ville hall, the “ten-twenty-thirties,” and as we will see in subsequent chapters, by going out to the amusement park, dancing the new “animal” dances, and regularly taking in the picture show in their neighborhood theaters and the downtown movie palaces.25

The new amusements and amusement spaces afforded residents of divided cities the experience of belonging to social groupings that were totalizing rather than divisive, or, to employ the anthropologist Victor Turner’s terms, generous rather than snobbish, inclusive rather than exclusive. Going out provided a momentary escape not simply from one’s particular class and ethnic group but also from a society differentiated along these lines to “an alternative and more ‘liberated’ way of being socially human.”26

Though individual audiences remained segregated by class and income, with the prosperous attending the downtown theaters that charged a dollar or more for orchestra seats, and the clerks and stenographers going to the “ten-twenty-thirties,” they were all part of a larger national public for commercial amusements. The bills, fliers, posters, marquees, and newspaper advertisements that carried the magic words, “Straight from Broadway,” confirmed for theatergoers that no matter how distant they might be from the two-dollar seats on the “Great White Way,” no matter where they had come from or were returning to after the show, they were, for an hour or two at least, part of what the journalist Edwin Slosson would later identify as that “ordinary American crowd, the best natured, best dressed, best behaving and best smelling crowd in the world.”27

While the doors of commercial amusements were opening far wider than ever before, not everyone was being welcomed inside. “Decency” remained the essential element in determining who would and would not be permitted within the public amusement sites, but decency in the abstract was too evanescent a notion. To sustain its integrity and utility, it had to be concretized through reference to an immutably “indecent” other. This was the role assigned to African Americans.

Racial segregation and racist parody were not invented by turn-of-the-century showmen. They became constituent elements in commercial amusements because they were already endemic in the larger society and because they provided a heterogeneous white audience with a unifying point of reference and visible and constant reminders of its privileged status.6

“White” immigrants and ethnics who dressed appropriately, acted decently, and had the price of admission were welcomed inside the

*While Asians and Asian Americans were also parodied on stage and segregated or excluded in some western theaters, they were never as significant a factor in the amusement world. Most of their leisure time was spent in their own communities; seldom did they venture outside them or attempt to patronize commercial amusements. They were, for this reason, not affected to the same degree as the African Americans by segregation or exclusion.
commercial amusement centers. As Henry James discovered in 1904 on
his return to the United States after a twenty-year absence, the
“aliens” were everywhere being rapidly Americanized or, as he put it,
magically lifted to a new “level,” “glazed . . . over . . . by a huge white-
washing brush.” Even the Italians, he found, had lost their “colour,”
which of all the European “races,” they had “appeared . . . most to
have.” James’s use of metaphors of color to describe the Americaniza-
tion of the “alien” was particularly apt. For what most distinguished
the European Americans from the African Americans was the former’s
ability to lose their “colour.”

Two years after James revisited America, Ray Stannard Baker, the
magazine reporter and sometime muckraker, made his own tour of the
country. In the articles and book he published about his journey, Baker
made explicit what had been implicit in James’s musings about ethnicity
and race. He noted that, while the “mingling white races,” “the Ger-
mans, Irish, English, Italians, Jews, Slavs,” were being rapidly assimilated
into the “nation we call America,” the Negro was still not “accepted as an American. Instead of losing himself gradually in the
dominant race, as the Germans, Irish, and Italians are doing, adding
those traits or qualities with which Time fashions and modifies this
human mosaic called the American nation, the Negro is set apart as a
peculiar people.” Like “blacks in South Africa, and certain classes in
India,” Negroes were becoming increasingly segregated, “a people
wholly apart—separate in their churches, separate in their schools, sepa-
rate in cars, conveyances, hotels, restaurants.”

This segregation of public facilities was, Baker asserted, a recent
development. “Conditions are rapidly changing. A few years ago, no
hotel or restaurant in Boston refused Negro guests; now [in 1907] sev-
eral hotels, restaurants, and especially confectionery stores, will not
serve Negroes, even the best of them.” North and South, segregation
had grown apace with the growth of the cities—and their African-
American populations. As C. Van Woodward would assert a half-
century later, segregation in the South “did not appear with the end of
slavery, but toward the end of the [nineteenth] century and later.” It
was “essentially an urban, not a rural, phenomenon [that] appeared
first in towns and cities and grew as they grew.”

Though segregation had by the early 1900s become national policy,
reinforced by the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision that permitted
states and municipalities to establish “separate but equal” public facili-
ties for African-American citizens, there remained significant differ-
ces between northern and southern cities. In the North, African
Americans did not have to move to the back of trolleys and streetcars,
and the segregation of theaters, restaurants, and hotels was generally
prohibited by law. Unfortunately, these laws did not stop individual
proprietors from establishing their own segregation policies—nor
did they mandate that municipal and state judges punish them for
doing so. As a result of regional variations and the uneven (sometimes
nonexistent) enforcement of antidiscrimination statutes, southern
migrants to northern cities never quite knew where they stood. Early
twentieth-century Chicago, as James Grossman has written, “had its
own racial rules, but [unlike southern cities] they were unwritten and
ambiguous.”

One generally accepted rule was that first-class downtown theaters
had to be segregated. When African-American investigators working
for the Chicago Commission on Race Relations in 1919 and 1920 tried
to purchase theater tickets on the main floor of one of Chicago’s pre-
mier playhouses, they were informed that the only remaining seats
were in the gallery. “White” customers behind them on line were, how-
ever, given their choice of seats. One theater manager, when queried
about the behavior of “Negroes,” replied that it was not the “conduct of
the Negroes [that] was objectionable, but their mere presence.”

No matter how wealthy, educated, or distinguished black citizens
might be, they had to sit in the upper galleries. Even on Broadway,
African Americans who wished to see the black comedy team of Bert
Williams and George Walker performing In Dahomey had to undergo
the humiliating experience of entering the theater by a back entrance
and taking seats in the upper galleries. Though such segregation was
expressly illegal, the New York Times explained, it was necessary
because white theatergoers did not enjoy sitting alongside blacks.

African Americans did not, of course, passively condone such dis-
crimination. In issue after issue of Crisis, the weekly W. E. B. Du Bois
edited for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored
People, there were stories about legal actions initiated to enforce
antidiscrimination statutes. G. O. Cochran sued a theater proprietor in
Los Angeles for refusing “him admittance to the first floor on the
ground of color” and won fifty dollars plus court costs. Mary Scott, a
white woman, and Hattie Jones, who worked for her, sued the Chicago
theater manager who told them that they could only sit together in the
gallery, not in Mrs. Scott’s box, because “white patrons did not care to
sit in boxes with colored people.” Though such cases occasionally
resulted in decisions for the plaintiffs, the fines levied were seldom sufficient to force any permanent change in seating policy. 8

African Americans protested against discrimination in white-owned theaters but realized that the only alternative to patronizing segregated white theaters was to build their own. As a group of black businessmen explained in August 1901, “It has long been a source of exasperation to the leaders of colored society in Chicago that they could not secure box or orchestra seats in any of the theaters, no matter how much they were willing to pay or how soon they got in line before the box office window. . . . This fact has led to the plan of having a colored theatre in Chicago, controlled by colored people and catering only to colored patronage.” In 1904, Robert Motts opened the Pekin Theatre on Chicago’s South Side with a multitalented stock company of African-American actors, playwrights, and musicians. The Pekin Stock Company produced an entirely new musical show every two weeks—each with up to twenty original numbers. Motts’s venture proved so successful that within a few years white theater owners had “opened several theaters on State Street, catering to black patronage and located only a few blocks south of the Pekin.” 10

Though few cities could duplicate Chicago in the variety of live amusements offered by and for African Americans, most large cities by 1910 had at least one black theater. In Jackson, Mississippi, where the manager of the Century Theatre had “refused to book Negro troupes and made Negro patrons use the fire escape to reach the gallery,” a group of black businessmen in 1905 opened the American Theatre in the building that housed the American Trust and Savings Bank, “a Negro institution.” In New Orleans, a black company subleased the Elysium Theatre to present Billy Kersands’ “black” minstrel show. The theater remained segregated under the new management, but it was “the white people [who were] treated with secondary consideration, only having one side of the upper balcony set aside for them, while the Negroes have the entire orchestra, half of the balcony, the whole pit and all of the boxes with the exception of one.” 11

In southern cities, the theater-building campaign proceeded with such alacrity that Salem Tutt Whitney, a black producer and performer, commented in 1910 that, while Booker T. Washington could hardly

have been thinking of show business when he “maintained that the South is the natural field of endeavor for the colored man . . . a trip through the South will convince one that there had been no more rapid progress along any line than in things theatrical. Every town of importance has its colored play-house, and for the most part they are well attended. From empty storerooms and lots in the walls there have grown many creditable theatres with all the modern equipment, capable of seating from 500 to 1,000 persons.” 12

There were other “ethnic” and “national” theaters in cities across the country, but they were seldom as well-attended as the African-American ones. The Irish in Philadelphia could, if they chose, buy tickets for the “Mac Desmond Players” or travel downtown to see the latest Broadway road show; Russian Jews could patronize cheap English-speaking theaters as well as neighborhood Yiddish houses. Black audiences did not have the luxury of such choices. They patronized the black theaters because they refused to accept segregation in the “white” ones. 13

The segregation of African Americans comprised one element in their designation as “indecent” others. Equally important was their representation in parodic form on stage. What Douglas Gilbert has written of the early variety theater remained true in vaudeville and musical comedy in the 1890s and early 1900s. “Most of the comedy . . . was racial” or what we would today call ethnic. Reading through vaudeville programs from the early 1900s, one is struck by the way ethnicity and race were used to identify acts. Singers, sketch artists, dancers, comedians, and acrobats were listed on the “bills” as Irish, Hebrew, colored, blackface, or German. The designation referred not to the performers’ ethnicity but to the “type” of act they presented. Each “type” spoke its own language, dressed in readily identifiable costumes, and had its own routines. The Irish knockabout comics engaged in a particularly physical brand of comedy, tough-guy routines, dances, and songs. Dutch and German comics dressed in peaked cap, short pants, and large wooden shoes. The “Hebrews” sang and told their stories in “stage” Yiddish. 14

