Fixing race: visual representations of African Americans at the World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893

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ABSTRACT Cooks examines the Johnson family cartoon series published in Harper’s Weekly during the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Her analysis addresses the series’ caricatures of African-American fairgoers in the context of the landmark exposition, a national celebration of America’s cultural leadership and accomplishment since its ‘discovery’ by Christopher Columbus in 1492. The Johnson family cartoons are remarkable because they are the only racist images in the issues of Harper’s Weekly in which they appear, highlighting the importance of their message that African Americans were an unwanted presence at an event that served to solidify America’s national identity. The series provides insight into some of the social anxieties of white Americans regarding the presence of African Americans at the exposition. It also explores white American discomfort with racial and economic diversity through the antics of the imaginary yet symbolically representative Johnson family. Cooks’s discussion includes a visual analysis of the cartoons and comparisons of the Johnson family images with photographs and illustrations of African-American labourers at the fair and with depictions of proper behaviour by white American fairgoers. This examination of the cartoon series questions the roles of race, class and social hierarchy in turn-of-the-century America, and illustrates that acceptable mainstream attitudes clung to ideas of racial prejudice.

KEYWORDS African Americans, behaviour, Blacks, caricature, cartoons, expositions, illustration, labour, race, stereotypes, World’s Columbian Exposition

At the turn of the twentieth century, racist cartoons and ethnic caricatures were expected and enjoyed by the readership of some of America’s most popular magazines. Although Harper’s Weekly, with its lofty subtitle ‘A Journal of Civilization’, positioned itself as a more serious magazine than journals such as Harper’s Bazar and Puck that routinely printed degrading caricatures, it too occasionally published racist material. During the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Harper’s Weekly published the fifteen-part Saturday cartoon series about the fictional Johnson family by
illustrator Peter Newell. Newell’s series is in keeping with the popular nineteenth-century caricature tradition regarded as acceptable among his peers in the mainstream American press. However, the Johnson family cartoons are remarkable because they are the only racist images in the issues of Harper’s Weekly in which they appear, highlighting the importance of their message that African Americans were an unwanted presence at an event that served to solidify America’s national identity.¹ There has not yet been an analysis of the anomalous Johnson family series and its unique function in the context of Harper’s Weekly.²

The Johnson family series, published from 15 July to 11 November 1893, depicts Mr and Mrs Johnson, a former slave and his wife, and their son Peter, touring the World’s Columbian Exposition. The cartoons provide insight into some of the social anxieties of white Americans with regard to the presence of African Americans at the exposition. They also explore white American fears of racial and economic diversity through the antics of the imaginary yet symbolically representative Johnson family.

During the World’s Columbian Exposition, the world turned to Chicago to see evidence of the leadership and social progress of the United States, and the popular press dedicated many feature stories and illustrations to the ongoing events of the fair. In this context Harper’s Weekly’s presentation of the Johnson family cartoons functioned in three key ways. First, the cartoons were part of a larger national effort to ‘fix’ unstable categories of race as the potential for black economic opportunities and social equity increased. As illustrations of the inappropriate presence and ridiculous behaviour of African Americans, the series instructed white readers on how to be white Americans and how easily to identify behaviour that was

¹ In the fifteen issues of Harper’s Weekly that published the Johnson family cartoons, no other caricatures of any ethnic or racial group were printed. Newell published three illustrations unrelated to the series in two of the same Harper’s Weekly issues in which the Johnson family cartoons appear. The first was the cover image of the 23 September 1893 (no. 1918) issue illustrating the first instalment of the short story ‘The Moonshiners at Hoho-Hebee Falls’ by Charles Egbert Craddock (i.e. Mary N. Murfree). The second image, published in the same issue, accompanies the article ‘Free Food for Chicago’s Poor’, and Newell’s third, published in the 30 September 1893 (no. 1919) issue, illustrates the second instalment of the Craddock story. All three depict white people naturalistically and do not contain any of the elements of humour or debased exaggeration that define caricature.

different and essentially 'black'. The firm establishment of these racial categories was particularly crucial to the formalization of segregation in the 1890s.

During slavery the intimate daily routines of Whites and enslaved Blacks, from domestic service to the monitoring and punishing of slaves, made contact between the races necessary. However, in the North, the system of segregation was prevalent before the Civil War. According to historian C. Vann Woodward, with the ‘backing of legal and extra-legal codes, the system permeated all aspects of Negro life in the free states by 1860’. This advanced system functioned in the North through exclusion of Blacks from political parties, train cars, theatres, hotels, hospitals, churches as well as other public spaces. From the 1860s to approximately the end of the century, segregation became more controlling and divisive regionally, beginning with the northern and northeastern states and moving downward throughout the South. At the end of the nineteenth century, segregation laws, particularly targeting train cars, came firmly into effect. Grace Elizabeth Hale explains:

Whites created the culture of segregation in large part to counter black success, to make a myth of absolute racial difference, to stop the rising. ... Racial essentialism, the conception of sets of personal characteristics as biologically determined racial identities, grew in popularity among whites in tandem with the rise of the new black middle class and its increasing visibility, especially in cities.

Racial difference justified segregation and protected the freedoms that white supremacists enjoyed. Beyond the slave-based cultural economy, racial lines of difference had to be established to maintain the social order. As Mark Smith states: ‘Put simply, many whites worried that blackness was in danger of becoming whiteness.’ Drawing social lines of racial determination provided the sense of safety that Whites longed for. Newell’s cartoon series provided visual material to reinforce these lines.

Through the cartoon’s ‘humour’ and exploitation of racist stereotypes, readers could learn about the rules of behaviour in the public as opposed to the private sphere. The exposition was an important late nineteenth-century public exhibition space in which rules of behaviour were learned, practised and broken. The Johnson family functioned as part of this pedagogical

4 It must be noted that, in 1892, Homer Plessy challenged one such law, Act No. 111, the Separate Car Law of 1890 in Louisiana. The 1896 decision of Plessy v. Ferguson, handed down three years after the appearance of Newell’s cartoons in *Harper’s Weekly*, legalized the concept of separate but equal accommodation for Blacks and Whites.
project to teach national, racial and class identification in the public sphere through counter-example. These cartoon depictions of unacceptable behaviour clarified American race relations under social Darwinism by arguing that African Americans had not made contributions in the nation’s past and had no place in the nation’s future.

