the form of comic strips became a widely consumed commodity. It was also a useful medium for the promotion of other commodities, and the content of comic strips and comic books served as an advertisement for the values and practices of the emerging culture itself. Although I would acknowledge that comic art is often humorous and can provoke aesthetic appreciation, my point here is to show how these qualities have been put to commercial uses in comic strips, comic books, and advertising. These commercial uses came to define comic art to such a degree that comic strip and comic book characters at times seemed less storytelling devices and more ciphers, or business trademarks, that sold a range of products, which incidentally included comic strips and comic books. Moreover, these characters became icons of American culture, which if they did not unite all Americans as Americans at least naturalized a conception of defining American identity through the availability, and repetitious purchase, of commodities. When artists devised comic strip characters in the 1890s, they created a form that lent itself to an expanding culture. Comic art played a definitive role in the creation of a mass culture of consumption, which provided a focus for American identity in the twentieth century.

1 FROM CARICATURE TO COMIC STRIPS

The Shaping of Comic Art as Commodity

In 1883 Joseph Pulitzer commenced publication of a Sunday edition of his newly acquired newspaper the New York World. Building on the successes of the penny press the World carried detailed stories about the infamous side of city life, stories that helped shape gossip, rumor, and scandal into a marketable genre: the news. The World and other cheap newspapers were the products of developments in printing technology, transportation, and communication. Their audience was the new reading public of the eastern cities. Close to 90 percent of the urban working class was literate and made significant expenditures for newspapers.¹

The World led the way for these newspapers. One of its important innovations was the regular use of editorial cartoons, which before the mid-1880s were largely confined to illustrated humor magazines. On October 30, 1884, the World splashed Walt McDougall's "Royal Feast of Belshazzar Blaine" across its front page. This cartoon depicts a bloated James G. Blaine sitting down to dinner with the wealthy of the city while the hungry poor are excluded from the sumptuous repast. In the legends of comic art this cartoon and Bernhard Gillam's equally satirical version of Blaine as a man bearing the tattoos of his corruption, which appeared in Puck, are said to have cost Blaine the 1884 presidential election.² Whatever its effect on the election, McDougall's October 30 work certainly established the editorial cartoon as a regular feature on the World's front page.
The increased use of illustrated material in newspapers also contributed to the development of comic strips. The first comic strip character to enjoy widespread popularity, Richard Felton Outcalt's Yellow Kid, appeared as an unnamed figure in a series of illustrations in Pulitzer's Sunday World in 1895 and 1896. Dubbed "the Yellow Kid" by the newspaper's readers because of the color of his nightshirt, the figure became the center of a craze in New York and nearby cities. The Yellow Kid craze demonstrated that comic strip characters could sell newspapers. By the end of 1895 the Sunday World circulation averaged half a million copies—almost a 100 percent increase over 1891.3

Outcalt, Pulitzer, and his competitor William Randolph Hearst recognized the commercial possibilities that the popularity of comic strips and the increased circulation of newspapers offered. Outcalt tried to secure copyright protection for his character, presumably in order to license Yellow Kid products. Hearst obtained Outcalt's services over Pulitzer's objection and in October 1896 launched a comic supplement to his New York Journal built around the Yellow Kid. Although the Yellow Kid was short-lived, other comic strip characters, such as the Katzenjammer Kids and Happy Hooligan, soon followed and ensured the success of Hearst's newspapers and the comic strip form.

These characters won comic strips an institutionalized place in newspapers, first in New York and later across the country. Artists' development of popular characters, rather than the graphic form per se, accounted for the strips' success. Indeed artists created mechanisms basic to the comic strip as means of embellishing their characters. Devices such as panels and word balloons worked to elaborate and extend these characters by placing them in narratives and supplying them with voices. More important, comic strips were the form newspaper proprietors, editors, and artists developed to market distinct comic art characters. Characters laid the basis for widespread distribution of comic strips and development of the formal properties of the art form that later proved useful for advertising.

The Yellow Kid originally appeared in single-panel illustrations. Artists such as Richard Outcalt, Rudolph Dirks, and Frederick Oppen created the comic strip art form around this character model. Their early strips primarily represented city life in a form that could be sold through mass circulation newspapers. To understand where these images came from, and how they became commodities consumed on a mass scale, it is necessary to trace the development of comic art in America. Such a history requires an examination of American illustrated humor magazines and newspaper comic supplements before the development of comic strips.

AMERICAN ILLUSTRATED HUMOR MAGAZINES AND CITY CULTURE

The first American illustrated humor magazine published on a regular basis was Puck. Its founder, Joseph Keppler, was born in 1838 in Vienna, where he studied art and appeared on the stage before emigrating to America in 1867. After a stint in a touring theatrical company and two unsuccessful attempts in St. Louis at publishing German-language magazines, including an earlier Puck, Keppler moved to New York. In September 1876, in partnership with the printer A. Schwarzman, he launched a new German-language Puck. At the prompting of the playwright Sidney Rosenfeld and under his editorship, an English-language edition, using the same illustrations, was issued in March 1877. The English-language edition proved more popular than the German. Puck demonstrated both the influence of European antecedents and the special, and distinctively American, culture of New York City. The graphic material it published drew its form and technique from European traditions, but except for the occasional nod to Wilhelm Busch, its content was locally inspired by an emerging culture of the cities that the humor magazines not only celebrated but helped create.4 Keppler's cover illustration for the first issue—"A Strir in the Roost: What Another Chicken?"—showed the influence of the European tradition of representing human action in anthropomorphic symbolism. It depicted Puck, freshly hatched from an egg, greeting the rest of the brood, identified as the Tribune, Herald, Graphic, Leslie's Weekly, and Harper's Weekly. In this brood Puck stood out as the only journal to focus predominantly on humor. But it was not simply a copy of its European antecedents Fliegende Blätter, Charivari, and Punch. Unlike these journals, Puck combined social humor with sharp-edged political cartoons. Indeed Puck defined a format for American illustrated humor magazines followed by its main competitors, Judge and Life. Most issues of Puck contained a full-page political cartoon on the cover, a double-page political cartoon in the center pages, and a full-page social cartoon on the back cover.5
Puck’s political cartoons followed the success of Thomas Nast’s cartoons attacking the Tweed Ring in New York City, which appeared in Harper’s Weekly. These cartoons established the effectiveness of caricature as a modern political weapon. And, because Nast’s cartoons appealed to an emerging group of urban reformers, they achieved a respectable status in middle-class sensibilities. The single-panel cartoon became a legitimate form of political commentary and action in American society. Puck, Judge, and Life extended the respectability and appeal of political cartoons to all forms of illustration derived from caricature.

Illustrated humor magazines such as Puck fused the rough-and-tumble urban political culture of Gilded Age America with the rich pageant of public entertainment that filled up the leisure hours of thousands of men and women. Leisure time emerged when large-scale industrial production and craft deskillling led to work becoming something one did for a living rather than the way one lived. To increase production and achieve economies of scale, large industrial proprietors sought to exert greater control over the conduct of work. They established new work processes that curtailed an individual’s control over a job and created a new class of salaried managers to oversee production. For laborers work became more regimented and rationalized and consequently a chore from which they sought relief. The nonowning managers had less personal stake in the enterprises and spent less time on them than small proprietors had. By the turn of the century leisure was what one did in one’s nonwork hours.

As work and leisure split into separate spheres, leisure assumed a growing importance in shaping the class identities of both middle- and working-class Americans. The middle class erected a cultural hierarchy around practices such as the theatrical performance of Shakespeare, which had previously been part of a shared culture. Working-class leisure often involved partaking in activities formerly integrated into the workday. For instance, Roy Rosenzweig describes how owners forced the open consumption of alcohol from the workshops of Worcester, Massachusetts, to saloons. But although owners could regulate the time and place of alcohol consumption, they were less successful in regulating the activity itself. Nevertheless both middle- and working-class leisure swiftly came to be mediated by a culture industry created by entrepreneurs and consumers of professional sports; circuses; minstrel shows; vaudeville; amusement parks; dime novels; other cheap literature, including illustrated humor magazines, the modern daily, and Sunday newspapers, in which comic strips would appear; and eventually movies.6

Precisely because leisure took a greater role in structuring and mediating class identity, it also assumed a greater role in structuring and mediating class tensions. Indeed barrooms, dance halls, vaudeville palaces, and dime novels became contested terrain in the struggle to define urban America. The title of Rosenzweig’s book, Eight Hours for What We Will, captures workers’ determination to control their leisure. This was the trade-off they made for relinquishing control of the workplace. Leisure was obtained through work and was the right of those who worked. The very formation of a self-conscious middle class was bound up in efforts to determine appropriate leisure activities. According to the historian Michael Denning, the middle class defined itself by establishing cultural boundaries between it and the working class following the collapse of the notion of producing class as a mark of social position. Denning’s history of dime novels analyzes their conflicting “accents” (different voices for different audiences) in the context of a producerist plebeian mentality reluctantly giving way to an emerging middling mass culture. The revolution in private recreation among the “middle class” between 1880 and 1900, which Francis Couvares describes in his work on Pittsburgh, involved not so much “every leisure taboo [losing] its grip” on an existing static class as a redefinition of social position in the face of changes in the organization of work and the emergence of new forms of entertainment against which taboos had not yet been erected.7

If commercialized leisure mediated and structured the tensions between the middle and working classes, it also mediated between the Old World and the New. As did native-born managers and workers, immigrants defined themselves through leisure. In his history of immigrants in urban America, John Bodnar argues that rather than acquiring a set of given traits in a process of Americanization, immigrants shaped their own worlds, drawing on an inherited past in order to meet “the hierarchy of power and resources in urban America.” By contrast, Robert Snyder in a history of vaudeville argues that through that medium immigrants fashioned “new ethnic identities formed more from American popular culture than from Old World ways.”