Some comic teams mixed different types together on stage. Makey and Stewart appeared at Keith and Albee's Union Square Theater on November 24, 1902, “made up” as a “Hebrew” and an “Irishman.” The Marx Brothers combined three different stage “ethnicities” in their act. Groucho began in vaudeville playing the Dutch role, which he later

*These few blocks on South State Street would later become famous as the “Stroll,” described by Langston Hughes in 1918 as “a teeming Negro street with crowded theaters, restaurants, and cabarets. And excitement from noon to noon.” 9
altered only because it was too difficult for him to tell rapid-fire jokes in a “Dutch” accent; Harpo played the knockabout, slapstick Irishman; Chico, the happy-go-lucky Italian. There was a strange reality to the interplay among these ethnic types. As in real life, the “Hebrews,” “Irish,” and “Italians” fought, misunderstood, and mistrusted one another—but the bickering was “in famiglia” and the “act” usually ended with harmony, if not camaraderie, restored. 15

Though the ethnic comedic types were immediately identifiable, it was impossible to confuse the stage parody with the real-life immigrant. The presence of ethnic in the audience obligated immigrant impersonators to behave with some degree of sensitivity. Most of the ethnic audience members, already well Americanized, laughed uproariously at the “greenhorn” caricatures, because, in doing so, they were celebrating their new status as urban Americans. Still, there were set limits beyond which those caricatures could not proceed. When those limits were exceeded, the ethnic community, or its most vocal defenders, could be expected to take immediate and direct action, threatening theater managers and performers with negative publicity, boycotts, or worse. The reports from the Keith-Albee managers contain, as Robert Snyder has indicated, “repeated references to cuts of ethnic spoofs and nastier expressions such as ‘kike,’ ‘wop,’ and ‘dirty little Greek.’” In Chicago, representatives of the Jewish community “agitated... over the burlesque Hebrew types seen on the stage” and demanded “the suppression of the stage Jew.” 16

Sharing the vaudeville bill with the ethnic types were the native-born rubes, hicks, and hayseeds; the “gentlemen” in top hats; and the tramps, hoboes, and newsies. The hayseed acts were especially popular with vaudeville audiences who were only too pleased to see their cultural “superiority” acted out on stage. No matter how “green” the immigrants in the audience, they were always more sophisticated than the country bumpkins on the stage. Vaudeville audiences also joined together to hoot the daffy “gentleman” acts like that of Ed Wynn, who made his stage entrance with a pipe in his mouth, a bulldog on a leash, and the college cheer, “Rah, rah, rah. Who pays my bills? Pa and Ma.” A different, more sympathetic laughter greeted the tramp and hobo characters. W. C. Fields did his tramp juggler routine on vaudeville stages for years with great success. He was but one of hundreds of hobo performers to appear in vaudeville, musical comedy, and later, like Charlie Chaplin, in silent movies. 17

The cruelest and most popular of the comedic caricatures were the “coons” or “darkies” whose lineage reached back more than half a century to the antebellum minstrel show, where “stage Negroes” had been played exclusively by whites in blackface. 18 There were a variety of black comedic characters: the “dandy” preening and bragging about his thick lips, wooly hair, and smart clothes; the imbecile sputtering nonsense and forever “spooked” by hobgoblins; the lazy fool doing all he could to avoid work; the imposter maladroitly impersonating “white” doctors, lawyers, or politicians; and, toward the close of the century, altered only because it was too difficult for him to tell rapid-fire jokes in a “Dutch” accent; Harpo played the knockabout, slapstick Irishman; Chico, the happy-go-lucky Italian. There was a strange reality to the interplay among these ethnic types. As in real life, the “Hebrews,” “Irish,” and “Italians” fought, misunderstood, and mistrusted one another—but the bickering was “in famiglia” and the “act” usually ended with harmony, if not camaraderie, restored. 15

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the razor-wielding ‘coon’ who was as foolish as his predecessors, but sexual and dangerous as well.

These negative qualities attributed to “blackness” on stage served to unite the audience in a celebration of its own “whiteness.” As David Roediger reminds us, “Blackface minstrels were the first self-consciously ‘white’ entertainers in the world. The simple physical disguise—and elaborate cultural disguise—of blacking up served to emphasize that those on stage were really white and that whiteness really mattered. . . . All whites could easily participate in minstrelsy’s central joke, the point of which remained a common, respectable and increasingly smug whiteness under the makeup.”

The blackface performers who migrated from minstrelsy to vaudeville and musical comedy in the 1890s and early 1900s played the same kinds of shuffling, bumbling, preening characters. So, tragically, did the African-American comedians, singers, and dancers who began to appear on the vaudeville stage in the middle 1890s and were required to portray—in a more “authentic” fashion—the “darky” characters constructed by white performers in blackface. Bert Williams and George Walker, the first African Americans to play the “big time” in New York City, billed themselves as “The Two Real Coons” to distinguish themselves from white performers in blackface. Other African-American performers, many of whom had toiled for years on backwater minstrelsy circuits, followed Williams and Walker onto the vaudeville stage. Some, like Williams and Walker, attempted to “give style and comic dignity to a fiction that white men had created and fostered.” Others distanced themselves from the caricatures they acted out by exaggerating the parody. Billy Kersands claimed to have the largest mouth in the world. Ernest Hogan, who billed himself as “the Unbleached American” and wrote, published, and performed his own “coon” song, “All Coons Look Alike to Me,” incorporated watermelon eating into his act.

It is impossible to overstate the popularity of such black misrepresentations in the 1890s and early 1900s. African-American caricatures were a staple of the vaudeville bill, black musicals were playing on Broadway and touring the first-class theaters of the country, and “coon” songs were the hottest-selling item in sheet music. According to James Dorman, “Over six hundred [coon songs] were published during the decade of the 1890s, and the more successful efforts sold in the millions of copies. To take but a single example, Fred Fisher’s ‘If the Man
The "Indecent" Others

By the early 1900s, African-American performers singing coon songs, dancing cakewalks, and playing the comedic "darky" roles had become so popular and so in demand that white performers who had previously had vaudeville all to themselves began to demand their removal from the stage. A few African-American stars responded by spending more time in Europe and Australia, where, they claimed, there was no race prejudice. However, most black performers, not unused to such bigotry, continued to accept whatever billings came their way regardless of the hostility exhibited by the white performers.25

The prejudice of white vaudevillians and the tastes of white audiences strictly circumscribed the performance boundaries of African-American stars. No more than one "colored" act could appear on any vaudeville program at the same time; African Americans (with few exceptions) had to perform in blackface, speak and sing in dialect, wear funny costumes, sing "coon" songs, and end their acts with a cakewalk or some other kind of "darky" dance. While other performers, no matter what their ethnicity, were permitted to regularly "make up" as "blacks," "Hebrews," "Irish," the only groups blacks were allowed to parody were "darkies" and occasionally the Chinese. As a writer in the Philadelphia Tribune, a black newspaper, complained in 1907, white people "don't care to see a black man imitate the white folk, but they have nothing to say about George Primrose, Billy West, George Thatcher, Lew Dockstader, George Wilson and a number of other white men, who have got rich by blacking their faces and imitating the Negro." Only in the black theaters were the black performers permitted to imitate whites.27

Though many black performers were talented dancers and singers as well as comics, their value on the vaudeville stage resided almost exclusively in their ability to make their white audiences laugh at them. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued, perhaps in exaggerated fashion, in Dialectic of Enlightenment, "To laugh at something is always to deride it.... A laughing audience is a parody of humanity.... Their harmony is a caricature of solidarity." Bert Williams described the source of his audiences' pleasure in much the same terms. He was convinced that his success on stage depended on his humiliation, his always "getting the worst of it." Williams played what he called "the Jonah man," the man who, even if it rained soup, would be found with a fork in his hand and no spoon in sight, the man whose fighting rela-
This sheet music cover is from 1914. Unlike earlier representations of carefree “darkies,” this caricature has a sinister, brutish quality to it, representing the “Free and Easy” African American as a potential danger to civilization. (Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division; Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.)

The “Indecent” Others

tives come to visit him and whose head is always dented by the furniture they throw at each other.”

Although Williams, like Adorno and Horkheimer, claimed to be speaking of “laughter” in general, not whites laughing at blacks, there can be little doubt that the element of derision in the laughter of the white audience viewing black performers was of a different quality than it would have been had the audience been integrated. Adorno and Horkheimer scorned the “solidarity” of the modern audience as a “caricature,” but they did not deny that it was a form of solidarity. The “white” audience assembled to laugh at blacks came away from the experience with a sense of solidarity united by their shared distance from the objects of ridicule.

Other ethnic groups had some success in banning tasteless and offensive slurs, but African Americans could not threaten a boycott (they were too small an audience to matter), take direct action, or exert much political pressure. Their only recourse was to call on white theater managers, song publishers, and performers to be more sensitive; their only media for doing so were the columns of black newspapers like the Indianapolis Freeman and journals like Crisis.

As Sylvester Russell wrote in the Indianapolis Freeman in 1904, song publishers and performers had stopped using the words “sheenee” and “dago” to avoid offending Jews and Italians. There was, however, no such sensitivity when it came to “nigger,” “darky,” and “coon.” “Colored song writers have never insulted any of the white races. Why then should the song publishers accept a manuscript that would insult the Colored race? The best class of cultivated white people of the North do not appreciate the word ‘nigger.’ The ignorant ‘stick-weed’ variety performer who thinks he pleases in forcing this word upon the public is very much mistaken. . . . Colored people regard this word as an insult and an injustice to their race. There is no humor in the words ‘common nigger.’”