Second, ironically, the Johnson family served as a kind of all-American family. Consisting of a heterosexual couple with a young son, the cartoon depicted a family structure with which many readers could identify. However, this identification was qualified by popular beliefs of racial difference. At the expense of African-American integrity and progress, the cartoon articulated insecurities that many white visitors to the fair may have experienced, and transposed them on to an exaggerated racial Other. At the same time, the cartoon positioned white viewers at a level of the cultural hierarchy above the African-American family.

Third, through the series, white readers could take comfort in the efforts of the organizers of the exposition to exclude African-American contributions. The Johnson family presented African Americans as buffoons who could not understand what they encountered at the fair. Published concurrently in *Harper’s Weekly* were drawings and painted illustrations that underscored what many readers believed to be the rightful social function of African Americans, namely, to fulfil menial service positions. The tension between the coon-like role of the Johnson family, and the representation of real African-American people in supplementary text and pictures, constructed the argument that African Americans should live in servitude rather than be equal participants in the exposition and the ideal America it presented.

**African Americans in caricature**

The visual depiction of African Americans through caricature was not a new phenomenon in 1893. Although African Americans had been depicted through caricature since the seventeenth century, their distorted representations increased in popularity from the 1830s through the 1850s when the minstrel show developed in the North to become a popular national art. Eric Lott suggests that fundamental to the minstrel show was ‘cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and that made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure’.\(^7\) White blackface performers enjoyed ‘acting black’ while barring Blacks as performers and participants in public celebrations. This ironic presence and absence of blackness and black people reveals the schizophrenic negrophobic and negrophilic attitudes that Whites

had towards Blacks as they sought to define the attributes of Blacks while performing the blurred lines of race and class. Lisa Gitelman explains:

The white construction of minstrelsy’s ‘blackness’ possessed inherent contradictions: it played off a contrived sense of authenticity while it also relied upon counterfeiting. The form reinforced racial boundaries by denigrating black Americans, yet it also defiantly transgressed those boundaries for pleasure and profit in what had become marked as a lowbrow, ‘popular’ form of entertainment for the white working class.8

The blackface performance was an important formation of the visual economy of blackness that Newell exploits. Like the minstrel show, Newell’s caricatures deny African-American cultural contributions and reinscribe boundaries that protect an unstable white identity.

In the North, during the 1850s, the growing number of free Blacks increased anxiety among some Whites who feared competition from them in the labour market and the possibility that they would continue to make social gains towards eventual racial equality. Fearing the release of Blacks from slavery and the crumbling of the southern economy, visual and performative caricatures of African Americans by Whites proliferated, depicting a world of Blacks who enjoyed being slaves.9 Their political function was to convince viewers that keeping Blacks in slavery was not only the right thing to do, but the benevolent responsibility to a race of people who were not quite human enough to survive on their own.

The fear of black progress in the post-Reconstruction period resurfaced in the arts through the popularity of racist ‘coon songs’ and the visual depiction of black caricatures, such as the Johnson family, which served as projections of white male anxieties just as they had in the minstrel show. Gitelman observes:

Minstrelsy subverted the questions of racial essentialism on which it fed, providing a raucous catharsis for matters that seemed so pressing elsewhere in the American national scene: slavery, abolition, and Dred Scott helped form the context and complexion of the minstrel show; Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) would be context for the recorded coon song.10

The recorded ‘coon song’, a form made popular shortly after the technological development of the phonograph in 1877, was a derivative of the

9 These caricatures are evident in minstrel shows, popular art and fine art. See Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710–1940* (San Francisco: Bedford Arts/ Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art 1990) for a sample of these depictions.
10 Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines*, 133.
minstrel show. Without the presence of the racially identifiable minstrel performer, the recorded song freed sound as a signifier of blackness, causing confusion among white listeners. \(^{11}\) Dependence on sound to identify a singer as black meant that the identity of white singers who ‘sounded black’ could be masked. Because of anxieties about the increasing racial confusion, the visible markers of race became all the more important in the 1890s. The visual caricatures of African Americans such as Newell’s Johnson family harked back to the performed caricatures of the minstrel show to remove all doubt about what is easily recognizable as ‘authentically’ black.

Among the collection of minstrel characters, the most popular male types were Jim Crow, Rastus, Tom, Buck, Zip Coon, Uncle and Sambo. \(^{12}\) Newell’s depiction of Mr Johnson as an older African-American man, visually characterized as mostly bald with a fringe of grey hair, exploited the Uncle type. The Uncle is often well dressed in a formal uniform, an important attribute for depicting the black male body in a state of perpetual labour in the service of white people. This readiness to serve combined with an age well past a man’s labouring prime makes the Uncle a harmless, one-dimensional, dependable and loyal man. He is disciplined, well mannered and has a pleasant demeanour.

Like all the fictional black character types, the Uncle shares the characteristics of exaggerated facial features including oversized lips, often tinted bright pink or red to contrast with the brown of his skin. His eyes are sometimes shown as large saucer-like circles with the whites visible on the outer edges of the iris. The Uncle is drawn with particularly oversized teeth,

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 133–7.

an important element since he is frequently depicted with an impossibly large, open-mouthed smile. Smiles are an essential feature across character types to show the pleasure with which the slaves work in the service of their owners. The other common expression is a doughnut-like open-mouthed form used to emphasize the shock and surprise of the character, often in response to a new social situation. In his depiction of Mr Johnson, Newell visualizes all of the Uncle’s characterizations.

The most prominent female caricature is the Mammy, utilized by Newell for the character of Mrs Johnson. The Mammy is easily recognizable by her large size, dark skin, brightly coloured dress with apron and a handkerchief tied around her head. She is a distorted figure of a female house slave. Although thousands of black women were owned by young white charges during slavery, the differences between the real women who served as mammies and the Mammy character are striking. Slaves suffered from malnutrition and neither house slaves nor field slaves had much body fat. Actual mammies were thin, drawn and tired. The Mammy character that Newell presented through Mrs Johnson was large and smiling.

Newell also used the Pickaninny character to represent the son Peter Johnson. Recognizable by his or her dirty and uncombed hair and tattered, filthy clothes, the Pickaninny’s mischievous behaviour is attributed to the supposed natural savagery of children who would, in their native habitat, play with animals in the mythologized jungles of Africa. Pickaninnies are always shown as unsupervised and needing to be tamed, part of the failure of the black family to function cohesively. The humour of visual representations of the Pickaninny depends on the dangerous dilemmas that are created by the figure’s curiosity, frequently through depictions of fatal and near-fatal incidents with alligators. It is notable that Peter Newell gave Peter Johnson his own first name, perhaps suggesting identification with the young curious boy. This possible identification with the child in the Johnson family is suggestive of Newell’s later career, in which he dedicated himself to texts and illustrations specifically for children. Indeed, although many children are curious, the history of visual racial stereotyping plays a specific role in the meaning of the Johnson child for Newell’s cartoon.

