Racial Performance at Sea: Race, Region, and Empire on the *Empress of Australia*

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Abstract

This article examines the 1928–1929 world cruise of the *Empress of Australia*, a ship owned by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company. Drawing upon concert programs, passenger accounts, Canadian Pacific official publications, and historical newspapers, it focuses on a concert that happened while the ship was at sea. It examines three songs—"Ol' Man River," "Hawaiian Memories," and "Chu Chin Chow"—to show how nostalgia for the American South found purchase beyond US borders next to representations of a mysterious "Orient" and tropical Pacific. Situating this voyage within the larger context of Canadian nationhood and the Canadian Pacific's investment in the British empire, I argue that the combination of these songs on a ship bound for sites of white empire did two things. One, it reassured white passengers that the racial order of the Southern past would continue in the present. Second, it reinforced their experiences in China, Hawai'i, and other stops during the cruise. Through their depiction of Black folks and Asian people as submissive and alien, these songs collectively romanticized and exoticized people of color and the places they inhabited—whether living in the wake of slavery in the American South or under US and British imperialism in the Pacific. Ultimately, this article demonstrates the importance of the transnational for understanding the export of nostalgic representations of the American South and how they adopted new meaning outside of a US context.

Racial Performance at Sea

On April 20th, 1929, passengers congregate on a Canadian cruise ship, eager to see the evening's entertainment. During the program that commences, they watch numerous

performances. They listen to the Empress Orchestra perform a selection titled "Oberon" and several song and dance numbers, and next they watch a scene called "Hawaiian Memories." Ship staff then present "Gymnasium Life," including a burlesque boxing match. After the organizer offers remarks, the orchestra plays a piece called "Chu Chin Chow." Three songs follow the orchestra, including "Ol' Man River." The concert concludes with "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "God Save the King."[1]

This concert took place during the sixth annual world cruise of the Canadian Pacific ship *S. S. Empress of Australia* in 1928–1929.[2] Between November 1928 and April 1929, the *Empress of Australia* traveled from the English port of Southampton to North America, making various stops, including Jerusalem and Hong Kong before traveling to Honolulu and eventually returning to Southampton. Canadian Pacific Railway had been offering ocean travel since the late nineteenth century and the *Empress* was part of a new fleet of steamships. As the ship traveled the globe, it offered entertainment for passengers both on land and at sea. The fundraising performance "Concert and Varied Entertainment in Aid of Seamen's Charities" held on April 20th, 1929, was one form of entertainment offered as the ship crossed the Atlantic during the final days of the voyage.[3] This article follows this 1928–1929 voyage, examining the performances and activities, both on and off the ship, that romanticized and exoticized people of color and the geographies they inhabited. Three songs—"Hawaiian Memories," "Ol' Man River," and "Chu Chin Chow"—stand out because they reassured passengers of the persistence of white supremacy in the present and future.

This article focuses on the April 20th concert to argue that "Hawaiian Memories," "Ol' Man River," and "Chu Chin Chow" together reinforce a racial hierarchy structured by imperialism and the legacies of slavery. The first section argues that the meaning of these songs in combination reflects the Canadian Pacific's investment in white Canadian nationhood and the British Empire. The remaining sections analyze the three songs and their meaning in relation to each other. The second section examines how "Ol' Man River" romanticized the American South through its portrayal of submissive African Americans outside of a plantation setting. The third section examines how "Chu Chin Chow" and "Hawaiian Memories" depicted Chinese individuals and the "East" as mysterious and Hawai'i as a utopia where plantations still existed, now in service of imperialism. These songs together drew a connective thread between the US South, Hawai'i, and China, between slavery and empire, and between Blackness and Asianness, reassuring white passengers that the racial order of the past would continue.

To show how the setting of this concert shaped its reception, I read the *Empress of Australia* as a site of racialization. Both Katherine McKittrick and Louis Chude-Sokei offer useful frameworks. In her work on the transatlantic slave trade, Katherine McKittrick argues that racism is a "spatial act."[4] The important question for McKittrick is not only the "how" and the "why" but also the "where of race": how processes of domination manifest through geography, and how racialized bodies map and are mapped onto space.[5] When discussing Black cultural producers' resistance to white

supremacist visions of technology, Louis Chude-Sokei revisits P. T. Barnum's display of the enslaved Black woman Joice Heth next to a chess-playing machine. Barnum showcased technological advancement (i.e., the chess-playing machine) through familiar notions of racial difference, specifically the idea of Blackness as nonhuman.[6] Like McKittrick, Chude-Sokei also focuses on the "where of race" and I draw on Chude-Sokei in this article when I examine the twentieth-century cruise ship as a technology that reinforced ideas about hierarchical racial difference through performance.[7] Looking at Canadian Pacific advertisements and historical newspapers that discuss both the *Empress of Australia* and the company that owned it, this article shows how the Canadian Pacific advanced a vision of its cruise ships as modern conveyors of white leisure. The modernity these ships represented was intricately linked to whiteness, a whiteness that passengers performed by participating in and listening to songs about people of color or the places where they lived.

