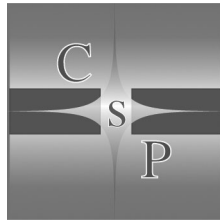


A Century of the Marx Brothers

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Edited by

Joseph Mills



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
The Faces of Twentieth Century Comedy Joseph Mills	
Chapter One	13
The Case of Rabbi Cantor vs. Roscoe W. Chandler: The Marx Brothers’ Ethnic Construction of Character Matthew Daube	
Chapter Two.....	26
Who’s Your Dada? The Marx Brothers at Paramount Renata Jackson	
Chapter Three.....	41
Surrealistic Heroes: The Marx Brothers and the European Avant-Garde Dean Wilcox	
Chapter Four	53
Horse Feathers, Monkey Business, and Lion Taming: The Marxes in Transition Thomas Grochowski	
Chapter Five.....	72
The Marx Brothers and the Satire of the Upper Class Eric Sterling	
Chapter Six.....	87
Signs, Slapstick, and Silence: The Transformation of Semiotic Meaning in the Comedy of Harpo Marx Matthew Turner	
Chapter Seven	106
Nation, Anthem, Irony in the Figure of Rufus Firefly Christopher Kelen	

Chapter Eight	124
The Extras to the Extraordinary: The Other Characters in the Marx Brothers Film Lance Duerfahrd	
Chapter Nine	136
'Italians' Know Nothing of Love: The Marx Brothers as Guardian Angels for Young Couples in Jeopardy Marc DiPaolo	
Chapter Ten.....	151
Woody Allen: A Red-Headed Marx Brothers Stepchild? Joseph Alvarez	
Chapter Eleven.....	164
The Big Grey Ir-Elephant: The Play of Language in the Marx Brothers' Scripts and in Charles Bernstein's L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry Zoe Brigley	
Contributors	176
Index	179

INTRODUCTION

THE FACES OF TWENTIETH CENTURY COMEDY

JOSEPH MILLS

At her 80th birthday celebration in 2006, Queen Elizabeth II noted, “As Groucho Marx once said ‘Getting older is no problem. You just have to live long enough.’” On the one hand, it’s not surprising that the Queen quoted Groucho; in the 2006 edition of *The Yale Book of Quotations*, he ranks third in the entries for twentieth-century figures.¹ On the other hand, it is remarkable that a British royal identifies with an immigrant American Jew who made a career of mocking figures of authority. In *Horse Feathers* (1932), as college president Professor Quincy Adams Wagstaff, Groucho sings, “Whatever it is, I’m against it,” and this sentiment encapsulates much of the Marx Brothers’ stance and work. The Queen’s use of Groucho’s words and the appreciation of other royals for the Marx Brothers, including the Queen’s father, King George VI, and her uncle, King Edward VIII, suggest the paradoxical nature of the brothers’ appeal, their humor, and their careers.² They have been called anarchic forces, and yet they are admired by the very people who would loathe anarchy. They attack bourgeois sensibilities and all types of pretensions, and, doing so, enables them to buy California mansions and become Hollywood figures. Although the theatre critic Brooks Atkinson insisted, “These are nihilists—These Marx boys” (Louvish 191) and their films parody consumerism, in the 1940s Groucho did numerous product endorsements to the point, as Stefan Kanfer puts it, “There seemed to be nothing to which he would not lend his name” (297).

Perhaps the greatest paradox is how fully the Marx Brothers have permeated popular culture despite completing relatively few films together more than half a century ago. People who have never seen a Marx Brothers movie can identify their faces, and “Groucho Glasses,” which were first manufactured in the 1940s,

¹ He’s tied with George Orwell and behind Winston Churchill and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

² Harpo mentions meeting Edward VIII in his autobiography, *Harpo Speaks!* and would claim the King handed him his leg.

are still standard attire at parties and masquerade balls.³ There even exists a Guinness World Record category: “Most people to Wear a Groucho Marx Disguise at the Same Time.”⁴ References to the brothers appear regularly in advertisements, comic strips, video games, television shows, and movies. For example, Benjamin Franklin Pierce in *M.A.S.H.* (the film and television series) frequently does Groucho impersonations, as does Gabe Kotter the teacher on *Welcome Back Kotter*,⁵ and both do so as a form of resistance; it offers them a way to combat the authoritarian structures—the military and educational systems—in which they work. Or, to cite an odder example, Rob Zombie uses the names of Marx brothers’ characters in his horror films *House of a 1000 Corpses* (2003) and *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005). The brothers’ direct influence can be seen in the works of artists such as Woody Allen, Roberto Benigni, Terry Gilliam, and the members of Monty Python and Saturday Night Live.⁶ Other comics who have stated their debt include Lucille Ball, Dick Cavett, Bill Cosby, Billy Crystal, Steve Martin, Jerry Seinfeld, and Robin Williams. Any child who has loved Bugs Bunny, Yakko and Wakko of the *Animaniacs*, or Quincy T. Quackepoker in *Pokemon* anime has been indirectly influenced by the Marx Brothers since these characters are based on Groucho and Harpo (as are many sequences in *Tiny Toon Adventures*). Musicians, including Alice Cooper, Elton John, Queen, and Jonathan Richman, admire the brothers. They also appear in the writings of numerous authors including Peter de Vries, E.L. Doctorow, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Azar Nafisi, and Thomas Pynchon.⁷ Performance

³ Kafner notes that even U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor wore a pair during a court conference on Halloween (434).

⁴As of this writing, the record is officially held by East Lansing High School, Michigan. In 2003, the school had 937 people wear the glasses. However, in 2005, the class A baseball team, the Myrtle Beach Pelicans had 1,827 fans with the glasses, and, in 2007, a NBA basketball team held “Groucho Glasses” night and sold over fifteen hundred glasses as a fund-raiser for charity.

⁵ Kaplan has also starred in one-man shows based on Groucho.

⁶Gilliam’s admiration can be seen in *Brazil* (1985), both in the way government agents saw through ceilings to enter apartments *Horse Feathers*-style and the fact one character is watching *The Cocoanuts* on television. In *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) the inmates watch *Duck Soup*, and in *The Fisher King* (1991) Parry sings “Lydia.” Members of various Saturday Night Live casts have repeatedly expressed their debt. John Belushi stated that he modeled his character Blutarski in *Animal House* (1978) on Harpo. (In that same film, the character Stork leads a band with the same stiff legged, high baton gestures that Harpo uses in *Duck Soup*). Dan Ackroyd’s character in *Coneheads* (1993) uses as an alias “Leonardo deChico.” Benigni in *Johnny Stecchino* (1991) offers a version of the famous mirror scene in *Duck Soup*.

⁷Doctorow devotes a chapter to Harpo in *The Creationists* (2006). In de Vries *Madder Music* (1977) the main character has delusions that he’s Groucho. Nafisi mentions the

art pranksters, such as those responsible for “Operation Groucho,”⁸ have been inspired by the work, as have graphic novelists.⁹ Film critics, including Roger Ebert and Leonard Maltin, cite the importance of seeing Marx Brothers movies when they were young, and Peter Canavese has established an on-line archive of his criticism called “grouchoreviews.com.” Marx Brothers’ references also can be seen in unlikely venues, such as London’s Groucho Club, medical texts¹⁰ and a Smithsonian museum exhibition that explains DNA recombination using a scene from *A Night at the Opera*. In short, the 20th century can be considered a Century of the Marx Brothers.