13 Patricia Turner explains that, like any other slave, the head female house slave was unlikely to be well fed. It was more likely that the mammy would be a thin, malnourished woman who was not given the privilege of eating enough food. ‘Their foodstuffs were severely rationed. They were more likely to be light rather than darker skinned because household jobs were frequently assigned mixed race women. They were unlikely to be old because nineteenth century black women just did not live very long; fewer than 10 percent lived beyond their fiftieth birthday during the antebellum south’ (Turner, Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies, 44).

By using these visual stereotypes, Newell evoked his readers’ notions of Blacks as hopelessly unfit. Newell built on this visual literacy to create the Johnson family as the converse of properly behaved exposition visitors. The family represented Blacks as still inadequate and dysfunctional in the nation’s public sphere after the failure of Reconstruction. By placing the family in the actual historical setting of the exposition, Newell was depicting antebellum characters in turn-of-the-century America as having made no progress since slavery.

Despite his popular racist and ethnic caricatures, Newell has largely been remembered as a ‘gentle artist’ who created ‘gentle cartoons’. A popular American illustrator known in the 1880s and 1890s for his work in *Harper’s Weekly*, *Harper’s Monthly*, *Harper’s Bazar* and *Harper’s Young People*, Newell is perhaps best known as the second artist to illustrate Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1901) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1902). Newell’s illustrations of the tales still serve as standard images of the *Alice* characters today. The characterization of Newell as ‘gentle’ must refer to his later career as a celebrated children’s book author and illustrator. It requires either ignoring the insidious images he produced of African Americans or acknowledging that racist humour was so common and acceptable at the turn of the century that it is hardly worth criticism, even by art and literary historians today. But, because of the specifically racist pedagogical function of the Johnson family in the context of the national phenomenon of the World’s Columbian Exposition, an exploration of Newell’s historically typical racist caricatures is not only appropriate but long overdue.

16 The first artist to illustrate Carroll’s *Alice* books was Sir John Tenniel, but Harper and Brothers commissioned Newell to create new compositions for their upcoming editions (Hearn, ‘Peter Newell (1862–1924)’, xxx). Newell is also recognized for creative innovations in children’s books, evident in his publications *Topsys & Turvys* (1893 and 1894), *The Hole Book* (1908) and *The Slant Book* (1910), among others.
17 A body of work that includes racist cartoons by popular illustrators is not uncommon. Like Newell, Dr Seuss (i.e. Theodor Geisel) is one of America’s most beloved children’s authors. In addition to his children’s books, Geisel created racist depictions in editorial cartoons of racial Others in the service of American nationalism. This other body of work did not hamper Geisel’s career as a successful illustrator in the mainstream press. See Richard H. Minear, *Dr Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel* (New York: New Press 1999), for a discussion of Geisel’s anti-Japanese and anti-Japanese American cartoons published in *PM* newspaper in 1941–3.
African Americans at the fair

The role of African Americans at the World’s Columbian Exposition illuminates the history of black participation in and contestation of a moment of celebratory American nationalism. When the Chicago exposition opened on 1 May 1893, it became the largest fair to have been constructed in the United States. Built in Jackson Park, a scenic stretch of land along Lake Michigan, the exposition welcomed over twenty million people during its six-month run. Removed from the poverty-stricken urban and rural living spaces of many Illinois residents, it became a cosmopolitan picturesque city on the lake. The theme of the exposition was American progress on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in America. The event was organized to construct a narrative of the glorious past of the United States in order to boost national morale and patriotism. The celebratory spectacle not only belied the instability of racial categories but also the shaky political climate in the United States in the 1890s, marked by the financial panic of 1893, which contributed to the unease of the working and middle classes who were concerned about the economic stability of their jobs, family and country.

In response to the desperate situation in which many Americans found themselves, the exposition promoted an image of the United States as a united national economic power. To create the illusion of national unity through the fair, the diversity of the nation’s economic, political and racial makeup was minimized, and the reconciliation between the North and the South was emphasized along racial lines. After Reconstruction, white Northerners were sympathetic to southern Whites and deferred to them for expertise regarding the problem of assimilating southern Blacks. Part of this transformative identification with southern Whites included taking on the racist ideology that Blacks were inherently inassimilable, and were most at

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Black Representation and Self-Representation in Art Exhibitions in the United States, 1893–1998’, Ph.D. thesis, University of Rochester, 2001, and by Michael D. Harris, who characterizes the cartoons as part of an offensive tradition that ‘graphically articulated the inappropriateness of full black participation in American society’ (Harris, Colored Pictures, 76). Although images of ‘darkies’ were most prevalent in Newell’s racist work, he also produced racist images of Irish and Chinese immigrants. However, the scope of this article allows only for a focus on the specific series he produced of Blacks at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition.

19 Reid Badger argues that, physically, the exhibition was ‘a magnificent stage prop’ that created a fantasy setting of white buildings in which visitors could forget the reality of their conditions. The function of the architecture of the fair was ‘to serve as an ideal counterweight on the cultural scale to the confusing diversity of physical and material change’; Reid Badger, The Great American Fair: The World’s Columbian Exposition and American Culture (Chicago: Nelson Hall 1979), 127. The World’s Columbian Exposition was nicknamed White City because the architectural plan by Burnham and Root consisted of all-white structures built in a neo-classical style. The nickname took on a double meaning, referring also to the exclusionary racial policies of the exposition.
home in the natural primitive context of rural southern slave life. Historian Nina Silber states:

By the 1890s white Americans often defined their sense of national will, no longer seen as a legalistic entity, as the working out of the Anglo-Saxon destiny. This equation of nationalism and international greatness with Anglo-Saxonism thus made it difficult to define any non-white group, whether Filipino or Mexican or southern black, as anything but ‘foreign’.20

This national unity was forged along racial lines to the exclusion of all non-Anglo-Saxons. For the fair organizers, the recognition of national diversity would have served as a blemish on the brilliant appearance of White City, and complicated the appearance of a unified Anglo-Saxon ‘manifest destiny’. For African Americans who had survived slavery and lived to see the passage of the thirteenth amendment a mere thirty years earlier, a proposal to celebrate the glory of the nation presented an intriguing opportunity. Some African Americans looked forward to the exposition as a chance to tell the stories of their contributions to the nation. However, from the beginning stages of the exposition’s organization, fair officials made efforts to exclude African Americans as participants.21