Although the April 20th concert anchors this article, it is not the only performance under examination. Performance does not just refer to live entertainment such as this concert but also to passengers' participation in other activities and their encounters with the places and people the ship visited. Anita Gonzalez offers a useful analytical framework for unpacking performance. In her study of Caribbean cruise ships, Gonzalez defines performance as the interactions between crew members and passengers. For her, Black and Brown crew members are "laboring while entertaining."[8] Their labor is their performance. While this article does not focus on crew members, this concept of performance nonetheless applies. Passengers on the *Empress of Australia* performed their whiteness when they impersonated Japanese individuals during a masquerade ball, when they tried on Chinese pajamas, when they sang "Old Man River" as a "character song." They performed their whiteness every single day, on and off the ship.

The Empress *of Australia*, Canadian Nationalism, and the British Empire

This article ultimately builds upon scholarship on race and empire. Recent work such as Kornel Chang's *Pacific Connections* has taken up imperialism in studies of borderlands. Chang's book looks at the complicated relationship between the US and Canada within the larger context of white empire in the Pacific. This "imperial circuitry of migration, trade, and communication," shaped the relationship between the US and Canada and their respective investments in anti-Asian immigration policies and transnational white solidarity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[9] "The story of the US-Canadian borderlands" is indeed about a "world in motion," and the *Empress of Australia* illustrates just how integral these vessels were.[10] As Canadian Pacific publications illustrate, the company grew from a desire to expand the country westward and maintain its whiteness while situating Canada as an important player in the British Empire. I argue that by bringing its passengers to sites of white empire and offering an onboard program of songs that included "Ol' Man River," "Hawaiian

Memories," and "Chiu Chin Chow," Canadian Pacific participated in a "Pacific connection" whereby Canadian Pacific and its cruises enabled passengers to romanticize and exoticize people of color in real life.

The *Empress of Australia* was a 21,400-ton ship owned by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company.[11] Founded following Canadian Confederation in 1867, the Canadian Pacific was a symbol of a new, modern nation united through technological advancement. In what A. A. den Otter calls a "technological nationalism," the company developed from a desire to use technology to unite Canada.[12] The construction of a transcontinental railroad by the same name (CPR) was the first step in realizing this mission. By the railroad's final completion in 1885, this unification process was underway.[13] Connecting the eastern provinces to the West was paramount; according to Kenneth Holland, plans to construct the railroad during the 1870s convinced British Columbia to join the confederation.[14] Underlining this language of unification was a desire to conquer a supposedly untamed and uninhabited landscape, which, according to den Otter, made Canada "less British and more American."[15] Canada (like the US) perceived the West as ideal for white settlement at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty, and saw its railroad as an opportunity to make this a reality.[16]

Apart from its nation-building agenda, the Canadian Pacific also invested in the British Empire. Providing a scenic experience over land for European tourists on their way to China and Japan, its railroad not only united the country but also, according to den Otter, "located Canada strategically between Europe and Asia, thus enhancing its position in the British Empire."[17] The company's ocean liners also supported British imperialism. This was clear from the name of its *Empress* line. After beginning its transpacific service in 1887, the company four years later debuted its first trio of *Empresses*: *Empress of India*, *Empress of China*, and the *Empress of Japan*.[18] The ships were literal vessels of empire that connected Great Britain to its settler nations and Pacific markets. The Canadian Pacific viewed itself as "the visible connection between ourselves as Canadian citizens and the Throne of that vast Empire."[19]

The company also supported imperialism through the language of modernity. It did this by juxtaposing its fleet of *Empresses* and the places they traversed. Since its 1922 debut, Canadian Pacific and Canadian, Australian, and American newspapers advertised the *Empress of Australia* as a luxurious hotel on the seas. Its modern features were particularly appealing, such as the use of oil for fuel, which the company declared "a modern touch that insures cool cleanliness in the tropics."[20] In fact, this juxtaposition of "cleanliness" and the "tropics" was intentional. The architects of the *Empress* line had considered the tropical climate when creating a promenade on the deck and rooms that were "large, airy, and well ventilated."[21] The ship provided what the "tropics" did not: coolness and cleanliness. This juxtaposition between the ships and their ports continued throughout Canadian Pacific's annual world cruises. Frequently described as "white empresses," Canadian Pacific ships were enveloped in white modernity against a racialized "otherness."[22] When it came to white world

supremacy, such ships were both the means of conveyance and a site of identity construction.

Canadian Pacific operated as part of a larger network of rail/ship/hotel packages during the early twentieth century. Passenger travel on cruise ships was possible due to the emergence of steam during the nineteenth century. In contrast to sail, steam ensured more predictable arrival/departure times and a faster experience for passengers.[23] Canadian Pacific was among a host of companies that capitalized on this technological development and paired cruise ships with other modes of transportation to maximize passengers' comfort. Some cruise ships were part of agribusiness corporations. This was the case with the United Fruit Company, which used steamships to transport not only bananas from the Caribbean to the US but also carry tourists to Caribbean destinations on the same ships. In addition to the ship itself, the United Fruit Company also provided two resort hotels.[24] Such companies incorporated passenger travel into an infrastructure originally used for the transport of products and workers.[25] What initially began as travel for health reasons (especially to tropical climates) turned into a broader culture of leisure travel, in which American and European companies quickly participated.[26] Although cruising in the twenty-first century is open to a range of socioeconomic classes—with more budget-friendly cruise lines such as Carnival existing alongside luxury cruise lines such as the Ritz-Carlton Yacht Collection—cruising during the early 1900s developed from a desire to cater to an elite class of traveler, one who had the time and money to vacation for months at a time.