But Snyder is not as far from Bodnar as these statements imply. If we take vaudeville as representative of American popular culture, we
can see that the latter encompassed a good number of Old World ways. And vaudeville embodied several ambiguities. Originally known as variety, it grew out of the exclusively masculine saloon concert. Changing the name to vaudeville was an attempt to attract a heterosexual audience; the aim was to retain enough raciness to titillate but not to offend the new, broader audience. Moreover, although the syndicate of B. F. Keith and Edward Albee centralized bookings for most of the vaudeville circuit, shows were tailored for specific audiences. Vaudeville appealed to its potential audiences by meeting them in familiar surroundings. The ethnic traditions played out on the vaudeville stage granted immigrant groups a “hyphenated” status, joining ethnic and American identities in a single, if ambiguous, identity. This duality comes out clearly in an anecdote about the Irish American vaudeville singer Maggie Cline. “Once, when she finished the song ‘Don’t Let Me Die till I See Ireland,’ a man in the gallery shouted, ‘Well, why don’t you go there?’ ‘Nit!’ Cline called back, ‘It’s too far from the Bowery.’ She swaggered off a stage awash in cheers.”

Illustrated humor magazines also played on this immigrant American identity. The October 20, 1892, issue of Life contained a graphic entitled “The Advantages of an Extensive Repertoire” by Franklin Morris Howarth (see Figure 1). In seven unframed scenes this piece depicts the attempts of a street musician to appease the cop walking the beat. The musician commences his performance with “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Howarth probably wanted readers to assume that the cop, lost in contemplation in the background, would not interfere with this display of American patriotism. The joke plays out when the cop demonstrates his intention to put a stop to the performance. The resourceful musician switches to the anthems of Germany and England before striking the right note with an Irish song.

A hundred years later the Irish cop joke appears stale. But the piece did more than contain a stereotypical joke; it offered a vision, shared by artist and reader, of power in the American city. The rapid shifts to German, English, and finally Irish music demonstrate the musician’s—and Howarth’s—knowledge of urban America. Power—in this case the ability to make, break, and enforce the law—did not belong exclusively to those who regarded themselves as American. It also belonged to German Americans, Anglo Americans, and Irish Americans. But as Howarth suggested, one could never be sure to whom it belonged on any given street corner. As did Maggie Cline, the musician had to

shape his identity in response to his audience, composed of both immigrant and native-born Americans.

Magazines such as *Life* helped middle-class Americans adapt to an emerging mass culture. The three major illustrated magazines—*Puck*, *Judge*, and *Life*—combined raucous humor with appeals to respectability. For instance, *Judge* attempted “to make a periodical which no gentleman will be ashamed to read in the family circle.” *Life* sold itself as a more genteel version of the other two magazines and probably appealed to a more well-to-do clientele. *Life*’s series of Gibson Girl cartoons, by Charles Dana Gibson, set the standard for middle-class male and female fashion in the mid-1890s. *Puck* often took the side of the workingman against big business but warned against extremism. Although their readership was probably limited to native-born Americans, these magazines acknowledged a shifting and heterogeneous urban population. *Puck*, *Judge*, and *Life* established illustrated humor as part of the urban scene and set an example for its commercial exploitation.10

F. M. HOWARTH AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMIC STRIPS

Magazines such as *Puck*, *Life*, and *Judge* acquainted readers with both a new urban political and leisure culture and a new art form. Franklin Morris Howarth was an important figure in the development of the comic strip. For instance, his “music” emanating from the performer’s trumpet in “Advantages of an Extensive Repertoire” was one of the first instances in American narrative comic humor in which text and graphic were combined. Howarth’s use of this important feature of comic strips placed him in the forefront of a movement that adapted and expanded Rodolphe Töpffer’s and Wilhelm Busch’s format for an American audience. As did those two European artists, Howarth narrowed the distance between the textual and the visual to create a comic art form that increased the emphasis on character and narrative by embedding them in the graphic image.

Howarth was one of a number of American comic artists who attempted to yoke narrative humor with graphic illustration. Through the course of Howarth’s career a number of artists drew jokes that recast Charles Darwin’s theories as a series of highly dubious evolutions, involutions, and transformations. The visual puns of these illustrations depend on the fusion of people and objects with graphic similarities and on ironic textual juxtapositions. For instance, in “A Thanksgiving Study” a turkey changes into an ax. “The Involution of the Messenger Boy” displays a boy becoming a tortoise. In “The Evolution of the English Sovereign” a bag of sterling metamorphoses into Queen Victoria. And “All Balled Up” features a catcher transformed into a baseball.11

Some artists linked the narrative structure of the evolution joke with caricature of city faces and types to comment on the metropolitan scene. “What Will Become of the Men Who Stay Out Late” transforms a dude out for an evening on the town into an owl. Other illustrations depict the expressions of an electric car motorman during a day’s work (see Figure 2), and of a man receiving the news, by phone, that his mother-in-law has cut short her visit and left while he is at work. Variations on these types of illustrations include a man who turns into a pig by eating at a lunch counter, a lovers’ quarrel illustrated solely by feet, and “Puck’s Easy Lessons in Caricature,” which shows how to depict any type of face by adding to a basic oval shape. “The Transformation of a Paying Teller,” in which a teller changes
from a humble servant into an outraged bureaucrat because a customer has endorsed a check at the wrong end, demonstrates the narrative possibilities of these types of illustrations.\textsuperscript{12}

Howarth did the most to develop humorous illustrated narratives. He joined \textit{Puck} as a full-time artist in the mid-1890s, during the magazine's reign as the preeminent forum for illustrated humor. Unlike the other artists on \textit{Puck}'s staff, Howarth was not required to draw editorial cartoons. This was an important division of labor, marking the point at which artists and editors separated comic strip art from political commentary. Howarth was one of the first major American comic artists to concentrate on social, or nonpolitical, humor. His work in \textit{Puck} consisted mainly of sequential narratives, occasionally with text underneath, a format borrowed directly from Busch. Howarth’s innovation was to block out his work in panels.\textsuperscript{13}

Howarth was the leading American proponent of multipaneled comic stories. This feature laid the basis for the creation of comic strip characters because the humor in narrative derives from a dynamic social setting in which the passage of time plays a role. Instead of using the figures as illustrations for gags printed beneath the panels, in these sequences artists created the humor around the figures. Artists such as Howarth gave their figures characteristics attributed to city dwellers and created various types.

Busch’s influence can clearly be seen in an early Howarth strip, “The Revenge of the Persecuted Baker,” which appeared in \textit{Judge} on July 11, 1891. This pantomime strip, in which two naughty boys steal pastries from an overladen baker, who eventually extracts his revenge by lacing his goods with coal oil, reworked Busch’s theme in \textit{Max und Moritz}.\textsuperscript{14} Howarth’s style, however, was more explicit and conveyed the story without recourse to an exterior explanatory text. For instance, although this strip and “The Advantages of an Extensive Repertoire” were not blocked out with panels, Howarth established a rudimentary frame by changing the positions of the figures. The narrative shifts in both strips also frame the action. In “The Advantages of an Extensive Repertoire,” the narrative flows from the “music” coming from the trumpet. In “The Revenge of the Persecuted Baker” the use of depth and perspective help carry the story.