A series of attempts were made by African Americans to be represented at the fair as worthy contributors to the nation. Four major sites of conflict illustrate the complex relationship between African Americans and exposition administrators. The conflicts began when President Benjamin Harrison appointed the exposition’s first national commission, made up of representatives from each state and national territory; African Americans were disappointed that each of the members was ‘simon pure and lily white’.22 The black press accused the President of having


21 The discourse of African-American exclusion from the 1893 exposition has been addressed by several authors. The most comprehensive discussion is Christopher Robert Reed, ‘All the World Is Here!’: The Black Presence at White City (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2000), 58. For a specific focus on exclusion by race and gender, see Ann Massa, ‘Black women in the “White City”’, Journal of American Studies, vol. 8, 1974, 319–37. Robert Rydell’s introduction to a recently reprinted 1893 pamphlet also puts the issue of African-American exclusion in perspective; Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Irvine Garland Penn and Ferdinand L. Barnett, The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American’s Contribution to Columbian Literature [1893], ed. Robert W. Rydell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1999). Blacks were excluded both as potential organizers and as visitors; Reed discusses the presence of Blacks as visitors to the fair in ‘All the World Is Here!’.

excluded an African American from the commission because he thought that it would ‘savor too much sentimentality’, and be ‘distasteful to the majority of the commissioners themselves’. After being pressured by the National Convention of Colored Men and the Afro-American Press Association to appoint an African-American commissioner, Harrison picked Hale G. Parker, a St Louis school principal, as an alternate commissioner.

This act of tokenism generated more criticism from African-American organizations than did the original exclusion of an African American from the board. Angered and embarrassed by having to plead with the President for what they considered due representation, many African Americans sought to become increasingly active in the planning and the formulation of exposition policies. Because of their systematically enforced absence in anything other than janitorial and other low-level service positions, African Americans were forced to create opportunities for self-representation during the early planning stages of the exposition and throughout the months of public visitation.

The push by some African Americans for cultural representation in separate facilities created a second site of contestation. The President of the Afro-American League favoured the idea of a ‘Negro department’ or ‘Afro-American annex’, while other groups spoke out against separate facilities. In 1891 the exposition’s all-white, all-male Board of Managers rejected the possibility of a racially segregated exposition space for African-American contributions. Instead the board decided to include submissions for African-American exhibits if they were presented to state screening committees. Few state committees were formed and the proposals for African-American exhibits that were submitted did not meet the ambiguous screening criteria.

A third site source of conflict involved key figures in the struggle for black self-representation: writer and groundbreaking anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells, and former slave, author and politician Frederick Douglass. Wells and Douglass responded to the denial of equal African-American representation with a plan to publish a pamphlet that would detail their understanding of the African-American side of the story. Wells and Douglass were joined in their effort by two other African Americans, educator and newspaper publisher Irvine Garland Penn and attorney and publisher Ferdinand L. Barnett. The four collaborated on *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition: The*

23 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
Afro-American’s Contribution to Columbian Literature for distribution to exposition visitors.26

Ironically, a significant space of African-American visibility was the exposition’s Haitian Pavilion. Haiti accepted the invitation to participate in the fair under the condition that its former Minister Resident and Consul General, Frederick Douglass, would oversee the production of the exhibit.27 Wells describes the irony of Douglass’s popularity at the exposition despite the organizers’ efforts to keep African Americans from being represented.

Haiti’s building was one of the gems of the World’s Fair, and in it Mr Douglass held high court. The peculiar thing about it was that nearly all day long it was crowded with American white people who came to pay their respects to this black man whom his own country had refused to honor.28

Under the auspices of a foreign country, the Haitian building became a headquarters for African-American self-representation, a place to resist exposition discrimination and show respect for influential national and international leaders. This real representation of Blacks at the fair stands in contrast to Newell’s fictional depictions of a displaced black presence in his cartoon series.

As remarkable as the Haitian Pavilion, and the struggle for representation generally, was the fight for African-American women to be included in the Woman’s Building, the only space in the exposition specifically designated for American women’s representation. In 1890 fair officials appointed the all-white National Board of Lady Managers to create and oversee the building. Despite the efforts of African-American women to convince the board that an African-American woman should be included, the National Board of Lady Managers maintained that sharing the building with African-American women would be regressive and therefore antithetical to the exposition’s theme of progress.29 After two years of struggle, the board allowed an ‘Afro

26 Because of the difficulties in securing funding and African-American support for the pamphlet, only 10,000 copies were printed and distributed during the last three months of the fair. The pamphlet was opposed by some African Americans, specifically by editors of the black press, most of whom refused to print the announcement. Rudwick and Meier, ‘Black man in the “White City”, 356.
27 President Harrison appointed Douglass to serve as Minister Resident and Consul General to Haiti from September 1889 to July 1891. Never before had an African American been appointed to the position of foreign minister. Whites had always played that role, and the appointment was greatly contested. Although Douglass was not Haitian, he was a man of African descent, representing other people of African descent.
29 Two groups of African-American women formed the World’s Columbian Association and the Women’s Columbian Auxiliary Association to express their desire for exhibits
American exhibit’, organized by Joan Imogene Howard and displaying work by African-American women, to be placed in a corner cabinet of the Woman’s Building. The cabinet, which provided a display of African-American women’s achievements, reflected both contemporary social attitudes about African-American women and their perseverance. Their contributions to the World’s Columbian Exposition were marginalized in the Woman’s Building, pushed into a corner, and contained in a kind of ‘curiosity cabinet’. Through a display of material culture, fragmented and detached from its social, economic and political context, the collection of objects drew attention to African-American women’s skills and abilities. Although not as comprehensive as the African-American women had hoped for, the cabinet did provide a space for their presence. The series of events that led to this small minority group’s involvement within the larger exposition plans was a microcosm of the ongoing struggle of African Americans in the exposition and the national narrative as a whole.

Learning to behave

Northern and southern white conservatives were eager to maintain the racial and social distance between Blacks and Whites at the end of the nineteenth century in order to stabilize racial divisions and curb the potential for black social and economic mobility in a capitalist system. In theory, the free market allowed Blacks the opportunity to participate in the American economy on equal terms. However, the need to re-establish white authority in the decades after the Civil War was addressed in both racial and economic terms.

The federal issuance of greenbacks during Reconstruction was a challenge to the value of American currency coined in silver and gold. This paper money, void of intrinsic material value, caused speculation about its worth and validity in the free market. As Michael O’Malley explains, scepticism about the worth of greenback currency extended to what was considered by some the God-given intelligence of the white race in comparison to the clear barbarism of the black race: ‘Diluting the money supply diluted the nation’s blood, and elevating the freedman depreciated the value of whiteness.’