Trains and hotels were also integral to this transportation infrastructure. While the Canadian Pacific began as a railroad company and gradually added sea travel to its operations, other companies started with a focus on steamships and either merged with or developed relationships with railroad companies. This was the case with the Alaska Steamship Company, which offered travel to Alaska by sea and then, taking advantage of its relationship with the Alaska Railroad, expanded to offer travel through Alaska by rail.[27] Hotels offered accommodation for rail and/or ship passengers who traveled over land or stopped at a port during a cruise. The use of hotels by railroad companies was very common and dates to the early nineteenth century, with companies such as London & Birmingham Railway establishing railway hotels (different from resort hotels where travelers stayed for an extended period) in 1839.[28] By the 1920s, railroad companies increased their construction or takeover of upscale resort hotels to compete with increased automobile travel, providing more luxury amenities (at the time) such as private bathrooms.[29]

The promise of modern, luxurious travel was no different during the 1928–1929 voyage. During the six-month cruise, passengers enjoyed a "luxuriously comfortable" travel experience and were "literally at home everywhere."[30] For a starting price of $1900, several types of accommodation were available, from luxury suites to more affordable staterooms. Of the 164 days spent at sea, 67 of those days were spent on land.[31] Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Honolulu were three of more than 70 ports the ship visited.[32] The ship had already stopped in Hong Kong and Honolulu in February and

March. The performances of "Chu Chin Chow" and "Hawaiian Memories" that preceded "Ol' Man River" therefore reflected passenger encounters that had already happened during stops in Hawai'i and China.

By 1928, Britain had firmly established its empire in East and Southeast Asia in and along the Pacific, partly due to its naval power and alliance with Japan following the Russo-Japanese War.[33] India had become central to Britain's dominance and came under British control in 1858.[34] Hong Kong had become an important port since Britain annexed it in 1842.[35] Britain also swept up Fiji, Singapore, and other Pacific Islands during the nineteenth century, sometimes by force, sometimes through purchase, and rarely (as was the case with Fiji) through voluntary relinquishment by local leaders.[36] Although Britain faced challenges to maintain influence throughout its settler colonies and territories, its empire was still intact by the 1928–1929 voyage.

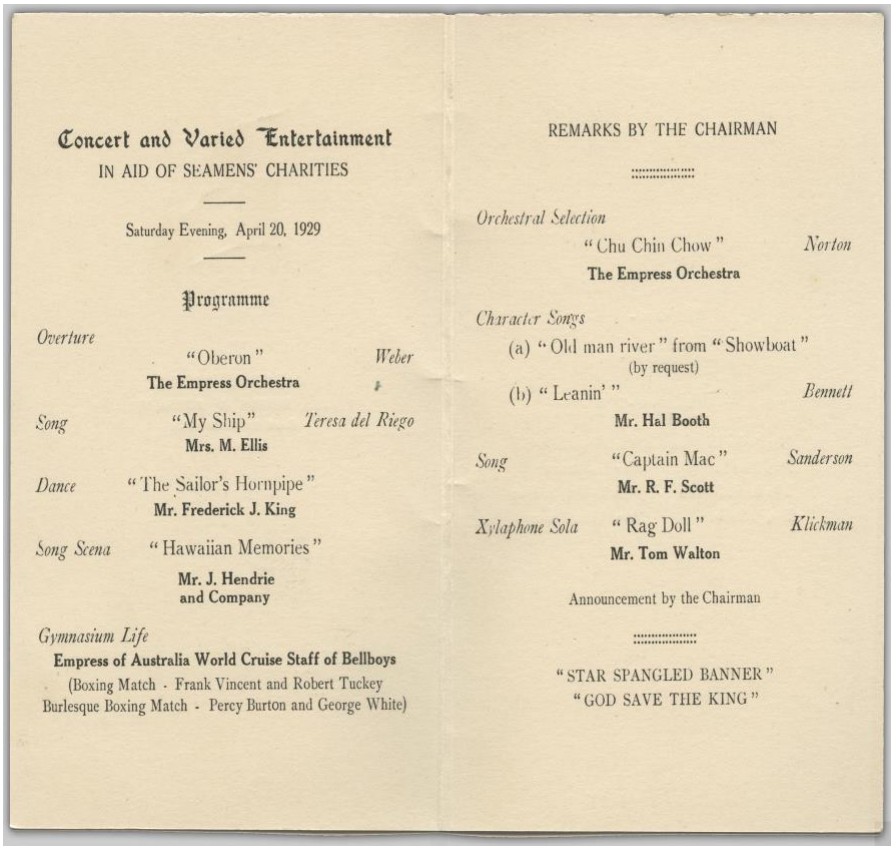
The US was another empire at work during the cruise. The period between 1898 and 1902 was a crucial turning point in US power in the Pacific, given its acquisition of Hawai'i, the Philippines, and Guam (also Puerto Rico and Cuba in the Caribbean) following the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars.[37] The US had already acquired Alaska from Russia in 1867, so its illegal overthrow of Hawai'i, and occupation of the Philippines and Guam, only furthered its imperial march into the Pacific.[38] Although many questioned US imperialism (especially after World War I), its Pacific empire was at its height at the time of this *Empress of Australia* cruise.[39]

The April 20th concert demonstrates how the ship functioned as a site of justifying empire. Josh Kun's concept of "audiotopia" is important for rethinking the concert through the lens of space.[40] Kun contends that music "is experienced not only as sound … but as a space that we can enter into, encounter, move around in, inhabit."[41] Here, I draw on concert programs and other details of onboard activities to examine the songs on the *Empress of Australia* as something that passengers created, experienced, and moved through. Although the program offers only brief descriptions of the songs, performers' intentions, and audience reception, the newspapers and Canadian Pacific publications provide passenger accounts and photographs from the cruise.