In fact, the Marx Brothers have become synonymous with comedy itself. The book *What’s So Funny: Humor in American Culture* (1998) offers a striking example of this. Although in the collection’s fifteen essays, the brothers are mentioned casually two or three times (and then in lists of other names), the book’s cover consists of a portrait of Groucho, emphasizing his iconic mustache, eyebrows, and glasses.¹¹ To consider the Marx Brothers the “faces of comedy” is appropriate since a number of their routines serve as humor compendiums. For example, in the sequence when the brothers first appear together in *The Cocoanuts* (1929) Groucho is a hotel manager, and Chico and Harpo enter and register for a room. In the following ten minutes, Harpo eats a variety of objects and offers his leg to men and women. Chico reassures Groucho that it’s okay his suitcase is empty – “We fill it up before we leave”—and as he “helps himself” to what’s in the cash register he simultaneously gives a parodic rendition of the anvil chorus of *Aida*. The scene contains linguistic wordplay and puns, parodies, cons, ethnic stereotypes, slapstick, mime, surreal moments, incongruity, nonsense which is treated seriously, jokes based on gender and class, violence as play, and a gleeful destructiveness. This variety is possible because with the four distinct characters—the hyper-verbal Groucho, the mute satyr Harpo, the quasi-ethnic word-mangler Chico, and the straight-man Zeppo—the troupe can configure itself into a number of forms and utilize various comic techniques (in contrast to an act like The Three Stooges where

importance of smuggling Marx Brothers movies into Iran in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). Pynchon includes a young Julius Marx in *Against the Day* (2006).

⁸ <http://www.badmouth.net/operation-groucho/>

⁹ Marx Brothers references and allusions can be seen in *V for Vendetta*, *Cerebrus the Aardvark* and *Dylan Dog* to name only a few.

¹⁰ For example, *The Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook* (1996) offers a quotation at the beginning of the chapter on Sexual Health: “I wasn’t kissing her, I was whispering in her mouth.” The book attributes it to Groucho instead of Chico.

¹¹ The Wikipedia entry on “groucho glasses” notes “Groucho glasses today are often used as a shorthand for slapstick and general silliness.”

each character is essentially the same and the humor depends almost entirely on slapstick).

Because of the complex nature of their comedy, Marx Brothers films can be usefully considered through the lens of most theories of humor, including Plato's suggestion that we feel both pain and pleasure at seeing others humiliated and Freud's belief that humor allows us to say what is taboo and serves as a defense mechanism. To briefly suggest only one example, Henri Bergson in "Laughter" argues we laugh at "the mechanical" in things and people: "The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (79). For Bergson, "The rigid, the ready-made, the mechanical, in contrast with the supple, the ever-changing and the living, absentmindedness in contrast with attention, in a word, automatism in contrast with free activity, such are the defects that laughter singles out and would fain correct" (145). This theory provides a useful way to understand the enormous number of mechanical repetitions in the brothers' films, including the ending of "Hooray for Captain Spalding," Chico getting stuck playing the same melody at the piano, the repetition of introductions, and the mechanical language of business correspondence and legal contracts, such as Zeppo taking a letter in *Animal Crackers* or the "sanity clause" scene between Groucho and Chico in *Duck Soup*. The Marx Brothers draw our attention to the deadening "automatism" of societal conventions and, in doing so, their comedy may serve as a liberating or life-affirming force.

Humor has been defined as the great leveler, and certainly much of the brothers' work can be considered this way. As Atkinson says, in reviewing the stage show of *Animal Crackers*, "the virtue of their vulgar mountebankery is its bewildering, passing, stinging thrusts at everybody in general, including themselves" (Louvish 191). The brothers are egalitarian. In *Monkey Business* Harpo kisses a line of people at the boat's railing. These include several women and a man; however, after kissing the man, there is no double-take, no grimace. It's not a joke based on homophobia; there's an inclusiveness to Harpo's inappropriate behavior. He invades the personal space of everyone. Similarly at the end of *Duck Soup*, the brothers joyfully throw fruit at Trentino, their male enemy, and at Mrs. Teasdale, their female benefactress. Nevertheless, there is no question that the brothers' humor also can be misogynist. For example the "examination" of Emily Upjohn (Margaret Dumont) in *A Day at the Races* (1937) exemplifies violence done to a feminine body under the sign of "Men at Work." And, although the brothers themselves were not explicitly racist—Groucho was furious at comments the director Sam Wood made about African-Americans—their films contain casually racist moments, such as the "darkies" joke in *Duck Soup*, and the perhaps well-intentioned but culturally insensitive

blackface scene in *A Day at the Races*. These moments usually present themselves as being concerned with class rather than gender or race with Margaret Dumont embodying upper-class society and minorities representing the poor, but they also demonstrate the often inextricable nature of these issues. If, as Bergson insists, laughter requires a “temporary anesthesia of the heart” (63), it’s important to remember to whose pain the audience is being deadened.

For the most part, Marx Brothers’ films are aggressively populist. In *Monkey Business*, the brothers are four nameless stowaway immigrants, and Groucho tells the captain, “Don’t forget, my fine fellow, that the stockholder of yesteryear is the stowaway of today.” Again and again, they champion the art and concerns of the lower classes, and they do so, as Gerald Mast notes, by “hurl[ing] comic mud at the gleaming marble pillars of the American temple” (281). They both mock and literally destroy icons of high culture. There are parodies of opera, serious theatre, and modernist literature. In *The Cocoanuts*, Harpo exchanges gunshots with a sculpture. In *A Day at the Races*, he wrecks a concert piano and finds his music inside. In *At The Circus*, the brothers set an orchestra adrift on a raft so that a circus can perform for society’s “400.” The film makes the implicit argument that the denizens of high culture should and would like circuses. It insists upon the value and appeal of mass culture. As several critics note, this explicit identification with the poor becomes particularly pronounced in the MGM films. For example, it is the “colorful” “ethnic” poor who feed them on the ship in *A Night at the Opera*, and both *A Day at the Races* and *At the Circus* contain African-American dance numbers which involve the brothers, particularly Harpo.

When the brothers put on blackface or beards or “spy glasses,” they place obviously fake disguises over what are already obviously artificial identities.¹² Each brother portrays a character which consists of an exaggerated representation— the greasepaint mustache, the fright wig and tattered coat, the Tyrolean hat. Even Zeppo is, according to Mast, “a cliché of the straight man and juvenile, the bland wooden espouser of sentiments that seem to exist only in the world of the sound stage” (282).¹³ Their identities consist of a series of stage props, gestures, and attitudes, all of which can be appropriated. Consequently, a Marx Brother is a role, one that can be played or worn, and one result is that people can “be” one of them or at least imagine themselves as one in a way that

¹² Gary Giddins argues that Groucho’s glasses and mustache represents one of “the most enduring masks of the 20th century.”

¹³ A further irony here is that people close to the family said Zeppo was the funniest brother.

they cannot be “Mark Twain” or “Marilyn Monroe.”¹⁴ The brothers took advantage of this. At one point during their stage career, Groucho had an emergency appendectomy. For two weeks, Zeppo played his role, and did such a good job that a jealous Groucho came back sooner than he planned. A similar transference of character occurred with Harpo. Not only did Zeppo also play his role on stage, but Maxine Marx, Chico’s daughter, recounts how during one matinee her father and Harpo switched roles and Kanfer notes that they did so for the last week of the Broadway run of *The Cocoanuts* (106).¹⁵ Kanfer also tells the story of the brothers smuggling Walter Winchell into a theater from which he has been banned by dressing him like Harpo and telling people that because Harpo suffers from seizures the troupe carries a spare (115).

