result of the relocation of this tradition into the political and economic arenas of the twentieth century. Instead, this institutionalization has deflated the societal tension and unstable remainder that made the experience

of being fooled enjoyable for audiences. Only through close study of this phenomenon, and an uncovering of the genealogy of mass manipulation, can citizens begin to understand and reevaluate the importance of nineteenth-century models of personhood in understanding modern consumer-capitalism.

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