While the focus of this article is the combination of "Hawaiian Memories," "Chu Chin Chow," and "Ol' Man River," the other segments of the concert constructed a particular narrative about the US and Britain. The concert ended with "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "God Save the King" (*see* Fig. 1).[42] The inclusion of these two national anthems was very common on Canadian Pacific ships, and many concerts on board included either one or both anthems. The Canadian Pacific also expressed its duty to uphold the British Empire by how it treated some of its royal passengers. Later that year, Prince George of Britain traveled on the same ship on his way to Canada to serve as royal interpreter on the *H. M. S. Durban*.[43] There was much anticipation of his presence aboard the ship. According to one passenger as they recalled their time on the cruise, passengers gathered on the ship's deck (on which ship staff had laid a red carpet) to celebrate Prince George's arrival.[44] The Canadian Pacific was also vocal about its stance concerning US empire. In a 1929 publication titled *To the Orient*, the

company presented its position on US involvement in the Philippines. The pamphlet described the islands as "an object lesson in what nearly three decades of American efficiency have made out of the effects of the last three centuries."[45] During this port stop, the pamphlet assured passengers that they could see the supposed benefits of imperial rule on the Filipino people and their culture. The inclusion of "God Save the King" and "The Star-Spangled Banner" therefore reflected the passengers' and company's investment in the US and British empires. These anthems set the tone of the entire concert—that passengers should reminisce about the American South or Hawai'i and take pleasure in the "exotic" wares they purchased in China, but also honor the two nations from which many hailed (out of 353 passengers, 217 were American and 128 were British).[46]

Looking to the Past through "Ol' Man River"



Concert and Varied Entertainment
IN AID OF SEAMENS' CHARITIES

Saturday Evening, April 20, 1929

Programme

Overture "Oberon" *Weber*
The Empress Orchestra

Song "My Ship" *Teresa del Riego*
Mrs. M. Ellis

Dance "The Sailor's Hornpipe"
Mr. Frederick J. King

Song Scena "Hawaiian Memories"
Mr. J. Hendrie and Company

Gymnasium Life
Empress of Australia World Cruise Staff of Bellboys
(Boxing Match - Frank Vincent and Robert Tuckey
Burlesque Boxing Match - Percy Burton and George White)

REMARKS BY THE CHAIRMAN

Orchestral Selection
"Chu Chin Chow" *Norton*
The Empress Orchestra

Character Songs
(a) "Old man river" from "Showboat"
(by request)
(b) "Leanin'" *Bennett*
Mr. Hal Booth

Song "Captain Mac" *Sanderson*
Mr. R. F. Scott

Xylaphone Sola "Rag Doll" *Klickman*
Mr. Tom Walton

Announcement by the Chairman

"STAR SPANGLED BANNER"
"GOD SAVE THE KING"

Figure 1. Program for the concert on April 20, 1929, on the *Empress of Australia's* world cruise. Canadian Pacific Railway Company, "Concert and Varied Entertainment in Aid of Seamen's Charities." Image Credit: Wallace B. Chung and Madeline H. Chung Collection. Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library. CC-TX-238-3-1.

Although the program does not provide many details about the performance, it is clear that "Ol' Man River" romanticized the American South. This section first examines "Ol' Man River" in its original context—*Show Boat*—to argue that it depicted African

Americans as static, one-dimensional figures against an idyllic Southern backdrop, and portrayed a regional landscape whose racial logic persisted even in the absence of slavery. Then, it returns to the world of the Canadian Pacific to contend that this nostalgia continued when the song appeared on the *Empress of Australia*. The setting may have changed, but the song's message about Black submission and white supremacy found a new home at sea.

"Ol' Man River" originated from the musical *Show Boat*, first produced in London in 1928. Published initially as a book by Edna Ferber in 1926, it was the story of a white performance troupe on a riverboat called the *Cotton Blossom* that traveled along the Mississippi River between the 1880s and 1920s. The romance between two white characters, Magnolia and Ravenal, unfolded against a postbellum South where Blacks were static figures in the background.[47] *Show Boat* portrayed the postbellum South as a place where amicable Black people sang as they worked and whites fell in love. Audiences fell in love *with* the South as they watched white characters fall in love *in* the South. Yet the real South—where Blacks experienced violence for any transgressions—remained hidden behind the smokescreen of nostalgia.

Nostalgia emerged as a longing for a previous time, which "Ol' Man River" invites through its reference to the Mississippi River and Black labor. This nostalgia has saturated American culture and moved around the world since the mid-nineteenth century. Southern studies scholars have used a transnational lens to explore this nostalgia in film, literature, song, and consumer products. Karen Cox and others argue that cultural producers used the mammy figure and other stereotypical depictions of Black people to sell nostalgic images of the South.[48] Even as some forms morphed over time, these representations preserved the image of Black submission.[49]

"Ol' Man River" participated in this nostalgia by depicting the Mississippi River as a calming fixture of the Southern landscape, just like the dependable Black individuals that *Show Boat* portrayed. Lyrics from "colored folks work while de white folk play" to "git-tin no rest till de judgement day" suggest frustration with their lot in life as laborers for whites.[50] Despite other lyrics suggesting flight from these conditions ("let me go 'way from de Mississippi/ let me go 'way from de white men boss"), the musical ultimately portrayed Black people as frozen in time and always there for white people.[51] Like the river, they "keeps on rollin along."[52]