More prevalent—and ultimately more damaging from the point of view of African Americans—was the widespread adoption of “coon” to refer to blacks. The term, which, David Roediger claims, had once been a common word for “white country persons,” had by the early twentieth century been transformed into a racial slur. Where black performers had used the word “just to amuse or to cause laughter,” white audiences had adopted it to insult the entire “race,” a writer for the Indianapolis Freeman argued in early 1909. “A show goes to a country town—some low down, loud mouth ‘coon shouter’ sings ‘Coon, Coon,
Coon,’ or some other song that has plenty of the word ‘coon’ in it, with an emphasis on the word ‘coon.’ The people, especially the children, are educated that a colored man is a ‘coon.’ What was meant for a jest is taken seriously. Before the show came people were afraid to call a black man a ‘coon.’ But now they think it’s alright and he won’t mind because it’s all in fun and it’s in all the songs. In this way and many other ways too numerous to mention, ‘coon’ songs have done more to insult the Negro and cause his white brethren, especially the young generation to have a bad opinion of good Negroes as well as bad Negroes, than anything that has ever happened. . . . Certain slang and nicknames should be abolished, even if it costs bloodshed—the same as it did to abolish slavery.”

No matter how vigorous the protests of black journalists and activists, the comedic “darkies” and “coons” remained an integral part of the vaudeville and musical-comedy show because they served a vital purpose. They provided a heterogeneous “white” audience with a symbol of the racial “other” and, in so doing, helped to cement it into a sort of “herrenvolk” democracy. Everyone in the audience, whether rich or poor, new immigrant, old immigrant, or native-born of native parents, was redefined as “white” by participating in collective, derisive laughter at the superstitions, the stupidities, the misuse of language and logic, the sentimentality and inherent childishness of the “blacks” cavorting on the stage before them.

African Americans, alone among the American peoples, were considered to be not only lacking in respectability but also constitutionally incapable of acquiring it. For H. G. Wells, visiting the United States in 1904, this fact of American life was virtually inexplicable. Try as he might, he could not understand the attitudes of white Americans toward “colored” people, especially as many of these “colored” people were, he discovered, “quite white” and had “the same blood,” the same Anglo-Saxon blood, flowing in their veins as the oldest, finest southern planter families. Wells was particularly confused by the difference between the way southern European immigrants and African-American “natives” were treated in the city’s public spaces. Though many of the blacks had patrician white ancestors, they were shunned and segregated. European “immigrants,” on the other hand, who shared no biological or cultural heritage with American whites, were afforded every social courtesy and right. Wells confronted his southern hosts with his confusion, “These people [the blacks] . . . are nearer your blood, nearer your temper, than any of those bright-eyed, ringleted immigrants on the East Side. Are you ashamed of your poor relations? Even if you don’t like the half, or the quarter of negro blood, you might deal civilly with the three-quarters white.”

North and South, Wells’s questions were met with the same sorts of answers, all testifying to the “mania” with which whites explained and defended segregation. “One man will dwell upon the uncontrollable violence of a black man’s evil passions . . . another will dilate upon the incredible stupidity of the full-blooded negro . . . a third will speak of his physical offensiveness, his peculiar smell which necessitates his social isolation.” More than once, Wells was told stories about light-skinned blacks who married “pure-minded, pure white” women who gave birth to children “black as your hat. Absolutely negroid.” Anecdotes such as these about “the lamentable results of intermarriage” were used not simply as an argument “against intermarriage, but as an argument against the extension of quite rudimentary civilities to the men of color. If you eat with them, you’ve got to marry them,” Wells was told. There was no acceptable compromise, no halfway point between miscegenation and segregation.

What this thinking on the part of whites meant for African Americans was obvious. There was no escape from biological destiny, no way blacks could change their appearance, rid themselves of what Well’s hosts had called their “evil passions” or their “peculiar smell.” The “taint” of black blood was such as to render attempts at respectability foolhardy. To sacralize public amusement spaces and sanctify their audiences as decent, African Americans had to be excluded or segregated within them. No exceptions could be permitted.
CHAPTER 6

The City as Playground: The World’s Fair Midways

“NIGHTLIFE” was the most conspicuous, but not the only, realm of commercial leisure to overflow its boundaries in the 1890s and early 1900s. The “vacation habit” that arrived in America in this period would support the expansion of a host of new leisure-time activities and amusement sites, from world’s fair midways to amusement and baseball parks. Vacations were not, of course, new for the city’s social elites who regularly left the metropolis during the warm weather to travel to Europe, the mountains, or the seashore. But they were for its less privileged residents who were beginning to adopt what the journalists referred to as “the vacation habit.”

Edward Hungerford described the new trend in an August 1891 article for Century magazine, “All classes and conditions of men enter the streams of population which from the middle of May to the middle of October ebb and flow through the land. Every social grade, every occupation, is represented. The rich and the well-to-do middle classes appear most conspicuously, but the currents are swelled by small tradespeople, by pensioners on limited legacies. Then come the work-people, who in one way and another manage to move with the

rest. Your colored barber, when trade begins to slacken in the large town, informs you that he is thinking of taking a little vacation. The carpenter and joiner sends his wife and babies a hundred miles away to spend weeks or months on a farm that takes boarders. Factories ... empty their armies into the open fields ... Professional men, college students, teachers, seamstresses, and fresh-air fund beneficiaries pour forth to the mountains, the seaside, the lakes, where they spend their summer outings in rest or in various forms of service."

Hungerford exaggerated. The only factories that were emptying “their armies into the open fields” were those that had closed down for the season and laid off their workers. For most city folk in the nineteenth century, the warm weather signaled no relief from the daily cycle of work and rest. Summer and winter, working people expected to labor at least five and a half days a week. Vacations, when they came, were unpaid and unwelcome."

Though journalists and reformers preached that “men and women in all vocations need[ed] rest and change” and settlement house workers raised money to send a handful of working girls to the countryside, the vast majority of vacationers came from the ranks of the self-employed, professionals, and white-collar workers. Teachers and self-employed professionals had always saved money for vacations. They were in the early 1900s joined by white-collar employees in government offices, banks, financial houses, and insurance companies, and salesmen and saleswomen from the larger department stores. The department store managers, in particular, encouraged their workers to take a week’s unpaid holiday. Vacations boosted morale, created favorable publicity for the stores, and were of minor cost or consequence as they occurred during the slow season. A few department stores gave employees who had been steadily at work for the past fifty-one weeks a week’s vacation with pay; senior employees got even longer vacations.

When Abraham Cahan’s fictional character David Levinsky arrived at Rigi Kulm, the most luxurious hotel in the Catskills, he found alongside the well-to-do manufacturers and professionals “a considerable number of single young people, of both sexes—salesmen,stenogra-

*In this chapter, we will look only at the world’s fair midways. In chapters 7 and 8, we will turn our attention to the amusement and baseball parks.

*It would be another fifty years before factory workers could expect a “paid” vacation. In their 1924 study of Muncie, Indiana, the Lynds found that only 12 of the 123 working-class families they interviewed had taken an annual vacation for two years in a row; another 12 had taken a vacation in one, but not both, of the previous two years. As late as 1939, the United States, unlike almost every European nation, had still not enacted legislation guaranteeing “vacation or holiday benefits for industrial wage-earners.”
phers, bookkeepers, librarians—who came for a fortnight's vacation." On his weekend trip to the Coney Island hotel district in the 1890s, Theodore Dreiser joined a crowd, that although dissimilar in ethnicity—there were probably no Russian Jews among them—was also representative of "New York's great middle class of that day." He shared the ferry to Coney with "the clerk and his prettiest girl, the actress and her admirer, the actor and his playmate, brokers, small and exclusive tradesmen, men of obvious political or commercial position, their wives, daughters, relatives and friends."5

While the countryside and the seashore remained the favored vacation spots of those who could afford a week's vacation, more and more Americans of moderate means were beginning to spend their summer holidays in the cities. In a 1904 Ladies Home Journal article on "The Best Two Weeks' Vacation for a Family," Mrs. George Archibald Palmer glowingly recounted her family's "vacation in New York." "Each of the fourteen days yielded recreation, entertainment and instruction... Those who had prophesied that a New York vacation would wear us out saw us return with renewed strength, high spirits and a firm conviction that there could be no better way to do it." In a companion article on "The Best Two Weeks' Vacation for a Girl: How Girls with Little Money Enjoyed Their Holidays," one writer described her "City Park Vacation"; another, her metropolitan holiday "By Way of the Trolley Cars."6

The cities and their environs were heavily promoted as vacation spots by tourist boards, hotels, railroads, and traction companies, all of which regularly took out newspaper ads or circulated their own publications extolling the joys of summer in the city. The Four-Track News, one of the country's first travel magazines (in later years, it would prosper as Travel, then Holiday) published by the Passenger Department of the New York Central and Hudson Railroad, interspersed among its travelogues on Java, Fiji, and Niagara Falls, stories about Chicago and its drainage canal and New York City and its picturesque immigrant quarters. Visitors to the cities were fed a steady diet of urban adventure stories before they even reached the metropolis. Once in town, they were assisted and advised by visitor's guidebooks, weekly tourist guides, and hotel personnel specially trained to guide "strangers" through the streets of the city.7

The city could never be marketed like other vacation resorts, domestic or foreign. But it had its charms, its attractions, and its "sights" to see. It was also much, much cheaper for the new breed of vacationer—the "clerks, bureaucrats, and others of modest means" who were now for the very first time "able to go on excursions."8

Because the cities had not entirely shed their nineteenth-century aura of sin, crime, and degeneracy, potential visitors had to be reassured that their passage through the streets would be a safe one. As William R. Taylor has pointed out, tourist guidebooks evoked "the moral geography of the city." They located, as a warning meant to be heeded, the immoral districts, but did so in a way that reassured readers that by avoiding these districts they could avoid all danger.9

The city's diversity was presented as an attraction. The guidebooks, travel magazines, and tour guides pointed proudly to the city's myriad populations and types, its parks, shopping districts, building styles, and neighborhoods, including those inhabited by the "other half." The Four-Track News offered among its articles extolling New York City a feature on the Sub-Treasury Building, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the city's immigrant quarters, where the tourist might be granted the "pleasure" of "shaking hands with the Old World." The Chicago guidebooks, as James Gilbert has written, "boasted of Chicago's ethnic diversity" and advised tourists how they could sample the city's diversity from within the protective environs of downtown.