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30 This struggle included a series of short-lived clerical appointments to the board of two African-American women, Mrs. A. M. Curtis and Fannie Barrier Williams. These appointments placed African-American women in token positions without decision-making powers, and further exacerbated the issue of African-American women’s representation. See Massa, ‘Black women in the “White City”’, 335.

resurgent racism of the 1890s was accompanied by a political obsession with gold and silver and the “intrinsic value of specie”’. The investment in maintaining essential racial difference in 1893 was both a social and economic strategy to maintain the hierarchical order on which the country was founded.

Late nineteenth-century world’s fairs and museum exhibitions shared a common goal of enforcing racial hierarchies and acceptable methods of social behaviour. Although many world exposition exhibits were designed to amuse, a pedagogical function was almost always present. In his book *The Birth of the Museum*, Tony Bennett addresses the role of private and public exhibition spaces in the mid- to late nineteenth century. In the private sphere of the museum, admission was restricted to the social elite. In the public sphere of a world’s fair, the ‘civilized’ behaviours practised within the bourgeois private sphere could be seen by a wide audience and could serve to instruct the lower classes in the forms of behaviour expected of the upper class. The subject and object positions were learned literally through practice in a public exhibition setting. Bennett argues that the role of the public exhibition was to transform and develop visitors by creating a more inclusive audience. This move towards inclusiveness created, in turn, a new public sphere. The exhibition became a space of observation and control ‘in order that the visitor’s body might be *taken hold of* and be moulded in accordance with the requirements of new norms of public conduct’ defined by the social elite.

The Newell cartoon series illustrates how this was done. In ‘The Johnson Family in Cairo Street’ (Figure 1), the family explores one of the diversions of the exposition’s Midway section in which groups of people from Africa, Asia, the Pacific Islands and ‘Old World’ Europe who had been brought to the fairgrounds performed and were displayed. The Midway functioned to show the antithesis of American progress and as a space in which to witness anthropological differences. It is described eloquently by historian and world’s fair scholar Robert Rydell.

Hailed as a ‘great object lesson’ in anthropology by leading anthropologists, the Midway provided visitors with ethnological, scientific sanction for the

American view of the nonwhite world as barbaric and childlike and gave a scientific basis to the racial blueprint for building a utopia. The Chicago world’s fair, generally recognized for its contributions to urban planning, beaux-arts architecture, and institutions of the arts and sciences, just as importantly introduced millions of fairgoers to evolutionary ideas about race—ideas that were presented in a utopian context and often conveyed by exhibits that were ostensibly amusing. On the Midway at the World’s Columbian Exposition, evolution, ethnology, and popular amusements interlocked as active agents and bulwarks of hegemonic assertion of ruling-class authority.35

In the context of the Midway, Newell presents Mr and Mrs Johnson riding a camel in front of the Egyptian exhibit. The caption reads:

MR. JOHNSON. ‘Cloriah [sic], Whah’s Petah?’
MRS. JOHNSON. ‘Taggin’ on behin’ some’res, I s’pose.’

The text is written to emphasize the style of ‘broken English’ that Mr Johnson speaks. Newell’s decision to render his speech phonetically endorses the notion that African Americans were incapable of speaking or learning grammatically correct English. Matched by the physical distortion of the family, the dialogue emphasizes racial and cultural difference in such a way as to highlight the family’s class inferiority. Mr Johnson speaks the black dialect of his community, and he is shown as an alien at the exposition, in opposition to the image of civility, progress and correctness that its organizers were striving to promote.

Caught up in the excitement of the Midway, Mr and Mrs Johnson have lost their son Peter who, just out of sight, swings mischievously on the camel’s tail. Mr and Mrs Johnson are presented as irresponsible caretakers of their son and, as a result, Peter-as-Pickaninny misbehaves. The Johnsons’ inability to participate properly in the fair suggests that African Americans exhibit poor behaviour both as parents and as children, carelessly breaking the rules of conduct in the public sphere. Simultaneously, the Johnsons become part of the Midway as another exhibit. Their misbehaviour demonstrates the racial hierarchy constructed in the Midway, reinforcing their racial difference and supposed inferiority.

*Harper’s Weekly*, however, offers a second model for African-American behaviour at the exposition. Appearing in the same issue as ‘The Johnson Family in Cairo Street’ is the illustration ‘Columbian Exposition—How the Crowds Lunch’ (Figure 2), which includes the only other visual representation of an African American in the issue. The illustrator here offers a collage of six images of exposition crowds eating lunch on the fairgrounds. In the largest image, numbered 3, an African-American man is shown not as a visitor but as a waiter. The artist is here indicating that the proper place for African Americans at the fair is serving Whites. This waiter’s position is echoed in the image numbered 6, in which a Turkish man sells ‘hot kababs’ at a sandwich stall. Although they have different racial and national identities, the two men share the same role of Other in relation to the shared white identity of the visitors they are serving. Although African Americans were allowed to work as waiters at the exposition, they also participated as visitors and as hosts of exhibits. These multiple positions are not represented in *Harper’s Weekly*. Instead, limited depictions promoted African Americans in static roles that were in fact already changing at the turn of the century. The lack of diverse imagery to reflect these changes speaks to white concerns about the social and economic development of African Americans, and to a desire to keep them, along with recent European immigrants, in the role of national Other.

Another illustration offers a further example of proper behaviour at the exposition. On the cover of the 16 September 1893 issue of *Harper’s Weekly*, the image ‘Columbian Exposition—In the Cairo Street, Midway Plaisance’ (Figure 3) depicts two white women riding a camel. The women appear calm as the camel is led gracefully by an elegant Egyptian man. Although
Figure 2  Thure de Thulstrup, ‘Columbian Exposition—How the Crowds Lunch’, *Harper’s Weekly*, 26 August 1893
Figure 3  Thure de Thulstrup, ‘Columbian Exposition—In the Cairo Street, Midway Plaisance’, Harper’s Weekly, 16 September 1893
there are crowds of people around the pair, few watch the women go by. The two women embody appropriate behaviour at the fair and, thus, do not warrant attention or scrutiny by other fairgoers. Their clothing is more elaborate than Mrs Johnson’s, indicating that they are of a higher economic order. In comparison to Mrs Johnson’s plain dress, the white pair’s dresses have fashionable, large puffed sleeves. The wide brimmed hats that shadow the two women’s faces are decorated with large ostrich plumes, while Mrs Johnson wears a more modest half-bonnet. The stylish couple provides an example of how visitors should dress and act while experiencing the exotic displays of the Midway. Because they are part of the middle class, they function as a model for visitors of other racial groups and economic classes. Readers could easily compare the two depictions of camel-riding—one presented as spectacle, the other as exemplary—and choose which to emulate.