Howarth also borrowed and developed techniques aimed at expanding possibilities for character development. He experimented with graphic methods that captured human feelings and emotions such as pain and anxiety. The last sequence of “The Revenge of the Persecuted Baker” shows the two boys in pain, depicted through contorted facial features, hands clenched to stomachs, and exaggerated sweat beads or tears pouring down their faces. Howarth had used this technique in “The Unexpected,” in which an Oriental prisoner about to be beheaded sweat large drops. In “The Advantages of an Extensive Repertoire” the musician’s anxious state is depicted by sweat beads. Exaggerated sweat beads became a standard means of displaying anxiety in comic strips, and the credit for them belongs to Howarth. These techniques may seem a matter of little interest. But comic art’s ability to convey emotions was important in the development of comic strip characters. Emotions, however crude, offered readers the sensation of intimacy. Moreover, the depiction of these “intimate emotions” in simple, repeatable, easily recognizable forms made them generally accessible, a factor that advertising researchers later concluded was the central appeal of comic strips.\textsuperscript{15}

Howarth’s use of narrative form and comic art technique allowed him to create new possibilities for comic characters. Rather than illustrate one- or two-line gags straight out of vaudeville, he presented unfolding stories. But as did vaudeville these series of panels worked familiar narrative genres in which the joke lay in the novel solution to a stock situation. Howarth’s work made fun of professional photographers and spoiled babies, highlighted the pettiness of fashion and social class, and depicted the numerous frustrations faced by suitors. For instance, in “Love Will Find the Way,” he showed a young couple’s triumph over a watchful father, while other strips depicted suitors’ efforts frustrated by vigilant fathers, jealous rivals, and even uncooperative elephants. These figures and others, such as the overbearing mother-in-law, emerged as stock types, so much so that on occasions Howarth created his humor by overturning expectations. For instance, he drew a strip in which a suitor encountered a cooperative father, and another in which a man’s mother-in-law proved a godsend. Nonetheless these stock situations and types remained the mainstay of comic art.\textsuperscript{16}

The most important of these pictorial representations of social types in the development of American comic strips was the naughty boy, originally borrowed from Wilhelm Busch’s \textit{Max und Moritz}. The first comic strip character, Richard Outcault’s \textit{Yellow Kid}, was developed from this type. Howarth was not the first American artist who borrowed Busch’s naughty boys for his comic strips. The leading illustrator of
the day, Frank Buelow, and his son “Chip,” contributed several such strips to Life before Howarth. But neither Frank, who died in 1888, nor Chip, who died at age thirty-two in 1894, developed comic strip work on the scale of Howarth’s.17 His “Revenge of the Persecuted Baker” occupied the whole back page of Judge and was in color. When he joined Puck the full-page comic strip, combining rhyming text with a graphic blocked out in panels, became his stock-in-trade.18

Howarth also regularly drew strips focused on two naughty boys. In addition to “The Revenge of the Persecuted Baker,” he featured two boys in strips in Life on October 1, 1891, and in Puck on May 10, 1893, August 19, 1896, and January 13, 1897. In addition, he and other artists drew numerous strips and cartoons featuring mischievous children. Of these Michael Angelo Woolf’s cartoons of the urban street life of children, which appeared in Life, stand out as prefiguring the Yellow Kid. Woolf’s cartoons featured street urchins speaking the same rough argot later employed by Outcault’s Yellow Kid. Furthermore Woolf gave his cartoons titles such as “The Spanish Craze in Mulligan’s Lane” and “Gymnastics in Brophy’s Alley.”19 These pre-saged Outcault’s “Hogan’s Alley.”

What separated the early American illustrated humor that appeared in Puck, Life, and Judge from the comic strip was the lack of a continuing character or cast of characters, the regular use of word balloons, a format that required weekly or daily appearances by these characters in a named strip, and a place in a mass-circulated medium, which made the form and characters consumer staples. But it was the launching of comic supplements to the Sunday editions of the New York World and New York Journal that set in motion a process leading to the distinct form of graphic narrative that eventually became comic strips.

COMIC STRIPS AND COMIC STRIP CHARACTERS

In 1889 the World capitalized on its successful use of illustrated material with the publication of a one-page illustrated humor section, “The World’s Funny Side,” in its Sunday edition. This section had an appearance similar to that of the humor magazines except it had no color plates. In 1894 the World acquired a color press and began a Sunday color supplement. Richard F. Outcault’s panel story “Origin of a New Species, or The Evolution of the Crocodile Explained,” published November 18, 1894, was one of the first illustrations to appear in color in the World’s Sunday supplement. Before his engagement by the World, Outcault worked as a technical illustrator for the Edison laboratories and the journal Electrical World. He also sold cartoons to Judge and Life. “From the Eiffel Tower,” probably drawn when he accompanied Edison to the Paris Exposition of 1889, is the only signed example of his early work in the three main illustrated humor journals. It is a poorly executed illustration of a two-line vaudeville-style gag about the size of a hotel bill in Paris.20 “Origin of a New Species” was a better piece, although it derived its theme from the well-worn genre of gag evolution illustrations. Some historians, such as William Murrell and Martin Sheridan, regard it as the first comic strip because of its panels, layout, and use of color, but Outcault’s graphic added nothing to the form. It was not even the first piece of comic art printed in color in an American newspaper.21

Outcault’s main contribution to the development of the comic strip was that he crystallized a succession of comic kid types into a single character, the Yellow Kid. Between 1895 and 1896 his Yellow Kid defined the artistic and commercial dimensions of comic strips.

On May 5, 1895, the World published Outcault’s “At the Circus in Hogan’s Alley” (see Figure 3). It was the first of a series of large comic illustrations of city kids that appeared in the World under the more or less continuous running title “Hogan’s Alley.” The origin of the title probably lay in the song “When Hogan Pays the Rent,” performed by the Irish American Maggie Cline in Tony Pastor’s vaudeville theater in 1891. The joke was that Hogan never paid the rent, and this caused a great deal of excitement in his neighborhood (alley) on rent days. In 1893 this characterization was incorporated into “Maggie Murphy’s Home,” a song for the play O’Reilly and the Four Hundred. The song opened with the line “Down in Hogan’s Alley.” Outcault had adopted this line for “Feudal Pride in Hogan’s Alley” (see Figure 4), which appeared in the illustrated humor magazine Truth on June 2, 1894.22

This Outcault cartoon, and others like it, were almost identical to Michael Angelo Woolf’s cartoons of city urchins. Woolf had originated this type of cartoon in the 1870s in Wild Oats, an early illustrated humor magazine.23 In the 1890s Woolf’s art appeared regularly in Life. A comparison of an untitled Woolf cartoon from 1892 (see Figure 5) and Outcault’s “Up to Date” from 1893 shows that Outcault
closely followed Woolf’s theme, poking fun at fashion, even using the same name for his main protagonist. In Woolf’s cartoon a young street urchin named Sally is mimicking the action of a bride making an entrance to the amusement of a crowd of onlookers. In Outcault’s “Up to Date” a similar Sally is modeling her new boots, courtesy of the Street Cleaning Department, for her friends. Outcault borrowed his theme from Woolf with little fear of recrimination because it was not possible to copyright themes, types, and situations. But it was possible to copyright characters with distinctive appearances.

The copyright law inspired an Outcault cartoon in the February 9, 1895, “Special Artists’ Issue” of Truth (see Figure 6). The cartoon satirizes the work of Palmer Cox, creator of “The Brownies,” a set of popular illustrated characters that appeared first in St. Nicholas Magazine in the early 1880s and then in books, comic strips, and a number of products, including Kodak’s Brownie cameras. The joke in this cartoon, “Fourth Ward Brownies,” operates on two levels. First, by having “Mickey the Artist” draw the simple features of a “brownie” on a fellow kid, Outcault implied that Cox’s work was childish and easily done. Second, the dialogue of the joke plays off this simplicity. Mickey says, “If Palmer Cox wuz t’ see yer, he’d git yer copyrighted in a minute,” the point being that Cox needed copyright protection because anybody could reproduce his art. In fact Cox’s art was reasonably detailed if simple in appearance. But the cartoon turns on the importance of copyright, so Outcault set up Cox’s work as easily created.

The appearance of this cartoon in the artists’ issue of Truth suggests that its message flowed from an ideology of craft pride, which posited that although artists owned the products of their labor and skill, they
should not try to control the subjects of their work. If this was Outcault's intention the cartoon proved highly ironic because one of those admiring Mickey's work was the as yet unnamed Yellow Kid in his first distinctive appearance.25 This small cartoon was reproduced in the *New York World* the following week. Another Outcault cartoon, “The Fate of the Glutton,” appeared in the *World* on February 10, 1895. Shortly after, on May 5, 1895, the jug-eared figure appeared in the *World’s* quarter-page “Hogan’s Alley.” Unlike the cartoons, the May 5 panel’s humor did not rely on a caption under the illustration, and the illustration was in color. On January 5, 1896, in an illustration entitled “Golf the Great Society Sport As Played in Hogan’s Alley,” this kid’s nightshirt was colored yellow, and the Yellow Kid, the first continuing character in a newspaper comic supplement, was born.

Outcault, it seems, did not deliberately set out to create the Yellow Kid. By all accounts it was the comic supplement audience who named the figure after the color of his nightshirt. Outcault did not refer to the boy as the Yellow Kid during his tenure at the *World*. It was only when he joined Hearst’s *New York Journal* in October 1896 that the figure appeared under this title.26 The title “Hogan’s Alley,” the vaudeville origins, and Outcault’s use of dialect located the comic in New York City, and in some ways the Kid was an archetypical working-class city dweller. Outcault apparently thought the Kid was a type, not an individual.27 But the Kid was bald, had jug ears and buck teeth, and always wore a nightshirt. Although he was Irish he was so often taken for Chinese that Outcault seized on the visit of Li Hung Chang,
a Chinese dignitary, to New York to have the Yellow Kid announce that Li was mistaken to think he was Chinese (see Figure 7). These features singled the Yellow Kid out from the other children in Outcault's illustrations and probably account for the feature's popularity. They also singled out Outcault's work as a distinctive representation of the complexity of city life; in his hands comic art transcended stock situations and types to produce an individual character. But the Yellow Kid's meaning and reception often slipped from his creator's control.