The brothers’ act explicitly played with the idea of their characters being reproducible. During the stage run of *Animal Crackers*, one night Margaret Dumont opened Captain Spaulding’s trunk and a series of stagehands all dressed like Groucho emerged (Kanfer 116). In *Duck Soup* (1933), both Chico and Harpo pretend to be Groucho by adopting big fake mustaches and cigars; as a result three Grouchos run through the house, and in the mirror scene, Groucho must trick his “reflection” into revealing that he is an imposter. This scene has a parallel version for Harpo in *The Big Store*. He plays the harp next to a set of mirrors, and his reflections begin accompanying him, playing music of their own and even changing instruments.

In a Marx Brothers’ film, identity is malleable; it can be constructed, donned, and exchanged. In *Animal Crackers*, for example, almost no one is who they say they are. Harpo is called the professor. The butler is an ex-con. The neighborhood “good girls” are manipulative schemers. The art dealer used to be Abie The Fish Peddler, and when Chico asks him, “How did you get to be Roscoe W. Chandler?” he is asked in return, “How did you get to be an Italian?” There is a continual mixing up of names in introductions. Even physical characteristics are not fixed markers of identity. The art dealer has a birthmark, and Harpo steals it. Groucho, playing Captain Spaulding, and Chico, as Ravelli, have the following exchange:

Capt. Spaulding: I used to know a fellow who looked exactly like you by the name of Emanuel Ravelli. Are you his brother?

Ravelli: I am Emanuel Ravelli.

¹⁴ This may account for an interesting dynamic in the essays in this book. Many of them begin with a first person opening; some of the scholars included here have deeply personal connections to the Marx Brothers.

¹⁵ Chico and Harpo looked so much alike that Maxine Marx claimed her womanizing father would “commit his adulteries in Harpo’s name.” Chico also appeared on *I’ve Got a Secret* as Harpo; his secret was that he was actually Chico.

Capt. Spaulding: You're Emanuel Ravelli?

Ravelli: I am Emanuel Ravelli.

Capt. Spaulding: Well, no wonder you look like him. But I still insist there is a resemblance.

Ravelli: Heh, heh, he thinks I look alike.

Capt. Spaulding: Well, if you do, it's a tough break for both of you.

In the world of the Marx Brothers you are who you say you are as long as you have the right props. You become a doctor by carrying a doctor's bag and a captain by putting on a captain's hat. The clothes don't make the man; the clothes are the man. In this sense, the brothers' work offers both a similar and contrasting statement to Rene Magritte's painting of a pipe above the sentence "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (This is not a pipe). Magritte calls attention to the issue of representation and insists a painting is not the actual object. Similarly, the Marx Brothers foreground issues of representation, but in contrast to the distinction made by Magritte, they insist it is all there is. In *Duck Soup*, Harpo may have the tattoo of a doghouse, but it has a real dog inside.

The Marx Brothers' work also calls into question the privileging of authenticity as a standard evaluation. In *Animal Crackers*, the plot turns on whether an art work can be identified or whether a copy can be "mistaken" for a painting which is called by its owner "most original." There exists multiple copies of the painting, and although one is dismissed as a "rank imitation," another, done by the romantic hero, is identified by an expert as the original. The film suggests that a copy can be as good as an original and the person who does it should be considered an artist.¹⁶ In other words, origins don't matter, only appearances do, a powerful idea in the 1920s and 1930s.

Animal Crackers places at the center of its plot the issue of authenticity and contains stars who make no pretense of offering "authentic" character portrayals. Yet, for all the jokes about identity construction, the brothers' characters are fixed. They are always the Marx Brothers (and, as a result, their movies can be regarded in one sense as a series of settings in which they run around—a Florida hotel, a boat, a country estate, a sanitarium, a circus, etc.). In *Monkey Business*, they have no names or backgrounds. We don't know where they are coming from, where they are going, or how they know each other. And we don't need to. We only need to know it's Groucho, Harpo, Chico, and Zeppo. For all of the Marx Brothers' "zaniness," "wackiness," and "wildness," the audience always knows what they are going to get. Harpo will not suddenly

¹⁶ In one sense, the entire film serves as a response to Walter Benjamin's insistence that in "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that a unique work of art has an "aura."

start speaking.¹⁷ Chico will not lose his accent, and Groucho will not suddenly woo Margaret Dumont sincerely or remove his mustache. In an age of standardization, the Marx Brothers provide a comic consistency.

To be concerned with identity is to be concerned with differentiation: “Why am I me and not you?” and even “How do I know I’m me and not you?” (And, in the mirror scene of *Duck Soup*, the question becomes “How can I prove it?”) How do we differentiate among ourselves? By our clothing? By our speech or lack of it? The work of the brothers, however, explores a more fundamental question: “What does it mean to be human?” This too can be a question of differentiation, one which asks, “What separates us from animals?” For the Marx Brothers, the answer is “not much.” As Captain Spaulding (Groucho) says, “I wish I were back in the jungle where men were monkeys.” The titles of the Paramount films emphasize the animalistic nature of human behavior — *Animal Crackers*, *Monkey Business*, *Horse Feathers*, *Duck Soup* (and indirectly *The Cocoanuts*)—and the films are literally full of animals, including dogs, horses, seals, and gorillas.¹⁸ In *Horse Feathers*, a satire of the educational system with its football crazy students and clueless professors, the very colleges are Darwin and Huxley, but the brothers have not evolved very far. They act according to the primal drives of hunger, sex, and aggression. Harpo, particularly in the Paramount films, embodies pure id. Continually hungry, there is nothing he will not eat, including flowers, cigars, telephones, and buttons, and there is no woman, except perhaps Margaret Dumont, he will not chase. As for aggression, these films contain a great deal of explicit and sublimated violence. Groucho attacks everyone verbally with his “machine-gun wit.” Harpo frequently raises his hand as if about to smack someone, and in *Animal Crackers* he punches Margaret Dumont hard enough to lift her off the ground. (Harpo is both a theatrical descendent of Mr. Punch and literally Mr. Punch, and in *Monkey Business*, he enters a Punch and Judy show.) *Duck Soup* culminates in war, and early drafts of *Horse Feathers* and *A Night at the Opera* had the college and the opera house being burned down.

Almost all of the qualities which some would argue distinguish humans from animals—for example language or rationality—are either mocked in these films or, in the case of spirituality, simply absent. The exchanges between Groucho and Chico demonstrate Krazy Kat’s claim that “Language is that we may misunderstand each udda.” *Animal Crackers*, on one level, is a mystery which Chico tries to solve by reasoning, through a series of syllogisms, that left handed moths ate the missing painting. If crime is a disruption of the social order and

¹⁷ While making *A Night in Casablanca*, the studio offered him an extra \$55,000 if he would say “Murder.” He refused.