The character Joe also reproduces this romanticized view of Black life in the South. As a Black stevedore, Joe represented the faithful slave archetype under a new guise. He magnified the lives of white characters, always singing in the background or hauling bales of cotton but, as Todd Decker observes, with "no role in the plot and lacking even a last name."[53] Although multiple actors played Joe in *Show Boat*, Paul Robeson became most closely associated with the character (and the song) after first performing in the 1928 London stage production and then in the 1936 film.[54] Regardless of the performer, the character Joe lulled audiences into a nostalgic slumber with his soothing voice. By singing "Ol' Man River," Joe reassured white audiences that African Americans would always be there in times of joy and sorrow. He assuaged

anxieties about the future, promising the preservation of a racial hierarchy (even if it looked differently) where African Americans remained submissive.

On the *Empress of Australia*, "Ol' Man River" reproduced this image of Black labor in the South. The song was part of a segment called "Character Songs," where a Mr. Hal Booth performed "Ol' Man River" and a song by T. C. Sterndale Bennett about the life of a farmer called "Leanin'."[55] As a "character song," "Ol' Man River" referenced the character Joe (who sang the song throughout the musical) and the Mississippi River, "an important, but crucially a silent, character in the lyric," as Decker argues.[56] Just as "Leanin'" an image of a farmer, "Ol' Man River" invoked an image of Joe from *Show Boat*. The program even mentions *Show Boat* in the song description to instruct passengers to envision the Mississippi River, the character Joe, or at the very least, the American South. Even if passengers had not seen the musical in the two years since its debut, they may have read Edna Ferber's novel, heard the song on the radio, or seen advertisements about the musical. It was familiar enough for someone to request it, as the program stated (*see* Fig. 1).[57] When passengers requested this song, they requested a setting and character representative of a romanticized South.

Passenger participation in this April 20th concert reflected a larger practice aboard these ships of crew members such as the Director of Entertainment calling on passengers for assistance in organizing events. Hal Booth not only sang "Old Man River" but also probably helped plan this concert to some degree. Having a mixture of staff and passengers participate in concerts was not uncommon. Sometimes passengers organized events amongst themselves, for example when passengers asked a reverend to give a lecture on Christmas in the Holy Land (this same reverend later performed a vocal solo during two additional concerts).[58] Passengers therefore held multiple roles: audience, performer, and organizer. Their reception therefore emerges not just from their position as audience, but also in their participation. The same passengers who may have comprised the audience during one concert became the performers during another show. One thing was clear: Passengers perceived people of color as objects to take on and off at will.

Yet how much Booth impersonated the character Joe is unclear. Did he just sing the song, or did he wear a costume or alter his physical features in any way? In other words, was he in blackface? While it is unclear how the performance actually looked without the discovery of photographs or other description of this concert in the archive, photographs from previous cruises on this ship illustrate that racial impersonation was common. A photographic record from the 1927–1928 world cruise includes one photograph depicting a birthday celebration aboard the ship for George Washington. It shows a group of individuals in costume posing in front of an American flag hanging on the wall. The individual in the center is dressed as Uncle Sam, and a few others wear headdresses and other attire that clearly shows them impersonating Native Americans.[59] Through their clothing, these individuals were, to borrow a term from Philip Deloria, "playing Indian" to construct a narrative of the past and US nationhood.[60]

Just a month prior to the April 20th concert, passengers participated in the Orchestra's Benefit Vaudeville and Minstrel Show. Organized by the Directress of Entertainment, this show was not spontaneous but happened after multiple rehearsals and much planning by the chairman and committee members, resulting in the orchestra raising almost one thousand dollars.[61] Although the *Empress Cruise News* did not describe the show in detail, the fact that other events aboard the ship such as the Washington Birthday celebration the previous year involved participants impersonating people of color suggests it is likely that passengers impersonated African Americans during this minstrel show, whether through dress, paint, or speech.

This minstrel show comprised a larger cultural landscape of blackface in which Black performers also participated. As David Gilbert explains, Black performers used their blackness to prove their authenticity on stage. He writes, "Black musicians in New York traded on preexisting ideas of inherent racial differences as they commodified their performances into a recognizable product to sell in popular entertainment markets."[62] They capitalized on audience desire for authenticity through their real Blackness: They were not white actors with burnt cork on their faces but real African Americans who maintained their Blackness after exiting the stage. On the *Empress of Australia*, of course, white passengers performed in these shows and sat in the audience. They would not have expected an authentic version of Blackness in the form of a real Black person. Nevertheless, they made up a growing population of white audiences in the US and other white Western nations who wanted to see real Blackness on stage.

When Hal Booth sang "Ol' Man River" during the April concert, he may or may not have painted his face black. What is clear, however, is that passengers had watched and participated in a minstrel show just a month earlier, so Black caricatures may still have been on their minds as they listened to Booth sing. Passengers certainly put on costumes for other occasions, such as during a Masquerade Ball.[63] Even the burlesque boxing match during the April 20th concert was part of this culture of costume activities on the ship.[64]

As Booth sang "Ol' Man River," he reproduced a familiar vision of African Americans like the fictional Joe acquiescing to white control, where the racial logic of slavery persisted in spite of its demise. Yet this nostalgia for the American South appeared next to representations that romanticized Hawai'i and exoticized the "East." Combined with these other performances, "Ol' Man River" also reassured passengers that this racial order would persist in the present and the future, that other people of color—even if seen as alien—could be managed through imperialism.