The Yellow Kid was immensely popular and figured almost every week in the World's advertisements for the Sunday edition. The "Hogan's Alley" feature itself, however, appeared just eight times in 1895 and on average only every other week in early 1896. Outcault kept no regular schedule for the production of "Hogan's Alley" illustrations up to June 1896. But from June 7 to October 4, 1896, "Hogan's Alley" appeared weekly in the Sunday World. The increased tempo of production may have been a response to the World's publication on May 31, 1896, of a George Luks "Hogan's Alley" comic that was indistinguishable from Outcault's work. It is possible that Outcault felt threatened by another artist drawing his successful feature and moved to protect his creation.

In any case, he took action to secure his legal position regarding "Hogan's Alley" and the Yellow Kid. The September 6, 1896, installment of the comic, "Li Hung Chang Visits Hogan's Alley," carried a small box in the left-hand corner that read, "Do Not Be Deceived None Genuine Without This Signature," below which appeared Outcault's signature. On September 7, 1896, he wrote to the Library of Congress seeking copyright for "The Yellow Dugan Kid." He stated that it was not intended as "an article of manufacture but to appear in my cartoons each week in the Sunday World." Outcault was uncertain if the character could be copyrighted, "as he appears in a different fashion each week. His costume however is always yellow, his ears are large, he has but two teeth and a bald head and is distinctly different from anything else." To emphasize his point, Outcault enclosed a sketch of the kid. In the October 4, 1896, "Hogan's Alley," a note attached to the Yellow Kid's arm identified him as Mick Dugan. Whether Outcault took these steps simply to protect his character or as part of a scheme to ensure that he would retain control over it when he left the World remains conjecture, but the October 4 "Hogan's Alley" was his last for the World before he joined Hearst's Journal.
Outcault gave the Yellow Kid singular features as part of his effort to distinguish his work from that of other artists, particularly Michael Angelo Woolf. His jab at Palmer Cox suggests that he thought an artist’s worth lay in the novelty of his or her ideas and the ability to render those ideas on paper. If Outcault thought of the Yellow Kid as a type, then the Kid’s individuality belonged not to the illustrated figure but to the artist. But as Outcault discovered when Luks imitated his work, such individuality was not only easily reproducible but apt to be copied when it was profitable. The artist’s only recourse was to copyright his character.

A letter from the Treasury Department to the New York Journal dated April 15, 1897, stated that on the advice of the Librarian of Congress the department held that only the title “The Yellow Kid” and not the Kid’s likeness had been copyrighted because of an irregularity in the application.29 This meant that Outcault could not prevent unauthorized reproductions of the Yellow Kid and so was unable to effectively license his character. Entrepreneurs marketed numerous unauthorized Yellow Kid products, including songbooks, buttons, chewing gum, chocolate figurines, cigars, and ladies’ fans. Outcault’s copyright difficulties, and loss of income, can be seen in the existence of at least two Yellow Kid chewing gums, the Outcault-licensed Adams’ Yellow Kid Gum and the nonlicensed Grove’s Yellow Kid Gum.30

Outcault’s Yellow Kid demonstrated the potential of comic characters to capture the public’s imagination and boost newspaper circulation. Both Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst saw this potential and waged a battle over the right to publish Yellow Kid comics. Hearst arrived in New York from San Francisco in 1895. He took control of the New York Journal and set about emulating Pulitzer’s Sunday World. To achieve this goal in the shortest possible time, he hired away from the Sunday World almost the entire staff at higher salaries. When Hearst decided to publish a humor supplement, it was natural to poach Outcault, especially because his “Hogan’s Alley” was the central feature of the World’s supplement.

Hearst launched his own comic supplement on October 18, 1896. It was heralded as “eight pages of polychromatic effulgence that make the rainbow look like a lead pipe.”31 A prominent element of the first issue was “McFadden’s Flats,” which featured the Yellow Kid and the other denizens of Hogan’s Alley, who joked, “Say Hogan’s Alley Has

Been Condemned By De Board of Helt An We Was Gittin Tired of It Anyway.”32 Both the World and the Journal published versions of the Yellow Kid. The World’s version continued to appear under the “Hogan’s Alley” title because the paper had copyrighted that title as part of its general copyright. The two versions of the character had the same physical appearance because the likeness was not copyrighted. The simultaneous appearance of two Yellow Kids in newspaper strips, and the flood of unlicensed products, diminished the value of the character as a commodity for both Outcault and the publishers. Neither paper could promote its comic strip as an exclusive feature and therefore a reason to buy one paper over the other. George Luks’s version of “Hogan’s Alley” for Pulitzer’s World eventually shifted the focus from the Yellow Kid to two new characters, the “yellow kids.” When Outcault realized he could not retain exclusive control of the Yellow Kid, he abandoned the character and Hearst but not comic strip characters. Outcault’s experience with the Yellow Kid showed him that with the right character, and effective copyright protection, an artist could make a lot of money.

The Journal discontinued its version of the Yellow Kid in early 1898, when Outcault left Hearst to rejoin Pulitzer. The World’s “Hogan’s Alley” folded shortly after. Although he was short-lived, the Yellow Kid established the legal status of illustrated figures as property. When Outcault left Hearst the comic strip had still not taken its definitive form, but the Yellow Kid had introduced comic strip characters as commodities that could be created and sold in the market.33

Hearst’s New York Journal was the most successful medium in the development of these new commodities. The Journal’s comic supplement published work by a host of artists in addition to Outcault. Most of this art was similar in content and style to what had appeared earlier in the illustrated humor journals. Indeed many of the Journal’s artists—including Archie Gunn, Syd Griffin, Frank Nankivell, and Louis Glackens—were alumni of those periodicals. But none of these artists developed a comic strip character. The first comic strip characters to appear in the Journal after the Yellow Kid were in “The Tinkle Brothers” by Harry Greening, which debuted in the Journal on September 5, 1897. This strip was an adaptation of Wilhelm Busch’s Max and Moritz. Although numerous adaptations of Busch’s work had appeared in American illustrated humor journals throughout the 1880s
and 1890s, "The Tinkle Brothers" was the first to name its characters and appear in a number of episodes. But the strip was short-lived. Only five episodes were published, and it disappeared after October 17, 1897. Two months later, on December 12, 1897, another adaptation of Busch's Max und Moritz, "The Katzenjammer Kids" by Rudolph Dirks, debuted in the Journal. This feature became one of the most successful comic strips of all time and was still appearing in 1997. But in its early form "The Katzenjammer Kids" had few of the characteristics of the comic strip.

The first episode of "The Katzenjammer Kids," "Ach Those Katzenjammer Kids!" contained six unframed sequences in which three boys played a prank on a gardener with a hose. In subsequent weeks there were only two kids and the feature was drawn in panels. In the initial episodes the action was depicted in pantomime. Occasionally during the first years text was included underneath the panels in the manner of Bilderbogen (work like Busch's) and Howarth's work in Puck. Dirks did not use word balloons in the strip's first two years. But its cast of continuing characters differentiated "The Katzenjammer Kids" from other comic art. The main characters were the kids, Hans and Fritz, and Mamma Katzenjammer. The basic framework of the strip was the kids' mischief, whose object was usually Mamma. In 1902 Dirks introduced two other regular characters, Der Captain and Der Inspector, who also became victims of Hans and Fritz's pranks.

In 1898, following Outcault's departure, "The Katzenjammer Kids" became the backbone of the Journal's comic supplement. The strip appeared in almost every Sunday edition of the Journal up to July 1898, when Hearst temporarily dropped the comic supplement in favor of a series of supplements promoting the Spanish-American War. Following the war "The Katzenjammer Kids" resumed its prominent place. The strip, and its regular appearance, was so important to the Journal that, from time to time, artists other than Rudolph Dirks drew "The Katzenjammer Kids."36

In one editor's words, "Habit forming [was] the core of newspaper supremacy."37 Comic strips with continuing casts proved well suited to the task of habit formation. Their attraction lay in their unique and striking characters. To late twentieth-century readers this may seem obvious because we are accustomed to the mass media's creation of new characters, such as Bart Simpson, with sharply defined personalities. But at the opening of the century the construction of such charac-

ters was a recent phenomenon. Comic strip artists still, however, had to give their characters voices before those characters could meet the standard of performance required of the twentieth-century personality and thus be able to achieve celebrity status.38

The first attempt to give an American comic strip character a voice occurred in Outcault's "Hogan's Alley" published on April 12, 1896, in the World. In this single-panel illustration, entitled "First Championship Game of the Hogan's Alley Baseball Team," the Yellow Kid stands in the foreground, mouth open as if to address the audience, his "speech" pinned to his nightshirt. The space on the Kid's nightshirt became Outcault's preferred tableau for conveying his words. On occasion, though, Outcault employed word balloons as means of giving his subjects voice. The World of September 15, 1895, carried an Outcault panel entitled "Grand Opening of the Dramatic Season at the North Pole," in which an Eskimo vendor offers theater patrons "Red Hot Tamales and Chili-Con-Carne" through a speech balloon. And on May 3, 1896, in "Hogan's Alley" a parrot exclaimed, "Good Bye, Good Bye," by way of a word balloon. Eventually, on October 25, 1896, in Hearst's Journal the Kid himself spoke through a speech balloon. But even on this occasion dialogue was also inscribed on his nightshirt.39