¹⁸ Perhaps this is one reason Eugene Ionesco, the author of *Rhinoceros*, declared the Marx Brothers a large influence on his work.

solving a crime is the healing of that rupture, then having the brothers on the case is to reject the re-establishing of the social order. It is to be rationally absurd, a state which allows the brothers to both enact and subvert conventions. For example, *Horse Feathers* ends with a wedding—the classic finale of a comedy—which reaffirms the social structure. Yet, in this particular ceremony, Groucho, Harpo, and Chico all say, “We do,” and tackle the bride, both offering the traditional conclusion and negating it. Similarly, within the same film, they “win” the big football game, providing the expected climax to a sports movie, but they do so in a manner which demonstrates its ludicrousness. They satirize the institutions, rituals, and conventions that govern human behavior. They even mock the art-making process itself by constantly drawing attention to their performances, such as when Groucho in *Monkey Business* sticks his head out a ship’s porthole, looks straight at the camera and says, “I’m spying on you” or in *Horse Feathers* when he tells the audience during a musical interlude “I’ve got to stay here, but there’s no reason why you folks shouldn’t go out into the lobby until this thing to blows over.” Ultimately, it is the mocking itself, the humor, which serves to curb the aggression and desires. As Harpo puts it, “People all have inhibitions and hate them. We just ignore them. Every man wants to chase a pretty girl if he sees one. He doesn’t—I do. Most people at some time want to throw things around recklessly. They don’t—but we do. We’re sort of a safety valve through which people can blow off steam” (Adamson 156). The brothers act as an outlet for the audience’s desires, and this, in part, explains their popularity.

Overall, the Marx Brothers iconic cultural status has not been matched by a similar wide-spread critical appreciation in the academy (in fact their very popularity may be held against them).¹⁹ In their stage and early film careers, the brothers gained the acclaim of influential journalists. They were admired by artists such as Antonin Artaud and Salvador Dali and featured on the cover of *Time*. During their career, many critics praised their work; nevertheless, in 1987 Wes Gehring noted that there had been “surprisingly few book-length critical studies of the Marxes” (154). There have been a handful of scholars dedicated to their work, including Gehring, Joe Adamson, Allen Eyles, Glenn Mitchell, and Gerald Weales. Most of the Marx Brothers bibliography, however, consists of biographies, autobiographies, anecdotal reminiscences, and memoirs, such as Maxine Marx’s *Growing Up with Chico* and Arthur Marx’s *Life with Groucho*.²⁰ Within the last decade, there have been two major biographies,

¹⁹ One contributor to this volume was warned by someone prominent in the field about devoting time to such subject matter.

²⁰ The story of the Marx family has also been turned into the musical *Minnie’s Boys* and the one-man shows *An Evening with Groucho* and *Groucho: A Life in Revue*. For the last several years, a biopic of the family has been in development in Hollywood.

Stefan Kanfer's *Groucho: The Life and Times of Julius Henry Marx* (2000) and Simon Louvish's *Monkey Business—The Lives and Legends of the Marx Brothers* (1999). Both of these books contain impressive research and useful insights; in general, however, serious academic criticism of the Marx Brothers work has been relatively sparse.

It may be that the brothers' achievement has been somewhat ignored because unlike their comic contemporaries, particularly Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, they had little interest in film as an art form. Although they insisted they wanted to create the best work possible (which, to them, meant the funniest), they left the filmmaking to the director and crew. They had little interest in the technology or moving behind the camera.²¹ Numerous stories detail the difficulties that directors had corralling them to shoot scenes. Although some of these may be apocryphal or circulated to generate press, they also suggest the brothers' impatience with being on set. The brothers rarely worked with high quality directors—in retrospect, Groucho would say that only Leo McCarey was first-rate—and after the death of producer Irving Thalberg in 1936 the quality of their work declined dramatically.²² None of the last half dozen films the brothers made have the energy or snap of their earlier work, and Groucho admitted that he did them “like an old pug, still going through the motions, but now doing it solely for money.”²³ Furthermore the Marx Brothers deliberately refused to present themselves as “artists” or engage in theoretical discussions. Groucho, when asked about the political nature of *Duck Soup*, insisted, “We were just four Jews trying to get a laugh,” and once said, “I don’t think the word art, which happens to be my son’s name, has ever come up in my thoughts or my conversations.” Perhaps for all these reasons, critics and particularly film historians have moved quickly over the brothers’ career or mention it mainly in passing.

Despite the self-deprecating attitudes of the brothers towards their work (whether sincere or disingenuous), it rewards critical attention, and the essays in

²¹ There are various trick shots in the films, such as Harpo accompanying himself in *The Big Store*. None of these, however, are as interesting or revolutionary as, say, Buster Keaton’s *The Playhouse* or Fred Astaire’s tribute to Bill Robinson, “Bojangles in Harlem” in *Swingtime*.

²² Groucho insisted, “When Thalberg died, at that moment I knew that the Marx Brothers wouldn’t make any more good pictures because the people who would replace Thalberg were second-rate talents.”

²³ By the time the brothers appeared on screen in *The Cocoanuts* (1929), they already were approaching middle-age. The oldest brother, Chico, was forty-two, Harpo was forty, and Groucho was thirty-eight. (Zeppo, the baby of the family, was twenty-seven, perhaps one of the reasons he could play Groucho’s son in *Horse Feathers*, and the fifth brother, Gummo, didn’t make the transition to films at all.) In their later films, they are in their fifties and sixties.

this collection demonstrate a range of possible approaches. Matthew Daube's "The Case of Rabbi Cantor vs. Roscoe W. Chandler: The Marx Brothers' Ethnic Construction of Character" explores how the brothers both used and downplayed their Jewishness, and how they appropriated and transformed various ethnic stereotypes as they became the Marx Brothers. Renata Jackson in "Who's Your Dada? The Marx Brothers at Paramount" and Dean Wilcox in "Surrealistic Heroes: The Marx Brothers and the European Avant-Garde" argue that it's fruitful to consider the brothers in relation to the artistic movements of dada and surrealism. They both insist that attempting to dismiss or downplay these comparisons misses an opportunity to more fully understand the complex cultural dynamic at work in these productions. Thomas Grochowski's "Horse Feathers, Monkey Business, and Lion Taming: The Marxes in Transition" considers the brothers' work at Paramount with regard to the idea of "cinema of attractions" and in doing so suggests that the later MGM films should not be considered a "taming" of the brothers but a different mode of cinema. Eric Sterling's "The Marx Brothers and the Satire of the Upper Class" considers the films' attack on social class and the way they "parody the materialism, pretentiousness, and greed of the wealthy and of the upper-class establishments and occupations that the rich dominated, such as art collecting, the university system, the business world, the high society world of opera, the medical profession, and politics."

Several of the essays focus on one of the brothers. Christopher Kelen in "Nation, Anthem, Irony in the Figure of Rufus Firefly" examines Groucho's character in *Duck Soup* and the film's parody of nationalism. Matthew Turner in "Signs, Slapstick, and Silence: The Transformation of Semiotic Meaning in the Comedy of Harpo Marx" argues that Harpo does visually what Groucho does linguistically and that there is a "semiotic transformation and undermining of signifiers at a visual level in the films of the Marx Brothers." Lance Duerfahrd's "The Extras to the Extraordinary: The Other Characters in the Marx Brothers Film" suggests that we can understand Groucho and Harpo more fully by considering the presence and reaction of others. In " 'Italians' Know Nothing of Love: The Marx Brothers as Guardian Angels for Young Couples in Jeopardy," Marc DiPaolo insists that contrary to most critical opinions, the later Marx Brothers films can be seen as a logical extension of their earlier works. The collection's two final essays—Joseph Alvarez's "Woody Allen: A Red-Headed Marx Brothers Stepchild?" and Zoe Brigley's "The Big Grey Ir-Elephant: The Play of Language in the Marx Brothers' Scripts and in Charles Bernstein's L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry"—consider the influence of the brothers on two very different contemporary artists.