Through Newell’s cartoons, the diversity of African Americans in Chicago is reduced to spectacle, to a type of visitor who is unable to comprehend what the exposition has to offer. By contrast, in his book ‘All the World Is Here!’: The Black Presence in White City, historian Christopher Robert Reed discusses the various roles African Americans played in the public sphere of the Chicago exposition. Diverse groups of African Americans looked forward to the fair for different reasons. For students hosting the exhibits of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute and Atlanta University, the fair provided an opportunity to feature accomplishments in black education. Leaders such as emigrationists Reverend Alexander Crummel and Bishop Henry McNeal Turner were keen to discuss their agendas for black freedom in Africa. Working-class Blacks looked on the fair as an employment opportunity and a space for learning and entertainment.

However, as rendered by Newell’s imagination, the Johnson family is unaware of these struggles for cultural representation. Unengaged with the political dimension of the event and left behind in the progressive vision that the fair represents, the family goes through the exposition shocked, surprised and displaced. The cartoon naturalizes their incompatibility with the fair and with the world at large.

**Knowing one’s place**

In only two cartoons of the series do the Johnson family receive any social recognition. ‘The Johnson Family Visit the Dahoman Village’ (Figure 4) depicts Mr Johnson eagerly shaking hands with a Fon man from Dahomey on stage at the Midway. Here, Newell’s portrayal of Mr Johnson departs from earlier illustrations. Mr Johnson’s facial structure, hair colour and ear shape are made to appear like an ape’s, neither the Uncle’s nor any human’s

likeness. These drastic changes in representation are noticeable in comparison to previous depictions of Mr Johnson, as well as in the reflection of his animalistic face in the face of the Fon man. Visually, these two men are connected to each other and to the primitive animal they are constructed to represent. To Mrs Johnson’s dismay, her husband finds affinity with and validation from the man from Central Africa:

MRS. JOHNSON: ‘Ezwell Johnson, stop shakin’ Han’s wid dat Heathen! You want de hull Fair ter t’ink you’s found a Poo’ Relation?’

This immediate connection across geographic and cultural borders implies that there is little difference between Africans and African Americans. Newell’s quick association denies the history of African Americans, including the horrors of slavery, the ability to learn new languages and customs, and the struggle to change the oppressive prejudicial system that controls them. Further, Mrs Johnson’s warning reveals a social anxiety on the part of African Americans of being associated with Africans. Her cautionary response is not far away from the real responses of some white and black Americans.
In the souvenir book *Chicago Times Portfolio of the Midway Types*, photographs of the Dahomey exhibition were published with derogatory and misinformed captions reflecting the attitudes of some Midway visitors. The caption to the photograph ‘A Group of Dahomeyans’ states: ‘Though they were not handsome, people flocked into the village and witnessed the rites and ceremonies of the villagers. Though they were representatives of Cannibal tribes they restrained their appetites for human flesh while at the Exposition.’ Part of the caption to the photograph ‘In True Dahomeyan Style’, an image that documents a procession of a group of Dahomeans through the exposition, reads:

Cleopatra never journeyed in happier state than rode this dusky beauty on the bright summer day that gave to the Midway a procession combining African savagery with the civilization of the Exposition. If contrasts teach lessons, then such spectacles as the one depicted—and they were frequent—must have leavened the multitudes with a great many seeds of knowledge.  

The author of these captions was candid in his expressions of disgust with the Dahomey presence. However, displeasure with the Dahomey exhibit was also apparent within black culture.

At the beginning of the fair, Frederick Douglass scathingly criticized the exposition organizers for the exhibits that displayed Africans. Though he was happy with the Haitian and Liberian buildings and African-American representation in the Woman’s Building and in the exhibits of black educational institutions, he commented: ‘Less edifying was a sideshow on the Midway consisting of a Dahomean village of thatched huts.’ He concluded that the exposition officials evidently wanted African Americans to be represented by the ‘barbaric rites’ of ‘African savages brought here to act the monkey’. The Dahomeans were brought in to demonstrate the notions that the exposition officials had about savagery and barbarism in Africa and, thus, by implication, to demonstrate the gap between white Americans and black Africans expressed in the souvenir book of ‘Midway types’. If Newell agreed that the Fon were savages, his cartoon connects them with African Americans. This association between the two men was exactly the one that angered Douglass, since it was one that would validate the poor treatment of black Americans, proving that they were still savages like their African brethren and not full American citizens who were part of the discourse of national progress.

The Johnsons’ appearance at the fair demonstrates the gap between national white idealism about American progress and the myth that Blacks inherently occupy a static primitive space that cannot be changed. In the

37 See *Chicago Times Portfolio of the Midway Types* (Chicago: The American Engraving Company 1893), Part 2, no. 34 and Part 9, no. 163.
38 *Indianapolis Freeman*, 12 August 1893, and *Chicago Tribune*, 26 August 1893.
penultimate cartoon of the series, ‘Columbian Exposition—The Johnson Family Rest at the Kentucky State Building’ (Figure 5), Mr Johnson sees his former master. Sitting in the foreground of the cartoon is a wealthy white couple who look at the Johnson family with smirks on their faces. In the background is another white woman who looks at the Johnson family and smiles. In the centre of the cartoon, a white colonel shakes Mr Johnson’s hand. Mrs Johnson stands beside her husband and stares wide-eyed directly at the colonel’s face. Behind Mr Johnson are two other figures, an African-American man and an African-American woman who peeks into the frame and looks at the reader. The caption reads:

THE COLONEL: (Mr. Johnson’s former master). ‘Well, well, Ez, what ah you doin’ heah?’

MR. JOHNSON: ‘Wal, sah, I’s lak a nole shoe dat’s been black’d—’bout time I’s gittin some polish!’

Newell’s emphasis on racial difference is evident in the dialogue between the colonel and Mr Johnson. Both men start their conversation with the same word, but the different spellings of the word distinguish Mr Johnson as speaking in a black dialect and his white rural counterpart as speaking with

Figure 5 Peter Newell, ‘Columbian Exposition—The Johnson Family Rest at the Kentucky State Building’, Harper’s Weekly, 4 November 1893
a moneyed southern drawl. Like his presence at the fair, Mr Johnson’s language is a poor imitation of his former master’s. This important distinction highlights the difference between the supposed racial inferiority of Blacks and uneducated white ‘country bumpkins’ or recent European immigrants who were also subjected to ethnic caricature in the late nineteenth century for foreign and antiquated cultural differences.