The credit for developing word balloons as means of giving comic strip characters voice belongs to Frederick Burr Opper.40 Before he joined the Journal in mid-1899 Opper was an established editorial cartoonist and worked for Puck. His first contributions to the Journal's comic supplement were full-page cartoons for its cover. Gradually he began to experiment with panel stories and comic strips. On March 18, 1900, Opper's first comic strip character, Happy Hooligan, made his debut in the Journal in a six-panel pantomime story.41 Between March 1900 and early 1901 Opper experimented with the use of word balloons in "Happy Hooligan" and other comic art features he produced. On December 30, 1900, the Journal published an Opper piece entitled "Cupid's Everlasting 'Jolly': Centuries May Come And Centuries May Go, But This Goes on Forever." This graphic was a comic depiction, in a series of panels, of love over the centuries. Opper used both word balloons and rhyming text underneath the panels to effect his joke. "Cupid's Everlasting 'Jolly'" symbolized the transformation of narrative comic art in turn-of-the-century America. The use of rhyming text and graphics in the manner of the German Bilderbogen
disappeared with the end of the nineteenth century, and the comic strip complete with characters, panels, and word balloons blossomed. By March 1901 Oppe used word balloons in almost all his comic strip work. Moreover the other regular artists on the Journal—Rudolph and Gus Dirks, James Swinnerton, and Carl Anderson—followed his lead. By June 1901 comic strips dominated the Journal’s comic supplement. And “Happy Hooligan” and “The Katzenjammer Kids” set a standard for the art form. Within a year newspapers throughout America began to carry comic strips in their Sunday editions and the strips became one of the most widely consumed forms of the emerging entertainment mass media.

2

COMIC STRIPS, NATIONAL CULTURE, AND MARKETING

The Breadth of the Form

William Randolph Hearst, the proprietor of the New York Journal, more fully utilized comic art’s potential to sell newspapers than did Joseph Pulitzer or any other publisher. He outbid Pulitzer for the services of the most popular artists. Between 1896 and 1901 the contributors to the Journal’s comic supplement—Richard Outcault, Rudolph Dirks, Frederick Oppe, and others—fashioned the comic strip. In particular Dirks in “The Katzenjammer Kids” and Oppe in “Happy Hooligan” refined the combination of character, word balloons, and panel layout that define modern comic strips. Hearst used the comic strips produced in New York in his other papers, such as the San Francisco Examiner. In 1902 he further offset his heavy costs for comic strips by selling them to newspapers around the country, thus opening a national market for strips. As early as 1903 at least forty-eight newspapers in thirty-three locations carried comic strips, and by 1908 this figure had grown to at least eighty-three newspapers in fifty locations.¹

Concurrent with the development of a national market for comic strips, Richard Outcault began to license a new strip, “Buster Brown,” created in 1902 in the pages of the New York Herald, to the manufacturers of a wide variety of products. With “Buster Brown” comic strip characters reached their full potential as marketing tools for other products. The range of Buster Brown merchandise available in 1908 would be envied by more recent licensees of comic art phenomena
such as Batman, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and the Simpsons. The importance of Buster Brown’s marketing is that it predated, and presaged, a wholesale shift from text-based to visual, image-centered advertising. Advertisers used Buster Brown as an eye-catching image and as a symbol of qualities to be associated with their product. Buster Brown was a prototype type of the form advertising assumed in twentieth-century America’s mass culture of consumption. He transcended the comic art form to become a cultural icon. But this success was rooted in the national distribution of comic strips through local newspapers.

THE NATIONAL SPREAD OF COMIC STRIPS

By 1903 newspapers across the country carried comic strip supplements in their Sunday editions. This expansion placed comic strip characters and the art form before a wide national audience, laying the basis for their use in other products. It also provided urban and rural readers with a weekly shared experience and brought together diverse national audiences as markets for mass media products. Apart from the healthy increases in circulation that the New York papers experienced when they introduced comic strips, two factors contributed to the rapid spread of the art form through the nation: the growth of syndication and the consolidation of control by newspaper chains. Both the World and the Journal organized syndicates to sell comic strip features to other papers. Independent syndicates, which began to supply feature material to newspapers, particularly Sunday papers, in the 1880s developed their own comic supplements that were sold to papers across the nation. Also by 1900 eight newspaper chains existed, the largest of which was the nine-paper chain of Edward W. Scripps.4

Hearst was a key figure in the development of both syndicated material and newspaper chains. By 1903 the comic art that originated in Hearst papers appeared in at least seventeen newspapers across the country, and Hearst himself owned six papers in four cities. According to Frank Mort, by 1922 “Hearst owned twenty daily papers and eleven Sunday papers in thirteen of the largest American cities.” The consolidation of the production and distribution of comic strips proceeded apace with the centralization of newspapers, news dissemination, and business and industry in general.3

Irving Bachelior set up the first successful company to syndicate feature material in 1883. In 1884 Samuel S. McClure established his syndicate, which distributed the stories of Rudyard Kipling, Jack London, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Robert Louis Stevenson. The syndicates sold the bulk of their material to newspapers for use in Sunday editions. Larger Sunday newspapers also syndicated some of their features, with both the New York Herald and the Journal beginning to do so in 1895. The World started to syndicate its material in 1898. In 1897 the St. Louis Post-Dispatch began to carry the World's comic supplement, but this was not syndication as such because both papers were owned by Pulitzer. Around this time newspaper owners led by Hearst began to syndicate comic strips. “The Katzenjammer Kids,” carried on January 6, 1901, by the Pittsburgh Post in black and white as part of its magazine section, is the first syndicated strip I found, but there may have been earlier occurrences. Most likely comic strips did not appear in color outside major cities such as New York, Chicago, and St. Louis in the late 1890s because color web presses would have been a prohibitive capital investment for most publishers.4

Hearst was probably the first to distribute a color comic supplement nationally. In 1900 he established two papers in Chicago: the morning Chicago Examiner and the evening Chicago American. This move gave Hearst three Sunday papers: the San Francisco and Chicago Examiners and the New York Journal. The San Francisco Examiner first contained a color comic supplement on November 4, 1900. Previously it had carried comic strips in black and white in the magazine section. The supplement in the San Francisco Examiner was identical to the Journal’s and was either preprinted or reproduced from stereotype matrices. It seems reasonable to assume that Hearst’s Sunday Chicago paper began to carry the comic supplement at that time because its inclusion would have required little additional cost. Other papers to carry color comic strip supplements from Hearst around this time included the Memphis Commercial Appeal, which first contained a color comic supplement on March 16, 1902, and the Seattle Daily Times. In addition newspapers in Denver, Atlanta, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Omaha, Cincinnati, Columbus, Pittsburgh, Nashville, Richmond, and Spokane carried comic art from Hearst by the end of 1903. And on December 12, 1903, the first issue of Hearst’s Los Angeles Examiner appeared, giving him four Sunday newspapers.5
By 1903 other syndicates had begun to distribute comic supplements nationally. Newspapers in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Minneapolis carried the New York Herald's strips. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the Pittsburgh Dispatch carried the New York World's strips. Additional syndicates that provided comic strips included the World Color Printing Company (unconnected to Pulitzer's World) and the T. C. McClure Syndicate, a product of the company founded by Samuel McClure. Papers in Louisville, Baltimore, Boston, St. Louis, Anaconda, Portland, Pittsburgh, Nashville, Knoxville, and Richmond carried the World Color Printing Company's material. The McClure Syndicate's strips appeared in San Francisco, Atlanta, Indianapolis, Topeka, Detroit, Minneapolis, New York, Houston, and Milwaukee papers. Another smaller organization, the C. J. Hirt company, syndicated material to papers in Augusta, Chicago, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, Helena, and Pittsburgh. Two Philadelphia papers, the North American and the Inquirer, as well as the Boston Globe, developed their own comic strips. The combined population of these cities and towns was 11,747,977, or 15.45 percent of the U.S. population. Because some of these papers, such as the Memphis Commercial Appeal, acted as regional papers, well over 20 percent of the population at this date had access to comic strips. Thus comic strips were a national and not an exclusively urban phenomenon by 1903.

Comic strips attracted the interest of newspaper publishers because they helped to increase circulation. The Memphis Commercial Appeal's Sunday circulation rose from 29,475 in 1901 to 35,292 in 1902 after the introduction of comic strips on March 16, 1902. The Topeka Daily Capital's Sunday circulation rose from 15,500 in October 1903 to 16,741 in January 1904 after strips commenced on November 22, 1903.

These circulation figures also give some idea of the regional circulation of the papers. In 1900 Memphis had a population of 102,320, and Topeka 33,608. Either one in three people in Memphis and one in two people in Topeka bought these papers or a good part of their circulation was outside the city limits. My data summarized in Table 1 (see the appendix) show that the national aggregate circulation of newspapers with comic strips in 1903 equaled 42.7 percent of the population in the centers where they were published. This figure suggests that most of these papers had significant sales outside their census-defined bases. The establishment of Rural Free Delivery by the Post Office between 1898 and 1906 boosted urban newspapers' rural circulations. By 1903 newspapers across the country carried comic strips, and the circulation of papers with strips rose, suggesting that comics were a popular feature. Moreover, many of these newspapers carried the same strips.