These essays delineate some of the critical implications of this rich material, and many suggest intriguing possibilities for future exploration. As a whole,

they pay tribute to the Marx Brothers' achievement by providing a better understanding of the brothers' work and why it appeals to a large diverse audience that includes artists and accountants, punks and professors, 8 year old mischief makers and 80 year old monarchs.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE CASE OF RABBI CANTOR VS. ROSCOE W. CHANDLER: THE MARX BROTHERS' ETHNIC CONSTRUCTION OF CHARACTER

MATTHEW DAUBE

Groucho, Chico, and Harpo Marx developed dramatic personas with such deftness and detail that their own family called them by their stage monikers, rather than by their given names of Julius, Leonard, and Adolph.¹ These finely honed masks both obscure and reveal the story of a multi-ethnic America at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, in which Jewish immigrants held an uncertain racial status. Down one path loomed the possibility of running aground in the racialized American power structure which divides, marks, and

¹ I will follow suit by referring to the brothers by their stage names, even when discussing their pre-nickname years. Apparently, their famous monikers arose during a card game with fellow vaudevillian Art Fisher, who named the boys according to what he saw as their defining quirks: “Charles Mager’s phenomenally successful comic strip *Sherlocko, the Monk* [...] was populated with characters whose dominant idiosyncrasies were reflected in their names, which also ended with the letter ‘o.’ [...] Because of the strip’s popularity, a number of vaudeville comedians adapted similarly inspired names [...] Cynical Julius became Groucho; harp-playing Adolph became Harpo; girl (chick)-chasing Leonard became Chico (a typesetter accidentally dropped the ‘k’ and the new spelling was retained), and the gumshoe-attired Milton became Gummo. (Herbert, not yet with the team, acquired the nickname Zeppo at a later date)” (Gehring 22-3). Simon Louvish writes that “the first mention in dispatches of the Marx Brothers by their new names occurs in February 1919, in a *Variety* review of ‘The Four Marx Brothers Revue’...Julius is still Julius in this piece, but ‘Harpo’, ‘Chico’ and ‘Zep’, for Herbert, are named. In their professional life, the Brothers were using their original names right up to and including their first Broadway show, *I’ll Say She Is*, in 1924. It was, in fact — leaping forward again — Alexander Woollcott, their mentor and discoverer, who witnessed them calling each other by their nicknames and said: ‘Wait a minute, you’ve got these great stage names and you’re still billing yourselves Julius, Arthur, Leonard and Herbert? Gedoutahere!’” (101).

restricts non-whites through the classification of bodies—most notably according to skin color. Down another path lay the promise of ethnicity, a system of classification which, while done against the backdrop of the black-white paradigm, allows for categorization according to cultural background, with the possibility for non-blacks to acquire the advantages of whiteness. Entering a profession that brimmed with racial play, after a childhood spent in a multi-ethnic community, the Marx Brothers' use of ethnic stereotypes gained them entrance into the dominant white class of American society even while they exposed the constructed nature of that very hierarchy. I trace this argument from their vaudeville decades of the 1900s and 1910s, through their success on Broadway in the 1920s, at which point their stage roles gelled into the characters we still recognize today, even when we overlook their origins.

The Marx Brothers' skill at identity formation was, in part, due to their status as second generation Americans. Their parents, Sam and Minnie, hailed from regions where religion invariably helped shape one's self and status. For European Jews, crossing the Atlantic involved all the fear and freedom wrapped up with leaving one's cultural roots and arriving in a new cultural home which was openly negotiating relationships between a large variety of ethnicities and national backgrounds. European Jews were familiar, before they ever disembarked in the United States, with conditions akin to the racial double consciousness described by W.E.B. Du Bois. Referring to African-Americans, Du Bois described this state as: "a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others . . . One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (2). It is the "dark body" which marks the black in America; it was the absence of the black body which gave Jews the possibility of obtaining whiteness. As Michael Rogin writes in *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (1996), "[d]uring the period of mass European immigration, roughly the 1840s to the 1920s, the racial status of Irish, Italians, Jews, and Slavs was in dispute. As anti-Semitism racialized Jews in Europe, however, European immigrants to the United States were coming under the banner of a new racial invention: whiteness" (12). That is, with their lighter skin, and the privileges available to non-blacks, Jews in America could use a racial consciousness developed in Europe in order to influence their racial status in the United States. Simon Marris of Alsace-Lorraine and Minna Schoenberg of Germany were to become Sam and Minnie Marx of New York City.

Minnie was particularly interested in the American assimilationist project and its promise of economic dividends. She moved the family to the upper East Side German community of Yorkville, which Stefan Kanfer describes (with presumed irony) in *Groucho: The Life and Times of Julius Henry Marx* (2000)

as farther away from “those swarthy black-haired [Eastern European Jews] downtown” (18). Minnie went so far as to mix peroxide with her boys’ shampoo in order to lighten their hair, demonstrating both practicality and a sense that whiteness was, at least in part, an achievable goal.

Jews had to negotiate a transition into white America; Rogin describes one such *modus operandi* in the arena of entertainment, where Jews established their non-black status by performing in blackface, thereby (ironically) displaying a racial flexibility denied to blacks. Vaudeville of this era was full of non-blacks playing with their sense of what I call the “off-white”—not fully white, yet edging close enough to partake of many of the benefits of whiteness. For Minnie, the immediate example was her brother Al Shean, who achieved success as part of the comic duo, Gallagher and Shean. Shean performed songs such as “It Isn’t What You Used to Be, It’s What You Are Today,” simultaneously lauding the values of assimilation and exhibiting himself as an example—Al Shean had been born in Germany under the name Abraham Eliesser Adolph Schoenberg. Shean can easily be seen as a prototype for his nephews, not just as a stage comedian, but because he made making a living overtly showcasing his flexible ethnic identity, his foreign attributes accepted by mainstream America when safely framed by the stage.

The Marx Brothers’ initial attempts to break into entertainment in the first decade of the twentieth century involved a degree of “whiteface”—that is, of trying to play the nondescript, “unmarked” American white. Groucho’s first paying gig was as a member of an Episcopal boys’ choir, singing Christian hymns. He refers to this wryly in *The Groucho Phile* (1977), writing: “I sang in a Protestant church choir, until they found out what was wrong with it” (11). He then tried to make it in vaudeville as a generic juvenile singer with a group called The Leroy Trio, which apparently debuted in drag. This choice, which adds to the aura of mutable identity, may have been due to their cross-dressing manager, who later ran off with the lead boy and Groucho’s money, but it was not unusual in vaudeville. It was, nonetheless, embarrassing to Groucho; in *Monkey Business: The Lives and Legends of The Marx Brothers* (1999), Simon Louvish informs us “that Julius’s first appearance on stage was in drag was never mentioned again [after a Saturday Evening Post 1931 interview], and was tactfully expunged from all later accounts” (46). Ethnic cross-dressing was to be more acceptable for the Marx Brothers than traditional gender-based drag acts.