The railroad terminals, hotels, theaters, restaurants, and downtown streets, tourists were informed, exhibited abundant specimens of new immigrants speaking exotic languages.10

One came to the city not just to see the sights but also to become part of the heterogeneous crowds, to join in the spectacle of urban life. As the anonymous author of "A Vacation on Fifth Avenue" wrote in Outlook in May 1906, "It is not the things which Fifth Avenue contains that give it its greatest interest—it is the moving, pulsating life which it bears along in its great current. It is like a splendid river filled with all sorts of craft engaged in ministering to the pleasure or the needs of the world." To walk the streets of the city and partake in its pleasures was to embark on one's own journey along that "splendid river."11

The city was being reconceived as a place of play as well as of work. Still, compared to Europe, the mountains, and the beaches, the American city was still regarded by many as a less a tourist attraction than a place to flee in the summer months. That perception would change
dramatically with the construction of the world’s fair midways and later, the amusement and baseball parks, which would contribute enormously to the city’s allure as a warm-weather amusement center.

The world’s fairs were paens to progress, concrete demonstrations of how order and organization, high culture and art, science and technology, commerce and industry, all brought together under the wise administration of business and government, would lead inevitably to a brighter, more prosperous future. Even the most high-minded of the fair’s organizers, investors, and directors understood however that attracting visitors was an essential precondition to educating them. As the official history of the St. Louis exposition admitted, though reluctantly, visitors came to the fairs “to be amused, instruction . . . being secondary. . . . The educational features, of course, should be paramount, and perhaps they are, but the incontestable truth remains that without a great amusement feature, the light frivolity that ministered to the masses, an exposition cannot hope to succeed.”

The first of the major American fairs, the Philadelphia “Centennial Exposition” of 1876, had been, at least compared to those that would follow, a remarkably solemn occasion. Visitors lined up to pay their respects to the “wonders of the age”: the Corliss Engine, the world’s largest steam engine, ready-made shoes, elevators, canned foods, Fleischmann’s dry yeast, Westinghouse air brakes, telephones, sewing machines, and typewriters—all products of America’s developing scientific and technological prowess.

To maintain the appropriate focus on the exposition’s moral and educational missions, the Philadelphia fair directors banned amusements from the fairgrounds. Unfortunately, they could do nothing about the unofficial “Centennial City” (also known as “Shantytown” or “Diney-town”) that sprung up, unplanned and unwanted, directly across the street, where, within view of the stately exhibition halls and manicured lawns, a small army of hustlers, showmen, saloon keepers, and performers provided fairgoers with a taste of peanuts, beer, and sideshow “attractions” (including learned pigs, a five-legged cow, “the Man-eating Fleece,” and a 602-pound fat lady).

Unlike the sponsors of the Philadelphia exposition, the directors of the Paris Exposition of 1889 had no qualms about mixing the edifying and the amusing on their fairgrounds. Parisian fairgoers could visit the Galerie des Machines, if they wished, but they could also spend the day climbing the Eiffel Tower, laughing at themselves in the Hall of Mirrors, riding wooden horses down a roller-coaster track, or visiting the reproduction of the Bastille, transformed 100 years later into an amusement concession. In large part because of the mixture and quantity of exhibits (space was granted to nearly 62,000 exhibitors), the Paris Exposition was an enormous success. The Philadelphia Exposition had taken pride in its ten million visitors; over thirty-two million would visit the Paris Exposition.15

The World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 and subsequent American world’s fairs would take a position halfway between Philadelphia, which banned amusements, and Paris, which fully integrated them on the fairgrounds. While the American fair directors recognized the necessity for incorporating amusements in their expositions, they worried that the amusements would detract from the fair’s more noble purposes. Their solution was to include an entertainment “district” on the exposition site but segregate it in a “midway” geographically distinct from the rest of the fairgrounds.

The contrasts between the two fair “districts,” the edifying and the entertaining, could not have been greater. In the main exhibit areas, known respectively as “The White City” in Chicago in 1893, “The Little City of the Beautiful” in Omaha in 1898, “The Rainbow City” in Buffalo in 1901, and “The Ivory City” in St. Louis in 1904, building styles, materials, exterior coloring, design elements, and decorative motifs were coordinated by central planning directors or committees. These “Cities on a Hill” were, in the words of visitors, commentators, and recent historians, stately, orderly, dignified, majestic, monumental, imperial, classical, cosmopolitan, correct, uniform, and harmonious. They were cities without crime, without poverty, without decay, urban utopias made possible through the judicious application and administration of science, technology, learning, and high culture.16

The midways were different matters entirely. There was no attempt at uniform design or orderly presentation. Exhibitors were free to use any building materials, designs, styles, or exterior decorations they chose. The result was a jumble of shacks, sheds, stalls, tents, and booths, some wooden, some canvas, of every conceivable color and design. “What was lacking in stability was made up by the artist, in stucco, gilding, and paint,” wrote the authors of the official history of the St. Louis fair. “Minarets, towers, domes, pergolas, monuments, arcades, balconies, arches, and in fact all manner of ostentatious designs and devices to produce impressive architectural effects were employed.” All was spectacle: the overdecorated buildings; the billboards, posters, and garish signs; the barkers shouting their wares in
front of their exhibits; the "attractions" behind the canvas; the electric lights overhead. "Here," wrote Mark Bennitt in his Illustrated Souvenir Guide to the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, "is a business street—the strangest in the world—where all business is pleasure."

The Chicago Midway was a mile-long amusement strip with restaurants, rides, ethnic villages, and stage shows starring singers, dancers, comics, and novelty performers who during the winter made their living on vaudeville or musical comedy stages. Here were the "ethnological" villages, the most popular of all, the "street in Cairo," with Fahreda Mahzar, or "Little Egypt, the Darling of the Nile," the "bewitching bellyrina" of the "Dance du Ventre." Interspersed among the villages were restaurants and food stalls, rides, and a variety of shows and exhibits, including Hagenbeck's animals, strongman Bernarr MacFadden in white tights demonstrating his new exercise machines, James J. Corbett starring in Gentleman Jim, Houdini escaping from locked boxes, and "the stuffed horse Comanche, only survivor of Custer's last stand."18

There were also dozens of booths featuring the latest "automatic" amusement machines. Midway visitors could witness, for a nickel, the magic of Edison's talking machines, the zoopraxoscope that projected Muybridge's photographs of horses running, raccoons walking, and a dog's heart beating, and the "electro-Photographic Tachyscope" that "reproduced ... the natural motion of objects and animals ... with a degree of truth and accuracy that is absolutely bewildering. ... Fee, One Nickel in Slot." Thomas Armat, a bookkeeper, who, as we will see, would in 1895 invent one of the earliest and best moving-picture projectors, claimed that his interest in moving pictures dated from his visit to the Chicago Midway, where, for a nickel, he had peered into the Anschutz Tachyscope and seen an elephant walking.19

Compared to anything that had come before it, possibly excluding the Paris Exposition of 1889, the Chicago Midway was stupendous. Compared to the midways that would succeed it, it was only a beginning. As the world's fairs rolled on from Chicago to Atlanta in 1895, Nashville in 1897, Omaha in 1898, Buffalo in 1901, and St. Louis in 1904, the amusement sections of the expositions grew in relative size and profitability. Midway exhibitors learned that by charging twenty-five cents for a fifteen-minute show, they could make a lot more than if they had collected a dollar for a two-hour show. Variety was the spice of show business and the right kind of amusements—brief, light, and frivolous—could be almost addictive.

Midway visitors passed in and out of succeeding shows until they dropped from exhaustion or were defeated by lack of funds. Each amusement only whetted the appetite for more. Had any of the exhibits been entirely satisfying the chain would have been snapped. But that never happened. The shows were sufficiently entertaining and sufficiently satisfying to leave their customers always asking for more.

In Omaha, in 1898, the midway concessions proved so lucrative that a group of local businessmen and concessionaires pooled their resources to keep the midway open for a second season. Unfortunately, the midway without a fair attached proved to be a financial disaster. Too many fairgoers believed in the balanced meal approach to pleasure: they abjured the "sweets" along the midway until they had dutifully filled up with the main courses offered in "The Little City of the Beautiful." With the edifying exhibits in the fair proper withdrawn, they stayed away entirely.20

In Buffalo in 1901, the demand for amusement space on the fairgrounds was so great that a "Midway Annex Company" was formed to build a second midway outside the official amusement district, known as the Pan. Among the most successful of the Pan exhibitors was Frederic Thompson, the future designer and owner of Luna Park on Coney Island and the Hippodrome in Manhattan. Thompson had worked at every world's fair since Chicago. In Buffalo, he created his masterpiece, the "Trip to the Moon," an early twentieth-century gemeinkunst with a live narrator, a cast of midgets in uniforms, recorded sounds, projected images, elaborate stage settings, lighting effects, and simulated motion in simulated vehicles to create the illusion of space travel and a moon landing. The dramatic illusion was heightened by the participation of the customers, who, on entering the airship Luna, were transformed from visitors into actors with their own parts to play in the extravaganza. Here was the ultimate tourist spectacle, where the visitor not only viewed but also became part of the sight, part of the show, simultaneously insider and spectator.21

By the time the world's fair came to St. Louis in 1904, the fair directors had abandoned entirely the conceit that the midway was a "sideshow" to the main exhibitions. They placed their amusement district, the Pike, smack in the middle of the fairgrounds, with its own entrance onto the street. While the official guidebooks and histories of the fair, with few exceptions, downplayed the centrality of the Pike (the official history devoted 34 of its 3,851 pages to it), local businessmen
This reproduction of a “stereopticon” slide shows the Pike, the main amusement street at the St. Louis world’s fair, crowded from end to end with visitors. Nowhere else on the fairgrounds were the crowds this thick. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.)

invested between five and ten million dollars of their own money in amusement concessions.\textsuperscript{22}

The sideshow business, once the province of small-time hustlers, drifters, and traveling showmen, had become a respectable investment. In St. Louis, one of the largest and most profitable of the exotic villages was a re-created model of Jerusalem on 11 acres, with 22 streets, 300 structures, a wall “of the same height and aged tone as the one on the yellow hills of the Holy Land,” and “one thousand inhabitants of Jerusalem... conveyed to the Exposition by chartered steamer, sailing from Jaffa.” The exhibit, which cost almost a million and a half dollars to construct, had been paid for by a group of local investors whose Board of Directors read like a Who’s Who of Business in St. Louis.\textsuperscript{23}