Preserving Racial Hierarchy through "Chu Chin Chow" and "Hawaiian Memories"

This section examines "Ol' Man River" in relation to "Hawaiian Memories" and "Chu Chin Chow." It first examines "Ol' Man River" in relation to "Chu Chin Chow" to illuminate how "Ol' Man River" assuaged anxieties about Chinese people and the

mysterious "East," anxieties that Canada reinforced through its anti-Asian immigration laws even as the Canadian Pacific relied on Chinese labor and constructed China as a must-see tourist destination. I then examine how "Ol' Man River" and "Hawaiian Memories" encouraged passengers to long for two American landscapes—one, existing in the wake of slavery, the other, a site of US empire in the Pacific. In combination, these three songs represented African Americans, Chinese, and Pacific Islanders in stereotypical ways. Yet the setting mattered as well. As passengers on a cruise, they saw in real life the people and places they imagined while listening to "Hawaiian Memories" and "Chu Chin Chow." Performed on the ship, these songs together reassured them that people of color (whom white tourists viewed as objects of fascination and white settler nations marked as unwanted immigrants) living in the territories and commercial ports of the US and British empires would, like African Americans living in the US South, submit to white rule.

Before Mr. Booth sang "Ol' Man River," the Empress Orchestra played "Chu Chin Chow."[65] The program does not offer many details but does name the composer, clearly referring to the 1916 musical *Chu Chin Chow* by Oscar Ashe, with music by Frederick Norton. *Chu Chin Chow* had already been around for thirteen years, with stage productions starting in London in 1916, American versions beginning in 1917, and a silent screen adaptation appearing in 1923.[66] Many passengers probably saw the musical, film, or at least read about it in the newspaper. They would have connected the music on the ship to the characters, scenes, and overall plot.

According to Brian Singleton, *Chu Chin Chow* was a widely popular musical set in Baghdad about a robber named Abu Hasan who poses as a Chinese merchant named Chu Chin Chow.[67] First appearing in London during World War I, *Chu Chin Chow* transported British audiences from wartime hardship to an imagined geography and "provided a comfortable familiarity for audiences at a time of national anxiety."[68] At the center is the titular character Chu Chin Chow, the "mysterious mandarin from China."[69] Throughout the musical, Chu Chin Chow emerges as a devious man who disguises himself to rob others. A slave named Zahrat calls him "the son of Satan" as she recounts how he kidnapped and forced her to act as his spy "on pain of torture."[70] The musical not only portrays Chinese men as alien through Chu Chin Chow but also paints the "East" as a mystical place with decadent palaces, beautiful women, and merchants selling exotic wares on crowded streets; in other words, it presented an orientalist vision of a mysterious "East."

Edward Said explains orientalism in his groundbreaking work of the same name: "There are Westerners and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled."[71] For Said, this domination depended on constructions of the East and its people, on "a growing systematic knowledge in Europe about the Orient, knowledge reinforced by the colonial encounter as well as by the widespread interest in the alien and unusual."[72] *Chu Chin Chow* reproduced these ideas through its characterization of the title character as an evil imposter who subjugates innocent

women and of Baghdad as a mythical place. In many of the stage and screen productions, white actors in yellowface played the roles of Arab and Asian characters. As Krystyn Moon argues, a combination of "dialect, makeup, posture, and costuming comprised yellowface; when combined, these items marked the Chinese body as inferior and foreign."[73] Through yellowface, the actors constructed the "Orient" as a site of entertainment and its inhabitants as puppetlike figures.

This orientalist vision was part of the musical's popularity, and many passengers on the *Empress of Australia* had likely witnessed this musical before the voyage. In the years between its initial staging in London and this concert at sea, *Chu Chin Chow* appeared in full and partial form in the US and Canada. One year following its 1916 premiere, it appeared at the Manhattan Opera House as "an oriental fantasy, a dramatic tale of ancient Bagdad, full of thrills, mystery and wonderful pageants."[74] It was an "oriental dream" with an "unending accompaniment of music by Frederick Norton—tuneful and very English music—but they cut a man up in one act of the play and sew him up for burial in another."[75] The music was also a memorable feature of a 1921 stage production in Delaware. The local paper described it as an "extravaganza of Orient" with "soft strains of Oriental music" that delighted audiences.[76] As the Empress orchestra played a selection from *Chu Chin Chow,* it transported passengers to the theater or private parlors where they had likely watched, listened to, or read about the same music and imagined the supposedly mystical "East."

The Empress orchestra, however, also transported passengers to a setting which they had experienced in February: China. The ship spent ten days in China, stopping in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Chinwangtao.[77] Passengers consumed ideas about China as exotic before even leaving the ship. One activity on board involved trying on costumes. This was such a notable activity that an American newspaper included photographs showing white women on the cruise wearing "mandarin coats from China" and Chinese pajamas.[78] As they struck a playful pose, the women rendered Chinese culture an amusement.