Vaudeville, with its culturally mixed audiences and affordable ticket prices, was a logical place to practice self-fashioning of racial identity. Indeed, the Leroy Trio’s opening act at the Ramona Amusement Park in Grand Rapids, Michigan, featured four African Americans donning “yellowface” to play at being Chinese, under the name of the Whangdoodle Four. The audiences of immigrants and working class peoples were less dependent on the stability of

identity and such on-stage shifts reflected the transitions necessary in their own lives while negotiating the path towards the goal of establishing an American history of their own. The ethnic mix of the audiences meant that no single type of ethnic act could resonate with the majority, but cross-dressing (both gendered and ethnic) could.

In 1911, the Marxes devised a comedy piece entitled *Fun in Hi Skule*, which borrowed heavily from vaudevillian tropes. Groucho played the teacher, with an outrageous German accent. His costume and carriage overlapped with what Harley Erdman, in *Staging the Jew: the Performance of an American Ethnicity, 1860-1920* (1997), calls the “getup” of the stereotypical stage Jew, which “included stringy beard, long nose, and black derby pulled down tightly over the ears. Frequently, too, these characters had terrible posture; they walked with limps below oversized coats that hung to the ankles” (104). Harpo played the role of “a half-Irish village idiot stereotype named Patsy Brannigan, complete with violent red wig” (Kanfer 38); Gummo played a young Jew with a Yiddish accent; and non-family member Paul Yale played “the ‘Sissy,’ with standard limp wrists and lisping diction” (ibid.). Later, Groucho would describe the assemblage of character for *Hi Skule* as if elements had been culled from a family dress-up trunk, filled with old clothes and ethnic signifiers; he wrote that “[t]he frock coat was borrowed from Uncle Julius, and the German accent—the most readily accessible—was borrowed from Opie” (18).

Hi Skule carefully constrains and cultivates the Marx Brothers’ famous rebelliousness. The students only yell out only when the teacher turns his back, refraining from direct attacks, although their behavior hint that they are chomping at the bit to act out further. The students often break into a specially-commissioned song titled “Peasie Weasie,” full of puns and wordplay. Immigrant audiences appreciated both the pitfalls of literalness and the sophistication required to deliberately mishear. The boys also habitually departed from the script, including one night when they “stopped their act to follow the slow progress of a beetle across the stage,” only returning to form when Minnie whispered (from the wings) “Greenbaum!” (Gehring 16). Greenbaum was the name of the man who held their mortgage, so Minnie’s one word warning intimated their fragile economic and ethnic status. Despite this admonition, improvisation would become key to their development of stage characters.

Of course, the brothers were already familiar with impersonation through ethnic stereotype off-stage as well as on. In his autobiography, *Harpo Speaks!* (1962), Harpo describes his childhood as a world where ethnicities mingled while remaining distinct, joined together by shared experience as well as shared animosity, with the Irish, Italian, Germans, and Jews learning their place in America based on who beat them up. According to Harpo, it was Chico who

exchanged ethnic manifestations most often: “Chico was quick of tongue and he had a flair for mimicking accents. In a tight spot he could pass himself off as Italian, Irish, German, or first-generation Jewish, whichever was most useful in the scrape he happened to be in” (31). He presents the use of ethnic stereotype as both as a freedom and a necessity, a combination of exterior flexibility with the acceptance of a supposed interior fixity.

On the one hand, the Marx Brothers’ Jewishness gave them a great deal of leeway when it came to ethnic impersonation. On the other hand, the need to avoid being marked as exclusively Jewish created a corresponding need to de-accentuate their actual ethnicity. Groucho denied this denial, writing that:

[w]e Marx Brothers never denied our Jewishness. We simply didn’t use it. We could have safely fallen back on the Yiddish theatre, making secure careers for ourselves. But our act was designed from the start to have a broad appeal. If, because of Chico, a segment of the audience thought we were Italian, let them. Then they could admire my proficiency with a German accent, and wonder how the map of Ireland could be printed on the face of the boy with the red wig who played Patsy Brannigan (*The Groucho Phile* 21).

Indeed, Harpo writes that when the Marx Brothers played before a mostly Jewish audience at the Royal Theater in New York City, the audience was perplexed by the boys’ use of English rather than Yiddish. Harpo adds that “[w]e never used any Jewish expressions on-stage”—which would imply that they did so off-stage, and were conscious to avoid it while on (143).² I suspect that to be fixed as Jewish on stage would have restricted them to the Yiddish theater, because mainstream America was not yet ready for Jews playing Jews, with the possible exception of Shylock and that character’s derivatives.

Despite their assortment of ethnicities, the brothers were, for the most part, highlighting similar aspects of stereotype, emphasizing accent and wordplay. The precise authorship of their next overhaul is unclear, but according to some, we should credit the professional eye of Uncle Al. Regardless of who made the decisions, most of the set speeches were assigned to Groucho, and the greatest amount of wordplay to Groucho and Chico. Harpo was encouraged to develop his pantomime, perhaps because his voice ruined the effect of his chosen ethnic identity on-stage; a reviewer in Illinois wrote that “[t]he Marx Brother who plays ‘Patsy Brannigan’ is made up and costumed to a fare-thee-well and he takes off an Irish immigrant most amusingly in pantomime. Unfortunately the effect is spoiled when he speaks” (quoted in Kanfer 44). Harpo himself would

² Of course, Harpo also wrote that they didn’t use double-entendres, which makes one wonder why Groucho got such glee out of referring to the “magnificent chest” he brings as a gift in *Animal Crackers*.

later write that “If there is anything distinctive about me, it’s the one thing the public knows least about—my voice. I still talk with an East-93rd-Street-New-York accent” (12). I doubt that this connection between Harpo’s voice, his actual Jewish ethnicity, and his subsequent stage silence is a coincidence. In effect, Harpo’s immigrant pantomime act replaced his everyday immigrant’s voice.

In part, the Marx Brothers’ talent was similar to previous vaudeville acts. In *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical (2004)*, Andrea Most asserts that:

[t]his emphasis on visible performance virtuosity, rather than innate biological characteristics, was particularly strong on the vaudeville and musical theater stages in the early decades of the century, where performers often shifted ethnicity numerous times over the course of an evening (23).

Rather than shifting temporally, the Marxes displayed the shift spatially, spreading various ethnicities amongst four brothers. Their play with ethnic identity also stood out because it had quotation marks around it; they simultaneously played at being different ethnicities and revealed that they were playing. For example, Chico played both an Italian and a Jew playing an Italian; when he joined the cast of *Hi Skule*, he spoke with an Italian accent supposedly gleaned from his barber, but—Harpo’s accolades aside—he was not supposed to fool anyone into thinking that he was Italian. They freely ignored the fourth wall or winked knowingly at the audience, as they would on Broadway, in the *Animal Crackers* (1930) scene when Chico questions the identity of noted art dealer Roscoe W. Chandler.

Chico [*with thick Italian accent*]: How did you get to be Roscoe W. Chandler?
 Chandler: Say, how did you get to be an Italian?
 Chico: Never mind that. WhosE confession is this anyhow?

The Marx Brothers’ identity play is remarkable not because of their mimetic talents, but due to their ability to simultaneously play at identity while revealing the process at work.

Looking back, one wonders why no Marx Brother chose the guise of blackface for everyday wear. It may be that to perform race (which is predicated on physical fixity) alongside ethnicity (which overlaps with race but takes a more flexible sociological approach) would have undermined the opportunity promised to non-blacks by the ethnic approach. When the Marx Brothers encounter blacks in their act (as in the final scene of *At the Circus*) or temporarily don blackface (as in *A Day at the Races*), the effects disturbs because it speaks to the rampant racism in American entertainment and

foregrounds the reality that black actors cannot enter into the play of ethnic character creation which grants the Marx Brothers their entrée into the mainstream.