The world’s fairs succeeded admirably in their primary task of bringing millions of visitors to their host cities. (While the official attendance figures were probably exaggerated, if we follow James Gilbert and estimate the number of fair patrons by dividing the total paid admissions in half, we still end up with almost 14 million fairgoers in Chicago, 1.5 million in Omaha, 4 million in Buffalo, and almost 10 million in St. Louis.) As the official guide to the St. Louis fair exclaimed in particularly overblown prose, “Admission price was an open sesame to whatever desire or fancy might conceive; for a period caste and class distinction was eliminated, and common ground was occupied for a trifle.”\textsuperscript{24}

The St. Louis guidebook was only half right. From the perspective of the fair’s organizers, all of them established and prosperous citizens of their host cities, “caste and class distinctions” had indeed been eliminated. Nonetheless, the fifty-cent admission fee at the fairs served to filter out a significant proportion of the urban population. If the fair directors had set out to reach a larger and wider cross section of the urban public, they would not have kept their admission prices so high. Fifty cents was a considerable sum to pay for admission alone, especially considering that this fee granted visitors only the right to walk the fairgrounds and visit the official exhibits. Food, drink, midway shows and rides, and transportation within the fairgrounds cost extra.\textsuperscript{25}

The guidebook photographs show groups of well-dressed fairgoers, the men with well-starched collars, in bowlers or top hats, never bareheaded; the women in shirtwaists, wearing bonnets, often with parasols in hand.\textsuperscript{*} There were large numbers of native-born, churchgoing, proper middle-class city folk such as Mabel Barnes, a Buffalo schoolteacher and librarian, who visited the fairgrounds thirty-three times and kept a multivolume diary of her experiences. And there were gen-

\textsuperscript{*} Many of these photographic albums were commissioned to promote the expositions and for this reason alone cannot be uncritically accepted as historical evidence. On the other hand, they contain so many photographs that are so remarkably similar that they cannot be ignored either.
une American aristocrats like Henry Adams who visited the St. Louis exposition once and the Chicago fair twice, the second time with a large entourage including his two brothers. There were also, as the fair directors liked to point out, significant numbers of immigrant families who came to the midway to visit the friendly ethnic “villages.”

For many midway visitors, American-born and immigrant, the shows and rides constituted an introduction to the world of commercial amusements. These were women and men who patronized neither the first-class dollar theaters nor the vaudeville halls and popular-priced amusements, because they feared and distrusted amusements that were proffered entirely for their own sake. To make these visitors feel comfortable, the concessionaires cloaked their amusements in educational disguise. The amusement machines that sang through rubber tubes or exhibited moving pictures through a peep hole were presented as “scientific” wonders, the roller coaster rides were reconfigured as scenic railways to distant lands, the “exotic villages” as anthropological replicas of life among the primitives. As one of the guidebooks to the St. Louis fair reassured visitors, the Pike was “not at all frivolous. Several of its attractions are of real scientific value and of deep human interest.”

Even the midway’s haunted house exhibits and rides, soon to be replicated in amusement parks across the country, were overwhelmed with instructional allusions, in this case, biblical, literary, and scientific. In “Hereafter,” in St. Louis, visitors were guided on a trip through Hades by a Monk who read from Dante’s Inferno. “Creation” was entered through the front of an enormous blue dome in the center of which towered a bare-breasted sculpture of Eve (identical to the one that would later grace the entrance to Dreamland in Coney Island). Once inside, visitors glided by boat back twenty centuries to the Garden of Eden. In “Under and Over the Sea,” one of the Pike’s bigger attractions, visitors “traveled” by submarine to Paris (constructed, it was said, of 25,000 pieces of cardboard); rode an elevator to the top of the Eiffel Tower; and returned to St. Louis, via New York City, by airship.

It is doubtful that fairgoers such as Henry Adams and his companions or the group of prize-winning St. Louis schoolteachers who were guided through the Chicago fair by the St. Louis Republic’s star reporter, Theodore Dreiser, learned much from these exhibits. But that was not the point. The educational allusions were not supposed to inform or edify, but to make customers feel at ease in a new type of setting where “fun” came first. And they succeeded. Dreiser’s schoolteachers, to his delight, explored “even the risqué parts of the Midway.” Henry Adams and his entourage also took in all the fair had to offer, including “what Henry called the ‘lowest fakes’ of the Midway. The group repeatedly rode the Ferris wheel and spent every evening in gondolas on the water.” Charles Adams, the former president of the Union Pacific Railroad, was reported to have told his brother that
never had he enjoyed anything so much as seeing Chicago’s exposition—although he still growled at the cost and the quality of the food.”

Nowhere was this educational disguise more in evidence than in the foreign and historical villages that occupied a large part of every midway. In St. Louis alone, there were, in addition to the Jerusalem exhibit on its 11 acres, Tyrolean, Irish, Spanish, Moorish, Chinese, and Esquinan villages; “Mysterious Asia”; “Ancient Rome”; the “Old Plantation”; “Old Saint Louis”; the Bowery; the streets of Constantinople; “Fair Japan”; Paris; the streets of Cairo; and a “Cliff Dwellers” cave populated by “stone-age” Indians. It was not coincidental that the fairs devoted so much space to exhibits modeled on travelogues, nor that the showmen who organized them promoted their educational values. In the long decade between the opening of the Chicago and St. Louis world’s fairs, the United States became an imperial power, augmenting its considerable overseas economic expansion with formal and informal colonies in the Caribbean, the Pacific, and the Philippine Islands, half a world away.

The world’s fairs provided Americans with the opportunity to celebrate in public their nation’s recent accomplishments in the international arena and learn more of the places, peoples, and battles they had read about in their newspapers. Among the most popular exhibits in Omaha and the fairs that succeeded it were reenactments of the Battle of Manila, the sinking of the Maine, and the bombardment of the Spanish forts in Cuba. In St. Louis, the “Battle of Santiago” was re-created by a fleet of 21-foot battle ships on a 300- by 180-foot lake. In Buffalo, there were daily sham battles fought by the “wonderful collection of aborigines” that peopled the Indian Congress. Mabel Barnes, the schoolteacher and librarian, paid twenty-five cents to enter the “Darkest Africa” exhibit in Buffalo, because, as she wrote in her diary, she wanted to see the “presentation of real African life in a real African village.”

This ostensible and highly publicized “It’s a Small World” theme provided the fair proper and its amusement areas with an additional patina of respectability. Fairgoers who would have been ashamed to spend a quarter to view sword swallowers, “dancing girls,” or “Africans” in loin cloths in a dime museum or vaudeville hall were perfectly con-

tent to watch them perform their “authentic” rituals and dances in the ethnic village pavilions and theaters. Mabel Barnes recalled that the “finest exhibits of all [in “Darkest Africa” were] the natives themselves,” most of them minimally clothed. In her diary, she noted that she and her friend, Mrs. Hale, were entranced by the “slender, strong and clean” African bodies and “especially interested” in one of the men who “had a skin so free from blemish, so clean and smooth that it almost tempted one to lay hands upon it.” It is impossible to imagine that these women would have allowed themselves to experience and express such sentiments anywhere else but at a world’s fair midway.

Though such exhibits as “Darkest Africa” were promoted for their educational as well as their entertainment value, they were never intended to be ideologically neutral. As Robert Rydell has argued so persuasively, they functioned instead as festivals of racist imagery and ideology. In Chicago, the Dahomey village stood apart, geographically and conceptually, from every other national and ethnic village on the fairs. The European, Middle-Eastern, and Asian villages included restaurants, bazaars, theaters, and a generally festive atmosphere; the Dahomey village consisted only of a museum and a series of crude huts at the far end of the midway. The isolation of the Africans from the rest of the fair was highlighted by the placard placed at the exhibit entrance requesting visitors not to ask villagers about cannibalism and by the exclusion of the Africans, alone among every nation and culture, from the parade celebrating Chicago Day at the fair’s close.

In St. Louis, the government-sponsored Philippine Exposition Board imported 1,200 Filipinos to inhabit several different native villages. To counter anti-imperialist arguments that the “savage” Filipinos were “inherently unfit to be members of the American body politic,” the government experts carefully distinguished between the lighter-skinned Igorots, who it claimed were capable of progress, and the dark-skinned Negritos who were not. Visitors were continually reminded that, while all “primitive” peoples required the benevolent leadership and example of their white American brethren, only the lighter skinned could be civilized.

While African-American visitors were not barred from any of the world’s fairs or restricted to separate entrances, they were, as a “people,” treated with consummate disdain. Fairgoers of European background were welcomed with festive “villages” commemorating a mythologized past and “ethnic” days and parades saluting their contri-
The City as Playground: The World’s Fair Midways

butions to the present. African Americans were represented in exhibits that highlighted their racial “inferiority.” As Frederick Douglass explained, “The Dahomians are here to exhibit the Negro as a repulsive savage.”

Because the Chicago fair was supposed to commemorate human progress, Frederick Douglass, among others, had argued for exhibits honoring the progress of black Americans since slavery. But when the fair officials finally decided to hold a special “Colored People’s Day,” they made it into a cruel joke, with free watermelons for all African-American visitors. The Indianapolis Freeman demanded that blacks stay away. “The Board of Directors have furnished the day, some members of the race have pledged to furnish the ‘niggers,’ (in our presence Negroes), and if some thoughtful and philanthropic white man is willing to furnish watermelons, why should he be gibbeted?” Alone among the prominent African Americans in Chicago to participate in the “Day” was Frederick Douglass, who presided over the Haitian government’s exhibit. When Douglass tried to read his prepared paper on “The Race Problem in America,” he was “interrupted by ‘jeers and cat-calls’ from white men in the rear of the crowd.” As Paul Lawrence Dunbar remembers, Douglass responded to the hecklers by throwing down his prepared speech and roaring to the assembled crowd that there was “no Negro problem. The problem is whether the American people have loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough, to live up to their own Constitution.”