In addition to this costume activity, other events involving white women wearing clothing from the "Orient" happened. On March 14th, cruise staff held a "Japanese Pageant and Mandarin Ball," during which they encouraged passengers to wear clothing they had purchased in Asia.[79] Costumes that won prizes included a "Japanese Lady of Rank," a "Japanese Mother" and a "Coolie in the rain."[80] Passengers knew well in advance that these sorts of activities would happen, as official company literature encouraged them to pack costumes.[81] These costume activities aligned with the company's understanding of people of color and their different cultures, as evident in Canadian Pacific promotional material. For instance, the pamphlet advertising this world cruise described Bangkok as "amazingly cosmopolitan but intensively Oriental" and a "kaleidoscope picture of the Far East, a multitude of races and costumes."[82] The Canadian Pacific clearly saw foreign, nonwhite people as "costume," as something they could purchase, try on, and keep as a memento of their trip (and of their whiteness).

Off the ship, passengers continued this racialized consumption during port stops. "Here the jaded traveler in search of new worlds to conquer," wrote a Virginia newspaper of Hong Kong in 1928, "sees Chinese junks, queer looking craft with eyes in their bows."[83] The advertisement depicted China as drastically different from the West. The fantasy of "conquering" Asia was a reality in which Western travelers could participate. After traveling to Hong Kong, passengers could see the British Empire at work. They need look no further than Chinese children riding on bicycles, an image that a 1929 Virginia newspaper described as "Young China Modernized."[84]

As white tourists experienced the people and places of the "East," Western nations took measures to prevent immigration from these countries. Canada implemented laws to exclude Chinese immigrants while simultaneously depending on their labor. Zhongping Chen notes how the Canadian government tried to prevent Chinese immigrants from working on the railroad during its construction in the 1880s.[85] Organizations like the Anti-Chinese Association of British Columbia led a movement to prevent Chinese immigration altogether.[86] Over the next several years, the government passed laws restricting Chinese immigration, and the transportation company lobbied for their removal.[87] Anti-Chinese sentiment in Canada persisted into the twentieth century and especially increased during the 1920s when white men returned from World War I and grew hostile towards Chinese workers.[88] Periodicals like *Danger: The Anti-Asiatic Weekly* and organizations such as the Asiatic Exclusion League fueled racist attitudes.[89] The Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 reflected a continued drive to preserve a white Canada.[90]

By itself, the Empress Orchestra's performance of "Chu Chin Chow" evoked memories of watching the musical or listening to its music on the radio. It may have also elicited anxieties about Asian immigrants entering white countries and taking resources. Next to "Ol' Man River," however, a different message materialized. Similar to minstrel shows where actors sang "Ol' Man River" and played derogatory figures like "The Hungry Chinaman," the *Empress of Australia* concert placed these contrasting images together—one of a Chinese thief, the other of a steady, reliable African American worker.[91] Yet the setting of the concert meant that these two songs worked in tandem. Hearing "Ol' Man River" and "Chu Chin Chow" in the same concert did not spark fear but assurance that, like the dependable Black workers of the American South, people of the "Orient" could be controlled through white empire—and passengers saw the supposed benefits of imperialism when visiting Hong Kong and witnessing Chinese people consume modern, Western goods.

"Ol' Man River" also worked in tandem with another segment of this 1929 concert. Earlier in the concert, Mr. J. Hendrie and company performed a piece called "Hawaiian Memories."[92] Unlike "Chu Chin Chow," "Hawaiian Memories" did not appear on the program with the name of its composer. The identity of Mr. Hendrie is also unclear, although *The Empress Cruise News* mentioned that he had performed during another concert on the ship in January.[93] Like Mr. Booth, he was most likely a passenger who had been involved in the planning as well as execution of these

concerts. What is clear, however, is the nostalgia that "Hawaiian Memories" evoked, its invitation to reminisce about Hawai'i, which passengers had experienced the previous month when the ship made a stop at Honolulu.

In addition to nostalgia for the Southern landscape, this 1929 concert also evoked nostalgia for a tropical paradise. Scholars have linked nostalgia to imperialism. Some locate "colonial nostalgia"—what Patricia Lorcin understands as the "loss of empire"—in the aftermath of decolonization.[94] Colonial nostalgia is, in simplest terms, an empire's response to losing control over a formerly colonized territory.[95] However, the US and Great Britain were still empires during this 1928–1929 voyage, so "colonial nostalgia" does not fully explain what was happening on the ship. When passengers listened to "Hawaiian Memories," they did not long for past empires, but current ones, the territories of which they had just seen weeks before the concert. Instead of longing for something that was no more, passengers longed for people and places they had just encountered.

Although there is little information in the concert program about what happened during the "Hawaiian Memories" performance, information about the port in Honolulu during this voyage and other cruises provide clues about how the song depicted Hawaii. The song title itself is the first clue. The name "Hawaiian Memories" encourages the audience to literally remember Hawai'i, which these passengers could do since they had just visited Honolulu. Lady Williams-Taylor felt this deep sense of longing when she took this same cruise a year earlier, remembering how "Hawaii wound itself around our hearts, and to its haunting 'Aloha Oe' we saw it fade away through regretful tears."[96] Canadian Pacific advertisements frequently referenced "Aloha Oe" as a song that passengers heard while visiting Hawai'i during the shore excursions or during dinner entertainment aboard the ship.[97] Originally created by Queen Liliuokalani in 1878 and then transcribed by the queen during her house arrest in 1895 after the US dethroned her, "Aloha Oe" was a site of resistance—notes Adria L. Imada—to US imperialism in Hawaii.[98] Referenced by a transportation company whose ships brought white tourists to sites of empire, the subversive "Aloha Oe" became, in the eyes of Lady Williams-Taylor, repackaged as nostalgia.[99]