The ubiquitous—yet often ignored—backdrop of blackness illuminates the decision to re-cast Gummo as the harmless juvenile. Normally viewed as “character-less,” I believe that Gummo and Zeppo (who essentially took the same role on Broadway) actually play the vital and distinct role of white man. After all, the bland, suited, clean-cut lad was not the “true” face of an unpainted Marx Brother. Gummo and Zeppo are quite literally “straight men”—thoroughly heterosexual, WASP-ish, and practically indistinguishable from other contemporary white male youth leads. Their presence simultaneously brings the immigrant personas of the other brothers into sharper focus while allowing mainstream white America to relax in the security of knowing that a “white” man is on the inside of this comedy team.

Vaudeville provided a powerful platform for constructing character specifics, offering the rich flexibility of improvisation in collaboration with theatergoers. After the fact, Groucho described much of his character’s evolution as happenstance, created according to which improvisations struck an audience’s fancy. The comic technique of building characters from stereotypes adjusted by audience response—i.e., laughter—was quite literally popular, and reinforced the sense of identity as an adaptable asset. For example, Groucho claims that his crouched walk came when he was “just kidding around one day and started to walk funny [. . .] The audience liked it, so I kept it in. I would try a line and leave it in too if it got a laugh. If it didn’t, I’d take it out and put in another. Pretty soon I had a character” (quoted in Kanfer 54). Even when the brothers weren’t consciously poaching from or parodying popular conventions, by mixing personal habits with ethnic stereotypes, honed by audience reaction, the Marx Brothers developed stage personas which were both highly unique and easily recognizable.

The multi-layered nature of their characters allowed the Marx Brothers to keep adapting, even substituting stereotype for stereotype when needed, as was the case when the brothers played Shea’s Toronto Theatre in the spring of 1915. Their biggest vaudeville show, *Home Again*, played off the theme of immigration, opening at a New York pier where wealthy German American Groucho returns from a European vacation with his wife (Minnie) and son (Gummo). In the afternoon show, Groucho’s character (Mr. Schneider) was a German immigrant, gleefully singing “Alle shaft aber nicht Vater” (“Everybody Works but Father”)—perhaps a dig at their own leisure-prone father. After the afternoon papers announced the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Groucho played a Jew in the evening show, singing in English with a Yiddish accent. Eventually, Groucho would drop the Yiddish accent and metamorphose into a fast talker in

the tradition of vaudeville star Julian Rose, whose major routine was a Jewish-themed monologue, “Levinsky at the Wedding.” Groucho’s adaptability speaks to his skills at mimicry, the multi-ethnic background which granted him access to a wide array of “types,” and the idea that identity can be incorporated and asserted through replication of outer behavioral markers. Because the brothers picked and chose from stereotypes and characteristics rather than lifting them wholesale, it was possible for audiences to watch Groucho and feel that his fast talking was a new and unique characteristic.

The gap between vaudeville and Broadway was significant but breachable, as demonstrated best by Jewish blackface entertainer Al Jolson, who achieved the feat in 1911. Still, Jolson was considered a straight-forward act of mimicry; it was up in the air whether Broadway would accept an ethnically-infused act which went far beyond Jolson’s (literally) black-and-white show. Their first Broadway show, *I’ll Say She Is!*, opened in Philadelphia in 1923 and was largely a repetition of their vaudeville reinterpretation of ethnic stereotypes with an expanded script, but what was old in vaudeville, such as Groucho’s fast-talking, became new on Broadway, and by now the demographics of the Broadway audience had shifted enough to support vaudeville-tinged work. Their patchwork quality worked to their benefit, and their improvisation was absolutely electrifying when played next to an imposing proscenium arch, giving audiences the thrilling sense that convention was negotiable.

In part a showcase of various international ethnicities, *I’ll Say She Is!* plays out the sexual threat posed by immigrants and immigrant characters, under cover of comedy. The second half of the play features Groucho (playing Napoleon) returning repeatedly from the front in order to ward off the sexual advances towards Josephine by his three advisors (played by Chico, Harpo, and Zeppo). The threat is several steps removed because the brothers played characters-within-characters. That is, they took the characters developed in vaudeville and played those characters playing other typical stage roles—in this case, Napoleon and his courtiers. At times, they stepped out of the typical stage role and revealed the vaudevillian immigrant underneath, such as when Harpo would choose to chase a blonde chorus girl across the stage. In part a perfect representation of the fear of immigrant invasion and miscegenation, the performance is so brazen as to be dismissed as mere comedy. After all, how could a mute clown—a village idiot—be a true danger? And yet backstage the brothers engaged in varying degrees of womanizing and Harpo kept chasing (and catching) the blondes when in the wings.³

³ Although Chico married the Jewish Betty Karp in 1916, Groucho married gentile Ruth Johnson in 1920, setting a pattern for the brothers’ future marriages. Marriage between Jews and Christians were not commonplace, and the couple had difficulty finding someone to marry a couple of two different religions. The setup for one of Groucho’s

The Marx Brothers' next Broadway show, *The Cocoanuts* (1925), cast Groucho as a Florida hotel-owner, both in the middle of the developing middle class, and now a part of it. Immigrants are always on the move: as Chico explains to Groucho, "Well, you see, we come-a here to make money. I reada in de paper, and it says: 'Big boom in Florida.' So we come. We're a coupla big booms, too!"⁴ Florida becomes the America of America, the land where one can achieve the American Dream of owning a house, of finding a place to stay and lose one's immigrant status. Groucho's exchange with the hotel bellhops, who demand their back wages, demonstrates that in America, mobility can be bought, and ideals come afterwards:

Groucho: Suppose George Washington's soldiers had asked for money, where would this country be today?

Bellhop: But they did ask.

Groucho: And where's Washington? No my friends, no. Money will never make you happy. And happy will never make you money.

Despite his words of wisdom, Groucho spends the entire play trying to make money, as do the others. Money, of course, is the ultimate symbol of exchangeability.

Much of the tension in *The Cocoanuts* revolves around issues of class, which we see when the male lead, Bob Adams, wants to marry the female lead, Polly Potter, whose mother proclaims "Why a daughter of mine should fool around with a hotel clerk when she has the opportunity of marrying one of the Boston Yates is more than I can understand." Polly protests that "Bob isn't a clerk, he's an architect," to which Mrs. Potter responds "One who clerks, Polly, is a clerk." This being America, class is based on money, and Bob wins Polly when he proves himself a financial success, as opposed to the high-class but poor Harvey Yates and Penelope who go to jail for attempted theft of Mrs. Potter's jewelry. While class can be altered, the price to pay is ethnic assimilation; it is impossible for any of the Marx Brothers (with the possible exception of Zeppo) to marry Polly without dropping their ethnic identifications and playing whiteness—hence the Zeppo exception.

most famous quips came when he "resolved to join one of the Long Island beach clubs, a venture which produced one of his most scathing comments, when he drew up at the gate of the Sands Point Bath and Sun Club with Arthur in tow. The manager, unimpressed by Groucho's celebrity, refused him entrance on the grounds that he was Jewish. 'What about my son?' retorted Groucho. 'He's only half-Jewish. Would it be all right if he went into the water up to his knees?' At the end of the day, he joined the even more expensive Lakeville Country Club, with all the other showbiz Jews" (Louvish 184).