As was the case in other amusement venues, on the world’s fair midways, the African Americans who were barely tolerated as paying guests were prized as entertainers. Every fair had one or another variation of an “Old Plantation” village, managed by white showmen, where, as the misspelled advertisement for the Nashville fair proclaimed, “young bucks and thickclipped African maidens ‘happy as a big sunflower’ dance the old-time breakdowns, joined in by ‘all de niggahs’ with wierd and gutteral sounds to the accompaniment of ‘de scrapin’ of de fiddle and ‘de old bangio.’” The “Plantation Village” at the 1897 Tennessee Centennial Exposition in Nashville was so successful that it was

*When fair officials refused to allow African Americans to mount their own exhibits commemorating their progress, Ida B. Wells, with Douglass’s assistance, wrote, published, and distributed her own pamphlet about “the accomplishments of black Americans and their plight in a nation plagued by lynchings.”

This photograph was labeled “Chief, Darkest Africa.” It was taken at the 1901 Buffalo World’s Fair. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.)
shipped in its entirety to the Omaha Midway, where it was supplemented by a group of "thirty-five to seventy-five 'jolly, rollicking niggers' living in slave cabins transported from the south." The grandest plantation village of all was probably the one managed by Skip Dundy at the Buffalo fair directly across the street from "Darkest Africa." To make perfectly sure that his African-American performers acted as they should, Dundy sent them to a special "performance school in Charleston" to learn how to "act" like "darkies."37

The African and plantation villages were, of course, not the only ones that parodied the "natives" they represented. All non-European peoples were caricatured at the fairs, but none with the same dogged and brutal consistency as the Africans and African Americans. The lessons for fairgoers were indisputable. Unlike other peoples of the world who could, with appropriate training, be civilized or at least lifted up toward "white" standards, Africans and people of African descent were permanent outsiders, people to be feared or hated in their primitive African mode, ridiculed and humiliated in their African-American incarnations.

The villages' ideological lessons comported smoothly with their commercial purposes. The racist imagery and ideology they supported and elaborated made the exhibits even more attractive to fairgoers. The midway shows were group experiences; the crowd, an essential component in each one of them. As Neil Harris has written so perceptively, "Gregariousness was at the heart of [the midway] areas."38

In their portrayal of Africans and African Americans as the irrefutably inferior and indecent "other," the showmen provided an ideational and emotional ground for the crowd's otherwise ephemeral unity. Fairgoers of various ancestries and backgrounds, native-born, immigrant, and ethnic, were literally brought together as a white public to witness the spectacle of "black" inferiority and collectively celebrate their "whiteness."

The international expositions, with their millions of visitors, were good for the cities and their businesses. The host cities basked in the glory refracted back upon them by the "White Cities," "Rainbow Cities," and "Ivory Cities." The metropolis was reconfigured not only as a tourist sight for visitors, but as a utopian vision of what the city could become.39

The cities of joy that arose at the world's fair sites crystallized visions of the harmonious relationship that could be established between commerce and amusements in urban settings. The fairs induced temporary fits of frivolity among ordinarily sober Americans, transforming them into sports and spenders. Culture and commerce joined together, with the support of the state, to proclaim the arrival of a new and better future where distinctions between work and play, day and night, education and amusement, fantasy and reality, beauty and excess, propriety and immodesty were delightfully blurred.40

After the schoolteachers, churchgoers, and sober citizens had had their fill of midway thrills, seen the sights, ridden the rides, listened to recorded music, witnessed the magic of pictures that moved, and returned home no less whole and wholesome than they had left it, they were better prepared to take the next step into the twentieth century and enjoy the city's abundant and expanding pleasure parks and palaces.
CHAPTER 7

“The Summer Show”

Although millions of Americans visited the world’s fairs in the 1890s and 1900s, millions more stayed at home, because they could not afford the excursion fare, the price of a hotel room, or the admission charges at the fair site. These less fortunate city folk were not, however, without the resources to have fun in the summer. Because the nation’s waterways had served as its main transportation networks until the triumph of the railroad in the mid-nineteenth century, almost every major and mid-size American city was located on or near a waterfront that could, with minor adjustments, be converted into a playland for excursionists. Those few cities without beachfronts had nearby “picnic groves,” where one could smell the fresh air and forget momentarily the stone and concrete city a streetcar ride away.

In the late 1880s, the resort areas at the outskirts of the city, once the province of the wealthy, privileged, or politically connected, were opened up to the city’s working people as ferry boats, steamers, and streetcar lines linked them to the central city. The traction companies, having invested millions in electrical generators, rails, and rolling stock, wanted full return for their capital. If city folk could be given a reason to ride the trolleys seven days a week, instead of only five and a half, the companies could put their “idle generating equipment” to use “during slack periods” and noticeably increase ridership and profits.

Decreasd work hours, particularly for white-collar workers, increased wages, and summer slack times meant that more city folk had more money and time to play during the summer months. Consumer demand fed amusement supply. Small businessmen erected shacks and stands to keep the excursionists amused, fed, and smiling from the moment they stepped off their ferries and trolleys to the evening when they boarded them for the ride back to the city.

The trolley parks and summer resort areas welcomed an incredible variety of city types to their shores. Jimmy Durante, who played piano in Coney Island’s honky tons and barrooms, recalled that the island was a summertime haven for “young people—husky men and pretty girls in cheap finery; shipping clerks or truckmen or subway guards escorting their sweethearts [who] didn’t have much to spend but [knew that at Coney one] could go a long way on a few dollars.” There were also family groups who rode bumpy trolleys all the way to the beach, then paid additional nickels to ride the bumpier roller coasters; single working men and women who traveled in packs with their buddies looking for a good time and companions of the opposite sex; sportsmen who came to gamble at the race tracks and gambling dens; and the wealthy who “summered” in the expensive hotels.

There was something for everyone at the summer resorts. In its 1899 Visitor’s Guide to the City of New York, the Brooklyn Daily Eagle explained that the “great seaside playground for the people” at Coney Island “was divided equally amongst the rich and the poor,” but urged those who stayed in the luxury hotels at the rich end of the island to spend time at “the great resort for the crowds” at the poor end. “There is no sight comparable to it in America. It is a happy-go-lucky place. . . . Walk through the streets, ascend the tower, see the crowds, the merry-go-rounds, listen to the frankfurter man, see the bathers—and perhaps take a dip yourself—and then go to Manhattan or Brighton Beach [on the rich side] so that you may leave the Island with pleasant, healthful memories.”

Julian Ralph, a consummate dandy and snob, had three years earlier offered the same advice to the readers of Scribner’s Magazine. “There is not a thing (except the fireworks), in the higher-priced end of the island that cannot be obtained or witnessed at the cheaper end, but there are scores of attractions at the hurly-burly end that the more exclusive region does not hold forth.” He strongly encouraged all visitors to the island, no matter where they stayed, to go to the Bowery (Coney’s cheap amusement street) to listen to “the oom-pah bands of
rusted brass” and “have a luncheon of frankfurters and lager and a dinner of roasted clams and melted butter.”

The same sort of promiscuous mingling that Julian Ralph encouraged at Coney must have occurred at summer resorts such as Lake Quinsigamond in Massachusetts, Euclid Beach and Cedar Point in Ohio, and Meramec Falls outside St. Louis, which also had luxury hotels and bungalows near strips of cheap amusement and concession stands. Summer shows in the open air were more enticing to the respectable classes than enclosed amusements in the city proper. There was none of the discomfort or danger of congestion and contagion, no compulsion to breathe the same air and expose oneself to the stale odors of unashed working people.

At the summer resorts and amusement parks, visitors, having paid their trolley fares and admission fees, were in control of their day’s entertainment. Instead of being seated in a fixed location and presented with a prefabricated show, they put together their own program by walking from stand to stand, listening to the barkers, reading the attraction boards, and deciding whether to enter or pass on by. The beaches and amusement parks were not associated exclusively with any one social group or class. Rather, they belonged to the abstract pleasure seeker, the refugee from everyday urban life and its mundane concerns. “What is peculiar to Coney Island,” Julian Ralph explained, “is that no one lives there.” All were visitors encamped for the day or season, temporarily joined together in the pursuit of a good time.

By the early 1900s, summer resorts had become a big business. An editorial in the Street Railway Journal summarized the transformation that had occurred so quickly few had taken notice. “The merry-go-round with its single line of wooden horses has given place to the three-row carousel equipped with every kind of fantastic creature, which will perform all sorts of rhythmic movements. The peanut stand has been replaced by the restaurant. Scenic railways, roller coasters, shoot the chutes, amusement palaces, skating rinks and shows of all kinds have been added; in fact, every new amusement feature which can be thought of is a drawing card and must be had. People have been educated up to this sort of thing, they expect it and are ready to pay for it.”

The first true amusement park had been erected on Coney Island when promoter George Tilyou in 1897 enclosed a number of unrelated rides and “shows” in what he called Steeplechase Park and charged admission at the gate. In 1901, Tilyou convinced Frederic Thompson and his partner, Skip Dundy, to move their sensational “Trip to the Moon” concession to Steeplechase at the close of the Buffalo world’s fair. The “ride” proved to be as big a hit at Coney in 1902 as it had been on the Buffalo midway. The following summer, Thompson and Dundy left Steeplechase to build their own amusement park. With $200,000 of their own money and an additional half-million raised from outside investors, they bought the failing Sea Lion Park across the street from Steeplechase and reopened it the following season as Luna Park.

According to Richard Snow, Thompson and Dundy at first advertised Luna as “another world’s fair, but before long they realized it was something better, an ‘electric Eden’ unlike anything that had ever been built before.” In constructing Luna, Frederic Thompson claimed that he had thrown all his architecture “books and plans on to the ash-heap and decided to start after something new. . . . I stuck to no style. . . . One result is Luna Park which is utterly unlike anything else of its kind. . . . An exposition is a form of festivity, and serious architecture should not enter into it if it will interfere with the carnival spirit.”

Like the rest of Coney Island, but more so, Luna was a “totally synthetic resort” where all was artifice, extravagance, and excess. It was, as Thompson himself put it, “bizarre and fantastic—crazier than the craziest part of Paris—gayer and more different from the everyday world.” Thompson and Dundy filled their fantasyland with characters and animals as exotic as the architecture. There were camels to ride, diving horses, and elephants that slid down their own “Shoot the Chutes” ride. When journalist Albert Bigelow Paine entered Luna for the first time, he reported being filled with “profound amazement [at this] enchanted, story-book land of trelisses, columns, domes, minarets, lagoons, and lofty aerial flights. . . . It was a world removed—shut away from the sordid clutter and turmoil of the streets.” At night this effect of being enclosed in a fairyland, a “world removed,” was even more intense as 250,000 electric light bulbs—the largest number ever assembled on any one site—lit up the towers, arches, and minarets of the park in an exuberantly ornate, yet stately, skylight visible for miles.