This peculiar cartoon asserts the pedagogic and transformative function of the public sphere. The Johnson family come to the exposition to become part of the national public as African Americans. In this new public sphere, Mr Johnson can shake hands with his former master as if they were equal. Yet the exaggerated manner in which the family is portrayed and the language used to express Mr Johnson’s thoughts demonstrate that he is still considered inferior. For the reader, this portrayal secures black inferiority within the ideology of the public sphere.

At the same time, Newell recognizes a desire for social progress and respect within African American culture during the late nineteenth century. Mr Johnson explains that he is attending the fair to take advantage of the opportunity to experience the exposition and all that it has to offer. He describes his attendance at the fair through the metaphor of an old shoe blackened with polish, needing to be buffed and made presentable. Mr Johnson’s desire to transform himself through cultural exposure is recognized in this cartoon. Ironically, the polishing process of attending the fair makes him blacker. The cartoon defines Mr Johnson’s blackness as dysfunctional and coon-like in opposition to the refined manner that defines whiteness. The image presents a duality by depicting the family as misfit visitors at the fair yet showing their intentions as humorous and understandable even if insufficient and unacceptable.

A revealing part of the cartoon’s composition is the placement of the white American woman sitting beside the well-dressed man and the African-American woman who leans into the border of the picture frame. The composition of the cartoon separates the races—the left side contains the African Americans and the right side contains the white Americans—forcing a comparison of their positions. On one side, the white couple rest together on a bench, staring smugly at the black family. On the other side, the African-American woman stands isolated. She looks much less secure in her position as she leans into the picture and stares at us with curiosity. This contrast between security on one side and insecurity on the other raises the question of social positioning in the public sphere. The characters’ visual representations reflect their social positions through race and class. African Americans stand in a precarious position connected to Whites through the legacy of slavery; in this cartoon, Newell depicts the white characters enjoying a more comfortable position at the fair. The white women are seated while Mrs Johnson stands. They look condescendingly at the Johnsons as they sit with their hands folded in their laps. The social distance between the Johnson family and white Americans is made clear compositionally by
showing the basis of their amicable relationship as African-American subservience. The possibility of African-American independence, removed from the slave–master relationship, becomes a source of amusement. In ‘The Johnson Family Visit the Dahoman Village’ and ‘Columbian Exposition—The Johnson Family Rest at the Kentucky State Building’ cartoons, the Johnson family’s fixed locations are as African and as slave. The options offered by these two cartoons leave little room for the visibility or understanding of the complex contemporary identities and desires of African Americans.

Ironically, at the same time that the cartoon series depicts African-American fairgoers as buffoons, the Johnsons also function as a kind of all-American family. As a traditional family unit, they mirror the same familial structure of many Harper’s Weekly readers. At some level readers must have identified with the family in order to learn lessons from them. Through this identification, readers could relate to the familial roles of father, mother and child, and begin to transform themselves into acceptable members of the public sphere. For example, most visitors to the fair and readers of Harper’s Weekly had not travelled to the places outside the United States that were represented in the Midway. Most visitors to the Midway encountered national and cultural differences for the first time. These readers would have identified with the lack of cultural exposure demonstrated by the Johnson family. In this way, the Johnsons are a typical American family of their time, performing the anxieties of the American fairgoer through the cartoon series, irrespective of race. Yet, their caricatured appearance forces the reader to recognize their race.

The choice of creating an African-American family to act out the racial and class anxieties of the average fairgoer reinscribed African Americans’ marginal social position by removing evidence of their mobility at the turn of the century. The Johnson family helped to develop an identity for white readers by showing them the wrong way to behave. Learning from the family’s wrongdoings fulfilled a pedagogic function: teaching readers to distance themselves from the backward behaviour of African Americans and instead become part of the new public sphere. As a result, the Johnson family denied African Americans the possibility of using the public sphere to reinvent and re-present their popular image. The caricature of blackness satirized the potential for transformation and reinscribed African Americans as inherently inferior.

The Johnson family: racial inferiority, labour and the search for location

Although black men’s employment opportunities at the exposition were limited, they took advantage of the positions that were made available. Their
labour goes unacknowledged in the Johnson family cartoons. Commenting on the evidence of black labourers in exposition photographs, Reed writes:

The importance of this is found in the fact that, given the racism of the day, these employees could have been excluded or hidden, but were not. They are featured as integral parts of the organizations, appearing dignified and representing neither themselves nor their race in a derogatory fashion.

Likewise, the acknowledgment of black labour was one of Ida Wells’s important criticisms of the representation of Blacks at the fair:

The labor of one-half of this country has always been, and is still being done by [African Americans]. The first credit this country had in its commerce with foreign nations was created by production resulting from their labor. The wealth created by their industry has afforded to the white people of this country the leisure essential to their group progress in education, art, science, industry, and invention.

In contrast to the actual historical contributions to the exposition made by African-American labour, the possibility of such a contribution is marginalized in depictions of the Johnson family in which black labour becomes comic spectacle. In the first cartoon of the series, ‘The Johnson Family Visit the Great White City’ (Figure 6), Mr Johnson stands in front of his family with an exaggerated pose and a look of shock on his face. Typical of nineteenth-century caricatures of African Americans, Mr and Mrs Johnson’s eyes bulge. Mr Johnson’s large mouth is open wide enough to form a complete circle. The family looks lost, confused and in awe of their surroundings. To the right of the family, a white man dressed in an official Columbian Guard uniform and a white man visiting the fair look at the family and laugh.