⁴ All citations from *The Cocoanuts* comes from the film version, which attempted to reproduce the stage rendition.

Groucho's relationship with Margaret Dumont (Mrs. Potter) symbolizes the simultaneous attraction and repulsion felt by ethnic outsiders trying to break into mainstream America. Dumont plays a wealthy society dowager in a number of Marx Brothers projects, always representing blueblood America. This led to a declining role for Zeppo, who was no longer needed to represent white America. Groucho grasps and grapples with Dumont, whose good manners force her to endure his every advance and insult. He is incessantly attracted to Dumont, cultivating her favor and proposing to her in a shameless desire to enhance his social status. He is also forever repelled by her (lack of) beauty and overabundance of etiquette, of the rules of mainstream society. Groucho remains frozen in the act of assimilation, the social climber who refuses to take the last step and abandon his foreign moustache and eyebrows, let alone his ethnic nose.⁵

The advantage of those not yet bound by society's rules is that they can cross boundaries that keep others separated. When Groucho abandons the hotel lobby, Chico and Harpo have no compunction against stepping behind the desk, emptying out the cash register, and playing with all the objects within their reach. As the fool, Harpo's reality is the most bendable, and he even eats the phone and drinks ink. Two upstanding members of society enter, laughing, and Harpo steps in-between them, laughing heartily without emitting a sound. One of them calls Harpo a bum, and Chico repeats the word until it turns into a revolutionary war march and the three brothers mime being soldiers in parade. Being able to change one's identity means being beyond the law, as demonstrated when a police detective attempts to interrogate Chico and Harpo.

Detective [*to Chico*]: I think I know your face.

Chico: I give up. Whose is it?

Detective [*to Harpo*]: Let me see your face.

[*Harpo widens his eyes and blows out his cheeks. When the Detective turns to Chico, Harpo attempts to mold Chico's face with his hands.*]

Chico [*to Harpo*]: Alright, alright, I make my own face.

In the world of the Marx Brothers, a detective is a detective because he acts like a detective, so when Harpo steals the detective's badge, Chico announces: "That's a good. He no more a detective, you a detective." The joke is left behind as Harpo has no interest in being a detective. The shenanigans of Chico and Harpo often point to the constructed nature of character.

⁵ Groucho once wrote to a friend who was a plastic surgeon that "you and your medical brethren should be very careful with your knives, lest in time you erase all individuality from this country, and make us a race of straight faced citizens with all the personality of so many smoked white fish" (quoted in Gehring 34).

By the time of 1928's *Animal Crackers*, Groucho has "advanced" from Jewish immigrant to American landowner to African explorer—an ultimate representation of the colonizer. One's ability to imitate establishes authenticity, as reflected by the play's intrigue, which revolves around the concept of originals and copies, when a famous painting is stolen and replaced. There is one original painting and two fake paintings, one of them done well enough to make the male lead a successful artist, and the other poorly done. If one is able to mimic a great artist, one is a great artist. Talent, money, and the lack of black skin provide for the ability to change identity, which is never set. Take, for example, the following exchange between Groucho and Chico:

Groucho [*to Chico*]: Say, I used to know a fellow, that looked just like you, by the name of Manuel Ravelli. Are you his brother?

Chico: I am Emanuel Ravelli.

Groucho: You're Emanuel Ravelli?

Chico: I am Emanuel Ravelli.

Groucho: Oh, no wonder you look like him. But still I insist there is a resemblance.

Chico: Ha! Ha! He thinks I look alike. (21).

Identity, always in flux, does not even equal itself. Names are a matter of convenience, which can be donned and discarded at will. Most often this is done in order to escape the rigidity of the law, as we are to assume with Chico, or it is done to assimilate into aristocratic society: renowned art collector Roscoe W. Chandler is actually Abie the fish peddler from Czechoslovakia, recognized by fellow immigrants Chico and Harpo. Chandler is simultaneously a social climber decried by the brothers, and their mirror image—a man whose cover-up of his ethnic past goes beyond the change of name from Abie to Chandler; Louvish tells us that in one script, his identity was revealed to be Rabbi Cantor. Evidently, such a specifically Jewish origin was too dangerous for even the Marx Brothers to reveal as a major plot point.

Growing up in a space of racial liminality, the Marx boys knew identity as something changeable and interchangeable. When Chico wanted to increase his earnings as a silent theater pianist past his physical capacity, he double-booked engagements and employed his brother Harpo to play the part of Chico as needed. Harpo-playing-Chico was frequently fired due to an inexplicably shrunken repertoire, but the boys played this trick with a high rate of success and an extraordinary lack of self-consciousness. Later, Chico (the most adulterous of all the very adulterous Marx men) would commit some of his sexual escapades under Harpo's name. He even appeared in 1955 as Harpo on the television game show *I've Got a Secret*—the secret being that he was actually Chico. Harpo and Chico effortlessly exchanged roles in the last week of

their *I'll Say She Is!* and Zeppo was able to take Groucho's role for a day in their 1930 RKO vaudeville tour without the audience noticing anything other than the unexplained absence of Zeppo. Exchange of identities was possible both because the Marxes viewed identity as clothing to be donned when necessary and because they looked similar enough that their identity exchanges were difficult to discern on a purely physical level. Their uncanny similarities made the exchanges both very possible and very disturbing.

The Marx Brothers use their identity-shifting skills to invade society, but they are never fully assimilated, remaining publicly and privately frozen as the characters which gained them initial access to the world of the mainstream; the major difference between the film Groucho and the one hosting the game show *You Bet Your Life* (1950-61) is that he grew an actual moustache to play himself on television. Always, there is the fear that someone will discover their roots, as they discover those of Chandler. At a Carnegie Hall appearance late in his years, Groucho told the story of an old friend, Otto Kahn, who "who walked down Fifth Avenue with a deformed friend. 'You know,' said Kahn, 'I used to be a Jew.' His friend responded, 'Really? I used to be a hunchback'" (Kanfer 7). Groucho viewed both Jewishness and the hunchback as permanent (dis)figurements, which could be covered up or ignored at times but never completely discarded. One can win access to Hollywood and high society by demonstrating flexibility of identity, but complete assimilation is prevented by the fact that one's roots can always be revealed and used as a weapon. At his most lauded, in *Animal Crackers*, Groucho arrives at Dumont's house as Captain Spaulding, and the society guests join in singing the song "Hooray for Captain Spaulding, The African Explorer." After one of their cheers, Groucho quickly asks, "Did someone call me schnorrer?" (19). The Marx family would recognize that Groucho's grandfather Levy "Lafe" Schoenberg, father of Minnie Marx and Al Shean, had been a schnorrer—a Jewish beggar who traded tales for goods—in Germany before moving his family to America. But for most audience members, the line is a throwaway remark—which it is, only it is a throwaway remark which briefly reveals Groucho's deep-seated fear that his dexterous play of identity could fall apart should society attack his ethnic origins.

If the Marx Brothers had anything, it was timing. Had they attempted to become comics in earlier vaudeville, they would have encountered difficulties as they were not the most proficient at straight-forward ethnic mimicry—their act depended on the use of stereotype combined with a wink and a nod, to let the audience know that they were conscious of the act. Had they come later, Jews were more common in the entertainment business but had to hide their ethnicity due to the rising anti-Semitism of the 1930s. In the words of Most, "[b]y the late 1930s, Jews had disappeared from view onstage because they had become