Luna was an instant and overwhelming success. The speed with which Thompson and Dundy not only repaid their investors but accu-
mulated profits in the hundreds of thousands of dollars was sufficient incentive for others to enter the amusement park business. The following winter, a group of politicians and investors raised over three and one-half million dollars to build an even grander amusement park on the island. "Dreamland," as John Kasson has described it, "took Luna's formula and expanded it." It boasted two different Shoot the Chutes; a Doge's Palace with gondola rides; a Fall of Pompeii building; simulated submarine and airplane rides; a miniature railroad; "Lilliputia," a city peopled by 300 midgets and presided over by the former Mrs. General Tom Thumb; Bostock's animal show; Wormwood's Monkey Theater; a "Fighting the Flames" show with a burning six-story building and, reportedly, a cast of 4,000; a three-ring circus; and "an immense 25,000 square foot ballroom covered by a massive seashell."¹²

While no playgrounds in the world could match Coney Island's in capital investment, profits, and visitors (Luna Park in competition with Steeplechase and Dreamland in 1904 drew four million customers by itself), similarly spectacular amusement parks were constructed in cities across the country in the middle 1900s. In Cedar Point, Ohio, manager George Boeckling returned from the St. Louis world's fair of 1904 determined to upgrade Cedar Point into a full-fledged amusement park. To do so, he installed a powerhouse on the island and invited concessionaires to rent space on his new "midway." Outside Newark, where Electric Park had been established in 1903, the managers of Hilton Park added a full "midway" to their summer resort, thereby transforming it into Olympic Park, named after the 1904 Olympics in St. Louis. In Chicago, the Schmidt family opened Riverview Amusement Park on the grounds of what had been "the old German Sharpshooter Park."¹³

The amusement parks succeeded in attracting millions of visitors because they provided the city's residents with enclosed playgrounds, isolated and insulated from the demands of everyday life. In their promiscuous juxtaposition of sedate and seditious entertainments, the amusement parks were the self-conscious heavens of the world's fairs. Almost every park included among its offerings ribald attractions disguised as wholesome entertainment. Paragon Park had a "Streets of Cairo and Mysterious Asia" exhibit with no doubt one or more "Little Egypt" impersonators dancing the hootchi-kootchi. George Tilyou's Steeplechase Park on Coney Island was filled with "stunts" like the "Blowhole Theater," where hidden jets of air blew off men's hats and
raised women’s skirts, and dozens of rides—including the Steeplechase itself, the Funny Stairway, the Barrel of Fun, the Human Roulette Wheel, and the Razzle Dazzle—designed to upset the established order, throw strangers together, reveal petticoats, and literally shock (with electric prods wielded by midgets), disorient, and discombobulate visitors—to their own delight and that of nearby spectators. What made these “stunt” rides and shows acceptable was their context, their location in an enclosed “park” with luxuriously and formally landscaped Sunken Gardens, Venetian gondolas, a stately Ferris wheel, a decorous merry-go-round, pony rides for the children, and “serious” lecturers such as Carrie Nation speaking on temperance.¹⁴

The amusement park was a “temporary world within the ordinary world,” where “special rules” obtained, and visitors literally stepped out of their “real” lives into a world of play and make-believe.¹⁵

To accentuate the distance from the outside world and call attention to the wonders within, the parks built in the early 1900s were designed with monumental entrances. The first Coney Island amusement park, Steeplechase, channeled visitors inside “through entrances marked by triumphal arches of plaster accumulations of the iconography of laughter—clowns, pierrots, masks.” Visitors to Dreamland, built in 1904, entered the park through a massive archway formed by the outspread wings of a bare-breasted sculpture entitled “Creation.” The entrance to Olympic Park outside Newark, New Jersey, was described by a local German-language newspaper as “new and imposing” with “four huge pillars, entwined with electric lights,” and the “word, ‘Olympia,’ in letters of fire . . . descending from the arch over the main gateway.”¹⁶

The arches that bestrode the park gateways were more than ornamental. In accentuating the separation of the “play” world from the “real” one, the park entryways provided symbolic assurance to visitors that they would be secure within, that the amusement park, although it charged only five or ten cents for admission, was not an immigrant beer garden or picnic grove filled with surly, drunken crowds of manual workers. Every promotional brochure, press release, and souvenir bulletin published by the amusement parks assured visitors that “undesirables” had been effectively purged from their resorts. A 1904 full-page ad for Euclid Beach Park in the Cleveland Plain Dealer stated directly in bold type, “No Objectionable Persons Permitted on Grounds.” A 1909 brochure from Olympic Park promised, “if you come here you have no fear of contamination with the undesirable element usually found at summer amusement resorts. . . . Representatives of the rowdy element will not be tolerated.”¹⁷

To discourage the wrong type of city dwellers, Edward Hulse had suggested in a 1907 article in the Street Railway Journal that traction companies locate their amusement parks “at a sufficient distance from the [city] to warrant the collection of two fares.” Charging a double fare would, he predicted, deter the “cheaper class . . . who go out to hang around, to stand outside the entrances of the various concessions, to
pass remarks on those who patronize them, to mix in with others’ enjoyment, to see ‘what’s doing.’ The word that expresses that class is ‘mugs’—and they will kill any resort except one gaged [sic] especially to suit them.” Hulse did not charge the “mugs” with crimes or disruptive behavior. They were discouraged from attending the park because they discomfitted other visitors.18

On Coney Island, Frederic Thompson claimed that “the problem of handling the roughs . . . was solved very quickly and easily. The first rowdy I caught in Luna Park was soundly thrashed, and before he was thrown out of the grounds I told him the place was not run for him, but for his mother and sister.”19

In Cleveland, the owners of Euclid Beach Park solved the “mug” problem by maintaining a “free gate” policy. Because they charged no admission, they claimed that all who entered were “guests upon private grounds” and could be ejected at any time for any reason. The gatekeepers carefully watched approaching visitors. Anyone coming out of a saloon was denied entrance.20

To keep out “undesirables” and reassure “desirable” visitors that they would be safe inside, amusement park managers hired, outfitted, and organized their own police forces. The 1904 Rand McNally Handy Guide to Philadelphia reassured potential visitors to Washington Park that, although “the patrons of this resort are largely of the less orderly class,” there was little to fear, because “the police provisions here . . . are too strict for the really ‘tough’ element.” The 1907 promotional brochures for Luna Park in Scranton, Pennsylvania, announced that the park was “patrolled by a specially drilled police force, to insure safety to the patrons.” To further ensure civil behavior, liquor was banned from most of the parks.21

While discouraging misbehaving “mugs” from visiting their playgrounds, the amusement park owners went out of their way to attract the largest possible audience. Frederic Thompson publicly proclaimed that he had built his park for the “ninety-five percent of the American public [that] is pure and good.” Even visitors without a lot of money to spend were welcome in the amusement parks. As the White City Amusement Company in Chicago announced in its magazine, “Once within the gates of White City everybody will be equally considered by the management. If a person chooses to spend the sum of 10 cents for a ticket at the gate and does not wish to spend any more there will be no possible opportunity for criticism.”22

“The Summer Show”

Wherever they lived, amusement park patrons were attracted to the same sorts of amusements, in part because they wanted to ride the same rides and see the same shows as the folks at Coney or at the world’s fairs, but also because, as city folk, they shared the same sorts of fears, which in the parks, were transmuted into thrills. Every park had its share of “disaster” exhibits. The most popular disaster shows were re-creations of actual events, such as the Johnstown and Galveston floods, the eruptions of Mt. Vesuvius and Mt. Pele, and the San Francisco earthquake, although crowds were also drawn to fictional apocalypses inspired by Dante’s Inferno or “suggested by certain Biblical passages.” The “Doomsday” exhibit at Luna Park in Scranton where “Professor C. Nelson Camp, the inventor, shows by electric scenic effect, the destruction of the world” was among the major attractions at that park.23

Park visitors were also captivated by reproductions of disasters closer to home. Luna and Dreamland on Coney, Cedar Point in Ohio, and many others had their own “Fighting the Flames” shows, with full-size buildings, thousands of extras dressed as “guttersnipes, factory girls, policemen, pawnbrokers, Chinese laundrymen, newsboys, and roisters,” and performer/firemen fighting real flames with real equipment.24

Every park also had its own complement of mechanized rides based on exaggerated, at times almost nightmarish, reproductions of real-life streetcars and railways. As Edwin Slosson noted in his 1904 article on “The Amusement Business,” “In the popular amusements is most strikingly manifested that curious disposition of people to make their amusements so like their daily life. . . . The switchbacks, scenic railways and toy trains are merely trolley cars, a little more uneven in roadbed, jerky in motion and cramped in the seat than the ordinary means of transportation, but not much.”25

One of the chief attractions of these pleasure rides—and their major advantage over the trolley one took to work every day—was the not so subtle way they induced couples to hold on to one another as the cars

*It was, ironically, the same sort of urban fire that the parks presented as entertainment that would, in the end, lay them waste. In 1907, Steeplechase, and in 1909, Dreamland, burned to the ground.
careden around curves and down embankments. In an urban world that had not yet adjusted to new forms of courtship and girl-boy companionship, there were few places as comfortable as the park for meeting members of the opposite sex. "Hospitality and visiting in the country sense being impossible in city flats people must meet in public, and little trips by sea or land afford this opportunity. The reference to 'dear little Coney Isle' in the folk love songs show what a part it has played as a matchmaker."26

Boys and girls traveled together to the park or came in same-sex groups looking for someone to spend the day and, perhaps, part of the night with. Single working women, unable to afford a day's vacation on their meager wages, looked for men who could treat them—and not ask too much in return. Every park had dance halls, pavilions, and ballrooms where strangers could meet on the dance floor. At Cedar Point in Ohio, the "Coliseum," billed as the "Largest Dancing Pavilion on the Great Lakes," was divided in two, with half the floor reserved for couples, the other half for single men or women looking for partners.27