"Aloha Oe" indeed appeared as part of another performance of "Hawaiian Memories" a few years later. Sometimes concerts happened during port stops, as evident during a 1935 *Empress of Britain* port stop at Chinwangtao. Similar to the 1929 concert, this show included a range of music and dance performances. However, this time the concert program provided more description of "Hawaiian Memories." Again a "song scena," it specifically included the songs "Lovely Hawaii," "O Those Beautiful Maids" and "Aloha Oe" sung by the Empress Chorus (including two soloists).[100]

Hawaiian shore excursions reproduced this nostalgia during the 1928–1929 voyage. The ship stopped in Honolulu and Hilo between March 20th and March 22nd.[101] Once ashore, passengers took an automobile tour of Honolulu and Waikiki Beach, and saw the Fern Forest and the Kilauea Volcano.[102] They encountered native Hawaiians—"the most affable of people"—and visited sugar, banana, and pineapple

plantations.[103] The *Empress Cruise News* noted: "Once seen, the islands are not forgotten; they remain in memory, calling the traveler to return."[104] Passengers also expressed this longing for return: "As our ship left we counted numberless leis being wafted over the side as we passed Diamond Head; each symbolic of a desire deep in the heart of one of us to return some day and stay longer."[105] As passengers threw their leis over the side of the ship, they were already remembering the volcanoes, plantations, and other sights they visited. Hawai'i was indeed a memory, as "Hawaiian Memories" implied, that pulled at their heartstrings and made them want to return. Some returned on later cruises or even moved there.[106]

As Gerald Horne discusses, Hawaiian plantations thrived after the American Civil War due to the destruction of Louisiana sugar plantations.[107] As the twentieth century drew closer, white plantation owners in Hawai'i depended more on imported labor, and debates arose about what type of labor force would be most economically advantageous—newly free African Americans from the South or workers from China or Japan.[108] By the time the US annexed Hawai'i in 1898—"a gigantic step toward the construction of a 'White Pacific,'" notes Horne—the association of plantation labor and racial others was firmly intact.[109] Efforts to deny Indigenous sovereignty in service of white empire unfolded within a context where Chinese and Japanese laborers replaced African Americans on plantations, where the boundaries between Blackness and Asianness blurred. Within a setting where white settlers established plantations dependent on exploited labor and shaped by the racial ideology of the South, slavery (in a different form) and settler colonialism persisted in this new site of US empire.

Together, "Ol' Man River" and "Hawaiian Memories" encouraged passengers to romanticize two landscapes—one, where African Americans occupied submissive positions (sometimes on the very plantations where they or their ancestors were enslaved), the other, where Asians labored on new plantations in the Pacific. They witnessed the Southern plantation beyond the borders of the continental US, an export from the South with a different racial makeup. They witnessed a transformation in plantation labor that was already underway in the South, where Chinese individuals worked on plantations and disrupted the Black-white binary.[110]

Conclusion

The performances of "Ol' Man River," "Chu Chin Chow," and "Hawaiian Memories" illuminate the complex marriage of race, region, and empire during the early twentieth century. By itself, "Ol' Man River" captured a Southern nostalgia industry that crossed US borders and adopted new meanings. It represented a blurring of temporalities, a desire to look back in time to understand the present. Alongside "Hawaiian Memories" and "Chu Chin Chow," however, "Ol' Man River" represented not only a romanticized Southern landscape but also a Pacific geography structured by white empire. As passengers on the *Empress of Australia* listened to "Ol' Man River" and envisioned the character Joe singing along the Mississippi River, as they listened to "Hawaiian

Memories" and longed for the islands where native Hawaiians sang "Aloha Oe," as they heard "Chu Chin Chow" and pictured the Chinese as mysterious and exotic, they consumed ideas about racial difference. Together, all three songs invited passengers to imagine people of color as fixtures of romanticized and exoticized landscapes, whether it be the South, Hawai'i, or in China, whether as a residue of slavery or an apparatus of empire.

The setting of this concert is just as important as the combination of songs. The role of the cruise ship animates the relationship between the transnational and the export of nostalgia. The Canadian Pacific's marketing of the *Empress of Australia* as a modern home at sea is key. It advertised this cruise ship as a utopian escape from the everyday realities of life; it was both a temporary home and an escape from one's permanent home. For voyages such as the world cruise, the ship indeed became a sort of "home" as the cruise lasted several months. As "home," the cruise ship served as a site of transporting people and ideas about racial difference. Always traveling between nations, the *Empress of Australia* facilitated not just the circulation of ideas but also the reception of those ideas. At sea, passengers listened to "Chu Chin Chow" and "Hawaiian Memories" but had already visited the "Orient" and this imagined tropical paradise during the port stops at Shanghai and Honolulu. The concert a month later confirmed what they had seen in real life and was thus the crew members' and passengers' response to these encounters.

The *Empress of Australia* was therefore an incubator of a particular strand of white supremacy, one embedded in the language of modernity and connected to a worldwide tourism industry that enabled white supremacy to expand its global reach in new ways. It encouraged everyday citizens of Western nations to normalize racist ideas through their consumption of racial "otherness" at sea and on land, to participate in the imperial project that indexed people of color and imagined them and the spaces they occupied as in need of uplift. Through cruise ships like the *Empress of Australia*, white supremacy was on the move.

Notes

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