The overwhelming effect that the exposition environment has on the family is a mix of fact and fiction. Many visitors, African-American or not, were in awe of the exposition’s architecture and design. Readers may have

39 African-American poet, songwriter, novelist and critic James Weldon Johnson writes about his experience as an employee (a ‘roller chair boy’) of the exposition in ‘At the World’s Fair’, Bulletin of Atlanta University, May 1893. The roller chair was a wheelchair available for those who were too weary or unable to walk around the fairgrounds. Young men, usually college students, would push patrons around the exposition in the chairs. Johnson discusses some of the racial and class tensions between these young white and black men and their patrons. Johnson’s writings provide more evidence of invisible black labour at the exposition. See also Reed, ‘All the World Is Here!’, 76–7.
40 Reed, ‘All the World Is Here!’, 73.
identified with the family’s amazed reaction. However, because of the family’s caricatured appearance and the laughter they elicit from onlookers, readers may have also felt a sense of superiority over the family. The accompanying caption emphasizes the Johnsons’ misfit presence at the exposition:

_**PATERFAMILIAS (entering the gate at the head of the procession).** ‘Great Lan’, Gloriah! I’d a giben dat spotted Mule ob mine for de Contrac’ ob whitewashin’ dis yer place!’_

In this cartoon, Mr Johnson expresses his desire to be a part of the construction of the fair. His offer to trade a spotted mule for the painting contract would be worthless on the scale of the exposition’s budget, yet of value in the Johnson family’s economic situation. The reference to the mule represents Mr Johnson as unable to understand the exposition’s environment because his status as a former slave and a member of the working class is far removed from the grandeur of the United States, as constructed by the fair.
The laughing white visitor and the Columbian Guard may find humour in the possibility that an African-American man could be a businessman managing the contract for such an enormous project. Or they may be amused by the thought of Mr Johnson in the position of painter at the exposition. What is denied in this encounter is the labour that African-American men in fact did contribute to the construction of the fair. The incompatibility of the Johnson family with the exposition contradicts the real presence of African Americans on the fairgrounds. Although the exposition’s hierarchy of labour excluded African-American men as painters, they were part of the construction team, together with white men, that cleared and prepared the grounds for the erection of buildings and created the extensive ornamental plasterwork on the rooftops and friezes of the neoclassical exhibition buildings. In a photograph of the construction work by official exposition photographer C. D. Arnold, an African-American worker is clearly visible (Figure 7). On the far right side of the photograph, a white man is supervising the construction of relief moulding by a crew. In the centre, a white man gracefully poses to present a completed relief panel. In front of him two white male workers focus on their tasks. Immediately to

**Figure 7** Photograph by C. D. Arnold, ‘Workers in Staff, Mch, 7, 1892’ (Chicago Public Library, Special Collections and Preservation Division)

42 Reed, ‘All the World Is Here!’, 58.
the left of this central figure is a young African-American man working alongside a white man.

The position of Columbian Guard, filled by the uniformed man laughing at Mr Johnson in Figure 6, was another employment opportunity that was out of the reach of African Americans. The guard’s laughter mocks Mr Johnson’s hopes for employment and is a reminder to the Johnson family, and Harper’s Weekly readers, that America’s tradition of racial discrimination will be kept in place despite the celebration of progress at White City. Ignoring African Americans’ participation as part of the exposition’s construction team helped to enforce the invisibility of African Americans not only as contributors to the fair but also, on a larger scale, as contributors to the nation’s progress.

The Johnson family’s incongruity as visitors to the exposition continues in the third cartoon of the series, ‘The Johnson Family Visit Jackson Park in the Evening’ (Figure 8). As in Figures 5 and 6, white onlookers laugh at the family as they stroll through the cultured environment of the exposition. On the next page, in a drawing entitled ‘In the Restaurant of the House of Representatives, Washington’ (Figure 9), black and white men are shown

**Figure 8** Peter Newell, ‘The Johnson Family Visit Jackson Park in the Evening’, Harper’s Weekly, 12 August 1893
together in a government restaurant. In this interracial scene, by contrast, the white men are not laughing at the black men; their interaction is very orderly. The drawing presents Blacks and Whites performing their roles as dictated by the colour line in nineteenth-century America: Blacks working in subservience to Whites. The accompanying article, ‘In the House Restaurant’, describes the restaurant as a place where congressmen and senators can go to whisper to each other about national legislation. In this space in which politicians receive excellent hospitality, they feel sufficiently at ease to share ideas and make important political decisions. The pleasant service of African-American men enables the politicians to conduct their work.43

Examined comparatively, the cartoon and the illustration work together to promote the traditional social order of race and labour. The former depicts African Americans at the exposition as buffoons who do not belong. The latter presents the reader with a solution for the problem of black dislocation, illustrating the proper roles of both Blacks and Whites when sharing the same space. This solution reassured readers as to what many believed to be the proper role of African Americans. It also eased fears about

the increasingly diverse economic status of African Americans, particularly concerning the growth of the middle class and social elite in Chicago. Both images comforted white readers by supporting the sentimental notions that Blacks were essentially different from Whites and, therefore, could not achieve social equality with them.

**Getting the last laugh**

The humorous stereotypes illustrated in the Johnson family series easily pervaded popular culture to make the exposition a stage for a clash between savagery and civility, progress and regression. Perhaps the Johnson family’s misadventures created discomfort for typical white readers who may have spontaneously reflected on their own undesirable behaviours that caused others to laugh. However, the figures’ visually caricatured appearance would have reassured these nineteenth-century readers that they were not like the Johnson family.

For some African-American readers, the Johnson family may have reinforced an urgent need for a range of images representing black America. For others, it may have offered smug security with regard to their own position as part of a burgeoning African-American middle class. For this emerging class, the Johnson family clarified their distance from economically poor Blacks and distinguished them as socially mobile. On a popular level, the Johnson family helped define common misconceptions of black identity by depicting the African-American family as incapable of joining and participating in national progress. Represented through the lens of contemporary misguided notions about race, the cartoons supported the impossibility of African-American equality on the grounds of both biological

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44 Reed discusses the growing diversity of African Americans in Chicago in both economic and social status. ‘The refined’, ‘the respectables’ and ‘the riff-raff’ were three strata of African Americans, corresponding to the small group of elite, highly educated professionals, the upstanding citizens involved in religious activities and the underclass that constituted the economically and socially disenfranchised who struggled for daily survival. See Reed, *All the World Is Here!*, ch. 5, ‘The social order’.

45 In his humorous short story, ‘A matter of principle’, Charles W. Chesnutt addresses the anxiety of the light-skinned African-American elite about being defined as ‘Negro’ or ‘black’ and their fear of associating or being associated with black people. This elite group rejects their black ancestry and instead chooses to claim their white ancestry as the defining element of their identity. I would argue that the Johnson family cartoons would have been more humorous than offensive to this group, and would have provided them with more reasons to distance themselves from other black people. See Charles W. Chesnutt, ‘A matter of principle’, in *Selected Writings* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin 2001), 237–53. Chesnutt, a black man who could physically pass for white, addressed the social contradictions of the United States along racial lines throughout his work. ‘A matter of principle’ is particularly relevant here as a work that calls into question colourism and prejudice among Blacks.
determinism and social ineptitude. This resistance to understanding cultural difference and the contributions of African Americans guaranteed that W. E. B. DuBois’s 1903 prediction that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the colour line would come true. It also solidified the future of African-American challenges to white American superiority in the new public sphere.

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