By 1908 syndicates had brought comic strips to the nation and established methods of distributing their product that continue to the present. Between 1903 and 1908 newspapers in twenty-four locations added comic strips while only two dropped them. Almost 75 percent of Sunday newspapers had strips. The additional locations and the increase in population between 1903 and 1908 added almost 6 million readers to the potential comic strip audience. At the same time twelve more newspapers began to publish strips in major locations, such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and Cincinnati, where they were already carried by papers in 1903. Both the potential readership and the availability of comic strips to that readership increased notably.

In this period the major syndicates all expanded their coverage of the market. Their growth increased the chances that comic strip readers across the country read the same material. Almost all comic strips originated from six companies, and three (Hearst, World Color Co., and McClure) controlled over three-quarters of the market. For instance in 1908 Hearst strips were available to 66.00 percent of potential comic strip readers and McClure's to 57.79 percent. In short between 1901 and 1908 newspaper publishers and syndicates helped shape the New York phenomenon of comic strips into a shared national cultural artifact. Every Sunday Americans across the country could open their newspapers and read the same strips (see Tables 2 and 3 in the appendix).

The rapid spread and popularity of comic strips provoked a debate over their worth. One contemporary critic of strips regarded the Sunday editions of American newspapers as serving "a single community" but found no place for comic strips in that world. This critic's unsigned 1909 editorial in Ladies' Home Journal attacked comics as vulgar and cheap. Other articles that assailed the vulgarity of comics echoed her sentiments. In general these articles, which appeared with some frequency between 1906 and 1912, argued that comic strips eroded the moral fiber of the young by overstimulating their senses. Underlying the thrust of these articles was an uneasiness with a developing mass culture in which "the very element of variety has been
obliterated.” As one critic wrote in 1908, the comic supplement was for people “who don’t care for fine shades of humor, because they can’t appreciate them.”

In 1903 the literary critic Annie Russell Marble had pointed to a modern society in which sight reigned and surface impressions satisfied “the eyes of our understanding.” In her prescient article “The Reign of the Spectacular,” she observed “the commercial demand for all grades of illustrations, from classics to crudities.” She noted that even scholars and orators were called upon to illustrate their lectures with lantern slides. For Marble this general enthusiasm for illustrations explained why even in “homes refined in other ways” parents gave children the Sunday comic supplement for their amusement. Marble linked the demand for comic strips to a broader consumption of images. She hoped that communities “satiated with the spectacular” would return to “nobler standards” and “rebuke mere affluence and gaud.”

But if Daniel Boorstin is to be believed these communities dissipated under the impact of an array of commodities, and new nationwide communities were constituted around their consumption. Boorstin has argued that Rural Free Delivery helped lift rural Americans out of “narrow” communities and put them in “touch with a larger world of persons and events and things.” He notes that Rural Free Delivery led to the consolidation of post offices, which in turn destroyed many small towns and the communities based around them and argues that consumption communities appeared in their place. Boorstin’s use of the term consumption communities retains a connotation of community as a discrete, local entity whose members know and recognize one another. A preferable term is culture of consumption, which removes these intimations of “community” while retaining a sense of consumption as an individual act mediated by internal and external factors. Benjamin Rader argues that sport had a similar role in the early twentieth century. He writes that “sport helped give an identity and common purpose to many neighborhoods, towns, and cities which were otherwise divided by class, race, ethnicity, and religious differences. In a larger, less tangible sense, mass sporting spectacles may have been an aspect of a search for city-wide, regional, or even national communities.” To be sure, Boorstin was not referring to comics. But it is probable that the experience of reading comic strips created a national audience, or audiences, if not a community, drawn together by the visual images of comic strip characters.

Boorstin’s account of consumption communities does not make it clear how they came about. He assigns advertising a central role in their being but is uncertain whether advertisers created or discovered them. In the same paragraph he writes that advertising “aimed at something new—the creation of consumption communities” and that “the advertisement succeeded when it discovered, defined, and persuaded a new community of consumers.” The national spread of comic strips shows that the circulation in rural areas of urban cosmopolitan culture—comprising in part newspapers, catalogs, magazines, and books—created audiences of consumers rather than Boorstin’s consumption communities.

Newspaper owners decided to publish comic strips because their appeal to readers led to higher sales, not because literary-minded citizens with community-based salons requested their publication. Although purchasers did not directly consume comic strips, the strips established their characters as commodities. The popularity of comic strip characters, and the art form as a whole, suggested broader commercial opportunities to a number of entrepreneurs involved in their production. Richard Outcault’s second major comic strip character, Buster Brown, played a key role in the realization of these opportunities and the creation of a culture of consumption around comic strip characters.

COMICS AS COMMODITY AND AGENT OF CHANGE: BUSTER BROWN

A study of the Buster Brown comic strips reveals the amalgam of interests, and techniques, that extended comics’ Modernist vision to the nation. Richard Outcault created Buster Brown after his failure to ensure copyright protection of the Yellow Kid. He intended from the start to license Buster’s likeness to other products. Buster Brown’s physical appearance and manner of dress replicated Victorian representations of childhood innocence. As a visual type he could be described as a Little Lord Fauntleroy. In determining Buster’s depiction Outcault hit on the image of a child familiar to many Americans. Commercial lithographers, such as Currier and Ives, and nineteenth-century periodicals such as Godey’s Lady’s Book, made the innocent child a visual staple in the United States. Moreover the Victorian child appeared on thousands of trade cards, a promotion device used by diverse enterprises such as large-scale manufacturers and small-town dry
goods stores. Onto this Victorian icon Outcault layered comic art's urban naughty child themes, creating a strip with diverse appeal by combining two visions of childhood. But he did so employing the formal attributes of comic strips—sequential panels, continuing characters, and word balloons.15

“Buster Brown” first appeared in the New York Herald on May 4, 1902.16 The title character was a young boy from a middle-class family who played practical jokes and was generally mischievous. Buster's jokes often backfired. Consequently, he resolved at the end of every Sunday strip to improve his ways or at least to learn a lesson from his mistake. The next week he would be back at his old tricks. Outcault repeated this basic premise week after week. The strip's humor derived in part from Buster's inability to keep his resolve. The skill with which Outcault told new stories within the basic framework added to the strip's appeal. The reader had to appreciate the strip's framework yet repress that knowledge in order to let the story unfold. Those who read the strip regularly understood that Buster's mischievous side was held in check by his practicality. The repetition of the theme assured readers of the containment of this mischief. Like the Yellow Kid before him, Buster was a distinct character, yet “he” was simply a pen-and-ink drawing. Moreover, Buster's characteristics, and copyright status, made him a “personality” that could be marketed.

The construction of a “personality” occupied many Americans in the twentieth century. The historian Warren Susman suggested that in fin de siècle America character referred primarily to a person's internal moral order. Susman saw this vision of self giving way in the first decade of the twentieth century to a fascination with “personality.” Self-help manuals of the era distinguished between character as something one strengthened and personality as something one built. Individuals self-consciously created personalities by “paying attention to others so that they [would] pay attention to you.” Susman argued that both visions of self embodied qualities that could be learned. But the vision of self embodied in personality addressed personal and social needs brought on by the developing mass consumer society. According to Susman, “The social role demanded of all in the new culture of personality was that of performer.” Just as novelists and dramatists created fictional characters, people created their own self-images or “personalities.” The logical extension of the cult of personality, and one that reinforced it, was the creation of movie stars by motion picture studios beginning in 1910. Cultural products, movies, were then marketed through the images and personalities of particular screen players. Susman argued that this led to a new consciousness of personality and a new profession—that of the celebrity—in which any connection between achievement and fame was abandoned. It was possible to be famous merely for being famous.17

Susman did not provide a detailed account of the historical creation of a “personality-centered” vision of self. Rather, he saw it as an instance of Philip Rieff's notion that cultural changes alter the types of values that form a person. Susman aimed to show one way in which individuals may have participated in the development of a culture of consumption by creating personalities through leisure activities. To make this point he passed over Rieff's coda, which notes that because people understood themselves, in part, through historical institutions, “even the ignorants of a culture were bound to a great chain of meaning,” making change both slow and difficult.18

Susman overemphasized the ease and continuity of this transformation of character by overlooking a key part of Rieff's analysis. The changes in comic art show one part of this metamorphosis. The long-term factors that gave rise to newspaper comic supplements and comic strip characters formed a visual “chain of meaning” that stretched back to broadsheets of the fifteenth century. The development of comic strip characters with their distinct personalities was the way one tradition of visual representation changed with, and helped shape, mass consumer society. Comic strip characters provide historians with examples of “personality” as celebrity or commodity, but they also show how personality and celebrity took shape. Furthermore, comic strip characters, and the celebrity status accorded them, anticipated Hollywood's creation of movie stars.