"The Summer Show"

For those already paired off, there were "fun houses," mazes, and railway trips through caves and tunnels, where couples could become better acquainted. As the owner of a Coney Island fun house "unblushingly" informed the journalist Roland Hartt, "The men like it because it gives them a chance to hug the girls, the girls like it because it gives them a chance to get hugged."28

Although, as Sylvester Baxter wrote in Harper's New Monthly in the summer of 1898, "The American people—or at least a very large part of the American people—has become a pleasure-loving folk," not all of them, as we have seen in earlier chapters, were comfortable pursuing fun for its own sake. To attract the reluctant pleasure seekers to their grounds, the amusement park owners, like the midway entrepreneurs, scattered "educational" and "artistic" exhibits through their parks.29

The most important of these were the native villages imported or copied from the world's fairs. Paragon Park in Nantasket housed several "authentic" native villages, including "The Gypsy Camp"; "The Streets of Cairo and Mysterious Asia"; a Japanese village; the Klondike, and the Kennedy Brothers' "Wild West and Indian Congress," which, the Official Program explained, was especially "interesting and informative" because of the "rapid passing of the redmen."30

The native villages were not the only "educational" sideshows. Like the world's fairs and expositions, the amusement parks also presented their customers with the latest scientific and technological breakthroughs: roller coasters, Ferris wheels, halls of electricity, moving-picture shows, even incubators with premature infants. At Luna Park on Coney and the White City in Chicago, visitors, for a modest price of admission—never more than twenty cents—were admitted to an infant incubator ward and nursery presided over by a staff of trained doctors, attendants, and wet nurses clothed in white.31

Like other commercial entertainment sites, the amusement parks segregated or excluded African Americans from their grounds. Of the scores of photographs of pre-World War II amusement park visitors frolicking in the surf, eating hot dogs, or riding roller coasters, none that I have located presents a black face among the seas of white ones.32

Few amusement parks had written policies excluding Asian or African Americans. They didn't have to. Because there were almost
universal proscriptions against interracial dancing, dining, and swimming in the early twentieth century, often enforced by the police, parks that featured these activities—and almost all of them did—had to be segregated.33

In a 1928 article on “Recreational Facilities for the Negro,” Forrester Washington found that none of the twelve amusement parks he surveyed in the southern states “admitted whites and blacks at the same time,” although in a few, blacks were admitted on “off days.” In Atlanta, they were “given the use of Lakewood Park for an outing once a year. At Hot Spring, Ark., Negroes and whites use the largest amusement park on alternate days.” In the North, two-thirds of the amusement parks surveyed were found to practice segregation.34

In most locations, North and South, African Americans avoided the amusement parks of their own volition and instead patronized public beaches that had been informally designated for their use. In a few cities with large African-American populations, such as Savannah, Georgia, traction companies operated separate “pleasure resorts . . . for colored patrons.” After World War I, “when Negroes were earning larger wages,” amusement parks were opened in southern and border cities, although few survived for long.35

The exclusion of non-Europeans from the summer places where whites played was never total. Most amusement parks had a large number of “natives” living on the grounds, but they were strictly quarantined in the “villages” where they were exhibited. Segregating non-whites on the park grounds was a necessary element in the transmogrification of these “others” into alien objects, “spectacles” designed to evoe ridicule, contempt, or dread.

At Cedar Point in Ohio, where the “Igorrotes” from Luzon in the Philippines had been relocated after the St. Louis fair, the publicity director warned those who lived near the park to be on the lookout for Igorrote raiding parties looking for dogs to eat. The story, needless to say, brought scores of visitors to the park to see the dog-eating primitives in their native village. In advertising the new “Igorrote Village” to be erected at the White City Amusement Park in Chicago, the management stressed that the inhabitants were “an entirely new lot of genuine Dog-Eating Bontoc Igorrotes,” never before seen in the United States, every one of them a complete “pagan, a barbarian in culture.”36

To the gawking spectator who paid his dime to see the show, there was little difference between viewing the savages in their “native” vil-

lages and the fat lady in the “freak” show. In Coney Island’s Dreamland, the entrepreneur who collected “human oddities” for the “Big Circus Side Show”—with Princess Wee and the Queen of Fatland: “She’s So Fat That It Takes Seven Men to Hug Her”—also imported “aborigines” for the park’s native villages. The villages were, like the “freak” shows and sideshows, designed to titillate, to frighten, and to encourage “normal” spectators to feel both superior and fortunate that they had been born and raised without “deformities.”37

The amusement park crowd, gathered together to enjoy a public spectacle, was more than a benign instrument in the creation of its own pleasure. It was also capable of enormous brutality. Games of chance, where prizes were awarded for hitting the “coon” in the head with a rubber ball or dumping him into the water, were as commonplace in amusement parks across the country as Ferris wheels. They were so common, in fact, that Williams and Walker explicitly referred to them in their 1901 “Sons of Ham” show. In one of the show’s most popular skits, Bert Williams, after being insulted, declares that unlike the amusement park “artful dodger,” he knows how to take revenge. “Let me tell you,” he says earnestly, “he [the man who has insulted him] will never remember smoking the cigars he gets for hitting this coon.”38

Each of Kansas City’s three amusement parks had “Coontown Plunges.” On Coney Island, according to Eddie Cantor, there was a “Hit the Nigger—Three Balls for Five” concession. Cantor was hired to lure customers to the exhibit by bouncing “a few soft balls on the negro’s docile dome until a crowd gathered. . . . The negro would make a slurring remark to irritate some likely sucker in the mob. This sensitive soul, observing the ease with which I struck the negro’s shiny pate, would pay for three hard balls to vent his spleen. He missed because the negro was an expert dodger, but his pride would not let him quit before he struck a blow. The negro kept dodging and insulting him, and the heroic pitcher of wasted balls would spend as high as five dollars in the hope of hitting his tantalizing target.” In Chicago’s Riverview Park, concessions, known variously as the “African Dip,” with the victim perched in a cage on a wooden bench above the water, and the “African Dodgers,” where the victim plunged through “the wet mouth of a painted alligator” into the water, remained popular through the 1950s.39

Obviously, the “negroes” in these “shows” were not passive victims but performers paid to squeeze as much profit as they could from their marks. Still, it was the “suckers” who triumphed in the end. No matter
how effective the black performers were in infuriating them, the show had to conclude with the “African dodgers” being thrown into the water, snarling or whining in pretended disgust, and thus acting out their racial inferiority to the white crowd assembled to celebrate their distress.

The crowd was a necessary constituent of the amusement park experience. The park was, in this regard at least, a twentieth-century adaptation of nineteenth-century festivals, fêtes, and holiday celebrations, where revelers took over the streets, the parks, and the waterfronts to have a good time publicly and collectively. On entering the park, one surrendered one’s individual standing in the outside world and merged into a temporary play community which coexisted with one’s visit and dissolved immediately thereafter. Throwing balls at a “darky” perched over a tank of water, riding on a roller coaster, or visiting a fun house by oneself was inconceivable. One required companions to share the experience with, to laugh and scream with, to reflect back in recognizable form one’s own heightened emotions. In a firsthand account of his trip to Coney, Elmer Blaney Harris, a New York journalist, described his ride with “Dora” on the Great Divide, a Luna Park roller coaster. “We reached bottom and immediately the strain relaxed as we shot heavenward and were pillowed on the air. ‘Lordy, what a feeling!’ [Dora] panted, weakly. A man in front turned round laughing and wiped his forehead.” As they exited, an “old fox” who had ridden with them remarked, “A long way from the husking bee!” For a brief moment, Harris was fused with “Dora,” the “man in front,” and the old fox—people he had never met before and would never see again—into a group united for no other purpose than to have a good time together.40

Contained within the walls of the park was as large and as heterogeneous a crowd as could be found anywhere in the city. As the president of the White City Amusement Park Corporation stated in response to a question about “the advisability of charging an admission of only ten cents at the entrance,” the amusement park had not been “built alone for the four hundred; it is for the entertainment of the four million.”41

Every visitor, every commentator was impressed by the enormity of the amusement park crowds. The New York Times joked in an editorial in the spring of 1909 that no one ever went to Coney any more because it was too crowded. “Who ever goes to Coney Island nowadays except everyone. . . . Its fame is worldwide. It seems to represent, in its entirety, the nearest approach to festivalmaking of which the conglomertate American people are capable. . . . It is really worth visiting, if you can nerve yourself to it, if only to see the crowds.” That October, in an article entitled “Balancing the Books of a Season at Coney Island,” the Times concluded that “twenty million people had visited the island in the summer season just passed.”42 The figures for other amusement parks were almost as spectacular, even assuming that the numbers disclosed to the press and the public were wildly exaggerated. The reported attendance at Willow Grove Park in Philadelphia for 1903 was three million, and 600,000 people visited the Olentangy Park in Columbus, Ohio. Three million were admitted to the two parks outside Los Angeles. Over 2.25 million visited the White City Amusement Park in Chicago in 1909 when it opened. Kansas City’s daily newspapers reported in 1911 that the city’s three amusement parks had admitted over 1.6 million people.43

What was as remarkable as the size and heterogeneity of the crowds was their behavior. “Your pocketbook is not safe there yet,” remarked Edwin E. Slosson of Coney Island, “but it is not likely to be opened by another than yourself.” Even critic James Huneker, who had described Coney as “a disturbed ant-heap [with] human ants ferocious in their efforts to . . . heap up horrors of sound and of sight,” could not help but be impressed by the thousands who camped out on the beach one impossibly hot August evening. “The entire beach was thick with humanity. At close range it resolved itself in groups, sweethearts in pairs, families of three or four, six or seven, planted close together. With care, hesitation, and difficulty I navigated around these islets of flesh and blood. . . . It was impossible for such a large body of people to be more orderly, more decent.”44

*To put this number into perspective, let us recall that the entire population of the United States in 1910 was 92 million, which translates into 22 visits to Coney for every 100 Americans. In 1988, with a population approaching 250 million, the combined attendance at Disneyland in California and Disney World and Epcot Center in Florida totaled 44.5 million, or 18 for every 100 Americans.42