Comic strips helped bring a common visual culture to America. In his work on the launching of a commercial culture in New York City, William Taylor has suggested that the success of the Yellow Kid came about through its open-ended humor, which gave the strip “comic significance to those approaching it from different social perspectives.” Elsa Nystrom argues that the initial spread of comic strips reflected an urbanization of American culture, or at least a fascination with the urban experience. She suggests that “people were caught by the brash novelty of the Yellow Kid.”19 But that strip appeared only in New York City newspapers; its circulation was never national. When newspapers
across the nation began to carry comic strips, artists created works that were less urban in content than the strips that had appeared in New York papers in the late 1890s. They attempted to straddle the urban-rural diversity of American society and embellish their characters with even broader qualities than those needed to appeal to a diverse city audience. By 1903 among the best known and widely distributed strips only “Happy Hooligan” was clearly set in a city. “The Katzenjammer Kids” had a semirural setting and eventually moved to a tropical island. Artists set other strips, such as “Buster Brown” and “Sambo and His Funny Noises,” in urban-rural crossroads. Buster Brown, as did his creator, appeared to live in the wealthy semirural countryside of Long Island. But the formal attributes of comic strips remained the same. Buster Brown came to rural folk through the medium of comic strip art, which originated in and owed its nature to urban centers.  

The form of these comic strips ultimately may have been more important than their thematic content to the commodification of comic art. But it is necessary to remember that characters are both part of the formal attributes of comic strips and constituent elements of their subject matter. Characters could be removed from their nominal setting in a comic strip and used to market other products. The Yellow Kid craze was just one craze that swept New York City in the 1890s. Others included the “Yachting Craz” of September 1895, brought on by the America’s Cup Challenge between Britain and the USA, and the “boy in adult occupation craze” associated with dime novels. But, unlike these crazes that were briefly subjects of newspaper cartoon satire, the Yellow Kid demonstrated that comic strip art sold newspapers and other products.

Outcault wanted to pursue the commercial opportunities the popularity of a comic strip character offered. After abandoning the Yellow Kid in early 1898, when he discovered he could not control the commercial use of the Kid’s image, Outcault took four years to find another character with the same licensing potential. He drew a number of comic features for the New York World, Judge, and the New York Herald until the latter newspaper published the first episode of “Buster Brown” on May 4, 1902. “Buster Brown” was a departure from Outcault’s previous style. It was drawn in panels and employed word balloons as the prime means of conveying dialogue. But Outcault retained a familiar feature of his earlier work, a placard, to offer aphorisms in the form of Buster’s weekly resolutions.

Frederick Opper’s and Rudolph Dirks’s work in the New York Journal probably inspired Outcault’s new techniques. He also drew some of his theme and artistic style for “Buster Brown” from a series of panel drawings entitled “On the Sidewalks of New York” by Louis M. Glackens, which appeared in the Journal in 1897. The September 26, 1897, episode of Glackens’s series featured a “Bad Boy” confronting a “Good Little Boy” (dressed much as Buster was later dressed) because of the latter’s respectability. A “Little Girl” attempted to dissuade the “Bad Boy.” A text panel within the borders of the illustration speculated that the “Little Girl” may have been motivated by a desire to grow up and marry the “Good Little Boy” for his money. Glackens’s series fell into the school of city kid cartoons pioneered by Michael Angelo Woolf and Richard Outcault, but his use of text within the panel to pose an ethical question and offer alternative readings of the illustration proffered a model for humor with a moral. The trick to this type of humor was to present it in an open-ended fashion so that it had broad appeal.

One mark of Buster’s personality was the aphoristic resolution at the end of each strip, which became one of the strip’s formal narrative devices. The resolution did not so much close each episode as, through the expectation of Buster breaking his resolve, posit a beginning for the next. Outcault’s resolutions opened “Buster Brown” to alternative readings. For instance, during the 1906–12 campaign against comic strips, Maud Sumners, a member of the Playground Association, castigated “Buster Brown” as deceitful, whereas an unsigned editorial in the Christian reform journal Outlook found the strip to have some redeeming qualities, possibly because Outcault occasionally advocated “Christian” business practices. The resolution also displayed the artist’s ambiguous concern with the culture he was helping to create. In one resolution Buster stated that “it must be wicked to go to church on Sunday knowing that you’re going to push someone hard for a dollar on Monday.” But these sentiments did not stop Outcault from pushing his product before the public for a dollar. Indeed “Buster Brown” may have been so marketable precisely because of this “populist” antibusiness sentiment.

By 1908 “Buster Brown” was a nationally known name that produced considerable revenue for its owner. For instance, Outcault’s royalties from a Buster Brown stage show alone came to $44,000 between 1903 and mid-1907. Outcault sought to make the most of his success.
In January 1906, tempted by a lucrative offer, he left the *New York Herald* for Hearst's newspapers. On January 21, 1906, Hearst's *New York American* published its first episode of "Buster Brown." As in Outcault's earlier move of the Yellow Kid from the *World* to the *Journal*, there was a legal dispute over the copyright of the strip. The outcome left the rights to the comic strip title "Buster Brown" with the *New York Herald* but gave Outcault license to draw the characters. A later case established that Outcault owned all other rights to "Buster Brown." The *Herald* hired a succession of artists to produce its own version of "Buster Brown." At the *American* Outcault overcame the problem of not being able to name his strip "Buster Brown" by drawing his characters in the space normally provided for the title. Buster Brown and his dog Tige were so well known to comic strip readers at least, that their creator could simply ask "Guess Who?" to have the text and the images act as a title.

In 1908 Buster appeared in twenty-four newspapers across the United States. The aggregate circulation of the papers carrying "Buster Brown" equaled only 3 to 4 percent of the country's total population, but it is probable that each copy of these papers had multiple readers, with perhaps as much as 10 percent of the population exposed to the comic strip weekly (see Table 4 in the appendix). But Buster's audience extended beyond the pages of the comic strip. His creator licensed Buster Brown's image to numerous advertisers.

Richard Outcault was not the first to use comic art to sell products. In the mid-1890s Knox Hats ran a number of advertisements in *Life* magazine in the form of two-line gag panels. Other advertisers used celebrity endorsements to sell their wares. Henry Ward Beecher appeared in advertisements for Pears' soap, and Emile Zola pitched Vin Mariani brandy. *Life* even adopted an earlier comic narrative to point out the benefits of print advertising over billboards. In December 1903 Frederick Opper used a "Happy Hooligan" strip to promote a cast-iron Happy Hooligan toy. But none of these examples involved a concerted effort to use the visual image of a comic strip character to market products. Nor did the Yellow Kid craze, for Outcault copyrighted the name only after the phenomenon developed. Buster Brown was the first comic strip character licensed in such a fashion that it constituted a brand name. Buster's diverse use distinguished him from other illustrated characters, such as Aunt Jemima, Sunny Jim, and Phoebe Snow, whose images companies established purely as trade-mark figures. Buster's celebrity grew out of multiple representations, whereas Sunny Jim and the others were all tied to single products.

According to Robert Lesser, a comic art and memorabilia collector, Outcault licensed his character to a wide variety of manufacturers at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. The licensees included the Brown Shoe Company and Robert Ingersoll, the pioneer of inexpensive watches. Ingersoll, looking for new ways to sell watches, struck on the idea of a Buster Brown watch to be given away with a pair of Buster Brown shoes. He was guaranteed a certain number of sales, and the shoe company worked the wholesale price of the watch into the retail price of the shoes. The significance of Ingersoll's marketing scheme was not so much that it used a popular comic strip character to sell a variety of products but that it linked these products in such a fashion that the character constituted a brand name. For instance Ingersoll's first Buster Brown watch carried a direct advertisement for the shoes, but it also acted as an advertisement for the comic strip. Numerous other products—including textiles, harmonicas, a soft drink, coffee, flour, bread, apples, suits, hosiery, and pianos—used Buster Brown as a brand name. Buster Brown dolls, toys, and games, reprints of the comic strip, and the aforementioned touring musical stage show extended the dimensions of Buster's popularity and recognition.

Advertisers who used Buster Brown sought national recognition and distribution for their products. For instance, Ivan Frank & Co., a New York child's clothing wholesaler, distributed a promotional pamphlet that described their audience as extending "from Maine to California." There are examples of children's clothing advertisements featuring Buster Brown from Rhode Island and Washington State, so Frank & Co. probably made good on the claim. The Buster Brown brand name was so successful that Ivan Frank merged his company with an Indianapolis clothing company, and the Chattanooga mill he represented, and formed Buster Brown Textiles Incorporated (see Figure 8). This firm, since bought out by Gerber, still operates as Buster Brown Apparel.

The other major Buster Brown licensee, the Brown Shoe Company of St. Louis, took an advertisement in the *World's Fair Bulletin* of January 1902 proclaiming the United States the "territory of the Brown Shoe Company" (see Figure 9). The ad featured a map showing the territorial gains of the United States on which photographs of Brown's salesmen were superimposed according to their territory. It positioned
Brown Shoes as a company with a national vision. After it bought the Buster Brown name for its shoes, the company expanded rapidly. Between 1902 and about 1907 the physical plant of the Brown Shoe Company doubled from four to eight factories. To promote its shoes, the company ran a national series of “Buster Brown Outdoor Recitations” featuring a nine-year-old boy dressed to resemble the comic strip character. In 1910 J. H. Sawyer, the advertising manager for the Brown Shoe Company, reported in *Judicious Advertising* that Buster Brown, and the touring show, secured the company effective advertising often without cost. The title of Sawyer’s article, “Buster Brown Advertises Shoes,” gave clear expression to the character’s worth as a trademark.

“Buster Brown” was an extensively marketed name brand before name brands and trademarks received the full imprimatur of law in 1905. By 1908 the advertising industry was highly conscious of the importance of brand names. An article in *Printers’ Ink* estimated that over 50 percent of that year’s advertising existed to “create property in trade marks.” These trademarks and brand names contributed to the corporate restructuring of American production and distribution. They helped create a national culture of consumption fixated on images. Michael Schudson, an advertising historian, argues that goods and the sharing of their names help make a culture. The point is, What sort of a culture do they make? The introduction of large-scale production impersonalized the manufacture of many goods. The inauguration of brand names and prepackaged goods altered individual exchanges between retailers and customers. Brand names helped determine the purchase of products. Part of what people then shared was the name, the image of the commodity.

Buster Brown was the crucial link between comic strips and the development of a visual culture of consumption in America. “He” united entertainment and consumer goods. Indeed “Buster Brown” cannot be understood solely as a comic strip. All of his incarnations contributed to the makeup of his character, and each reinforced or advertised the others. Moreover this type of advertising, in the form of entertainment and consumption, allowed Buster’s audience to expand their contact with the character by purchasing one of his products. Readers of the strip no longer had to wait for Sunday to get a dose of “Buster Brown.” For instance, a 1908 advertisement for the Buster Brown doll in the Sears, Roebuck catalog described it as “a very fine imitation of

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bakery ran concurrent advertisements for Buster Brown Bread. In his 1953 autobiography, Bad Boy, the crime writer Jim Thompson, who was reared in Oklahoma City at this time, refers to his Buster Brown blouse as a customarily worn item. In this fashion through the purchase of a “Buster Brown” product, a cultural act, reading comic strips, was further tied to acts of consumption and the basis laid for the wholesale selling of a culture of consumption. Moreover, in a city such as Oklahoma City, which grew over 500 percent between 1900 and 1910, the consumption of Buster Brown united the inhabitants not as a local community but as participants in a culture of consumption. At the very least these Oklahomans were Americans because they consumed national products.33

More than a simple use of Buster Brown’s likeness and the techniques of comic art linked comic strips and advertising. Some merchants adopted the maxims expressed in Buster’s/Outcault’s weekly resolution as advertising slogans. For instance in a March 4, 1906, episode from the American entitled “Buster Brown: His Snowman,” the resolution read, in part:

How are you to gain your first idea of a man except by his clothes? They are the key to his nature, breeding and taste. Commence at the bath tub, and nice stockings and shoes boys.

A later resolution read:

Clothes are more important than most of us think. What else have you to judge a stranger by? . . . Flashy attire shows vulgarity. Very gaudy clothes are worn by vain, cheap people. Since your clothes are your best advertisement, try to advertise well, then live up to your advertisement. . . . Don’t advertise All Wool and then produce cotton. Don’t try to fool ‘em. It don’t pay.4

In 1906 Outcault’s Chicago-based advertising agency transferred these sentiments into advertisements for W. B. Hutchinson Co., a Seattle clothing store, and a Los Angeles store. A resolution within the advertisement stated “that if you wish to march along you must be clad in the latest. The better your apparel the swifter will be your progress.”35

In another 1906 strip Outcault expressed his notion of good business practices. The resolution said,

Business. What a lot of trickery and treachery is done in thy name. How many so called Christians excuse their meanness by saying

“Business is Business.” There’s lots better ways of being a good Christian than going to church—one way is being honest and generous in business.36

In a 1913 advertisement for a Providence, Rhode Island, clothing store Outcault’s agency adapted this sentiment to read, “Resolved. That people make their good luck by doing the right thing. We have made ours by giving our patrons the right kind of goods. Square deal always wins. We want to keep our patrons.”37

Outcault’s advertising agency prepared the advertisements, which probably accounts for their shared values with the comic strip resolutions. In these instances Buster, an entertainment celebrity, acted as the spokesman for the company. But he also served as the brand name for many items. The U. S. Copyright Office in the Library of Congress has, by my estimate, over 10,000 individual copyright registrations for advertisements using Buster Brown created by Outcault’s agency.

Buster’s image mediated the reception of the products and gave them a distinctive, if polysemic, “personality.” For instance, it is possible that parents bought Buster Brown shoes for their children out of regard for the Christian business practices and responsibilities Outcault advocated. The recipients of the shoes, by contrast, may have wanted them as a form of identification with Buster’s youthful rebellion. “Buster Brown Plays Cowboy,” published in the New York Herald on July 30, 1905, demonstrates the interplay between these two aspects of “Buster Brown.” In his resolution Buster admits to being wrong in “picking out things to do” and then states, “You can’t be happy unless you are good.” But this sentiment is undercut by Tige’s winking comment, “A lot of wise talk from a chap who is always slipping.”38 Outcault also poked fun at the range of “Buster Brown” products in the December 17, 1905, episode of the strip (see Figure 11). But even this episode can be read as a plug for Buster’s trademark, especially with its resolution extolling the joys of giving.

The structure of Buster Brown’s personality made him a figure open to different and simultaneous interpretations that translated into diverse market appeal. Buster showed that a character-based image made a wide range of goods and services attractive to disparate audiences. In addition to containing different motivations for consumption, he united the producers of different types of goods and services, from large-scale manufacturers, such as the Brown Shoe Company, to
small shopkeepers, such as F. E. Ballou of Providence. This unification may have helped to contain tensions produced when localized economies were subjected to national market forces. But more to the point, Buster’s diverse usages represent the gradual transformations that took place as a locally oriented producerist society became a centralized consumer society. Hal Barron, a historian of rural America, recently discovered a seemingly paradoxical use of Buster and Tige in a series of antmail-order advertisements run in the Upper Midwest and West in 1916. As Barron notes, Buster was “a paragon of national mass popular culture” and a familiar figure to local communities through the shoes that “were sold only by local retailers and were not available by mail order.” In this case Buster Brown literally represented the process of transformation where new cultural forms overlay, interact, and flow out of the culture being displaced.

Inevitably when I mention my work on Buster Brown to Americans, someone will recall having had a pair of Buster Brown shoes as a child. Everyone it seems has a story to tell about a Buster Brown product. Indeed the African American diva Marian Anderson recalled in her autobiography owning a pair of Buster Brown shoes. Perhaps this is not surprising since according to John A. Bush, the president of the Brown Shoe Company in the 1950s, the company had spent $30 million on advertising the shoes by 1959. The ads seem to have been particularly successful. In 1996 the historian Michael Barton could still remember the adaptation of Langston Hughes’s poem “All God’s Chil-

dren Got Shoes” for a Buster Brown Shoes radio commercial in the 1950s. And it is even now possible to buy Buster Brown clothing for children and Buster Brown Shoes in places such as the Buster Brown Shoe Shop on Philadelphia’s South Street.

My examination of Buster Brown suggests that the culture formed around these products was neither imposed by manufacturers nor created by the populace out of a desire to participate in a democracy of manufactured goods. Rather consumer culture was created in a strug-
gle to assign meaning and values to a variety of products and to lives changing under their impact. Singling out Buster Brown as a representative component in the long transition from a producerist society to a modern culture of consumption points to the multifaceted causality that brought on this change. The modern era was not constituted simply by an increased and universal consumption of goods and services but involved the extension of commodity status to, among other things, ideas and symbols and the development of intellectual property. Comic art was one of the subjects, objects, and agents of this change.

Comic strips not only transformed comic art, by stretching its commodity value but also transformed the culture. The simple, repeatable, easily recognizable form of comic strips made a Modernist aesthetic generally available. By the mid-1910s Americans across the country could open their newspapers and see the same strips. They could also buy an array of products branded with the image of one of the most popular comic strip characters. Ill at ease and hesitant, Americans began to recognize these comic strips and their characters as part of their daily lives. Around such recognitions America became a national culture of consumption.

I have shown that between the 1890s and the 1920s comic strips transformed a particular type of urban imagery into a national commodity. In this process artists and syndicates reshaped the rough-edged humor of the illustrated journals and the early comic strips. Notably artists toned down the ethnic jests and dialogue gags that underpinned many of the early strips. Syndicates tended to limit the distribution of comic strips premised on ethnic humor, such as “Abie the Agent,” to larger cities. Such maneuvers suggest that the sense of an American culture created by comic strips was fragile and open to challenge by humorous depictions of the diversity of that society.

Ethnic humor had a place in American culture but usually as a reference point to some “other” that lay outside the culture’s acceptable norms. Based in cities, with rapidly changing ethnic compositions, illustrated humor journals and early comic strips challenged these norms, expanded the acceptable, and established comic art as both a cultural form and a commodity. The expansion of comic strips from an urban to a national phenomenon revealed the art form’s limitations as transformative agent. For instance, Rudolph Dirks, having shaped the dimensions of comic strips with his “Katzenjammer Kids,” had to move the strip offshore to maintain its anarchic tendencies and dialect jokes.

Dirk’s relocation of his strip was a technical solution to the difficulty of maintaining the strip’s humor as its readership expanded beyond