

**Playing in the Land of Milk and Honey:
Performing Southern, Jewish, and African Diasporic Identities, 1776-1915**

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My new work grows out of the 2019 NEH Summer Institute, “Privilege and Prejudice,” hosted at the College of Charleston. The Institute explored the many challenges in mapping Southern Jewish identities – including the question of how to trace intersections of Southern, Jewish, and African diasporic cultural influences from the colonial period into the mid-twentieth century. My experience with the NEH Summer Institute helped to crystalize my thoughts on how to extend some of my earlier research in new directions, including a project tentatively titled “Playing in the Land of Milk and Honey: Performing Southern, Jewish, and African Diasporic Identities, 1776-1915.” The NEH Summer Institute illuminated patterns that I had not fully realized underlay much of my earlier research on African American and Jewish American performance.

The focused readings, seminars, and field trips of the Summer Institute helped to draw these threads together. Once I began sifting for traces of Jewish, Southern, and African diasporic performance encounters in theatrical histories of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries, I started to see more and more remnants scattered along the trading and commercial routes that Michael Cohen details in his brilliant 2017 study, *Cotton Capitalists: American Jewish Entrepreneurship in the Reconstruction Era* (part of our reading in the Summer Institute). Indeed, the convergence of these performances seems almost inevitable along routes that would have been equally familiar to Jewish peddlers, traders, and settlers, itinerant Jewish theatrical performers, and large populations of African Americans forcibly moved to those regions via the slave trade.

For example, the diary of one Mrs. Smith of Newburyport, MA illuminates the transforming performances of Jewish and African American identities in the years immediately following the Revolution. Her travelogue chronicles her journey from Boston to Savannah and back again in 1793. In addition to describing her encounters with theatrical troupes and liberty parades, she documents her attendance at religious celebrations including camp meetings with enslaved African Americans in Charleston and Passover Seders in Savannah. She imagines her role in each scenario as an appreciative and inquisitive actor, sampling Passover food or listening to

slaves sing at their religious meeting. She becomes the quintessential participant-observer in the culture-building process taking place around her.

Almost a century later, theatre manager Noah Ludlow's memoirs, *Dramatic Life as I Found It* records his fifty years as a touring performer and manager, trekking through the South and West from tiny towns like Olean, PA, to burgeoning cities such as Mobile, Nashville, Louisville, Cincinnati, and Natchez. Throughout his travels he documents his encounters with various itinerant Jewish performers and several well-known Jewish stars. He describes them variously as descendants of the "tribe of Levi," "of Hebrew parentage," or "novelty" performers (dancers, acrobats, and singers) who changed their names or adopted new titles in a vain attempt to shed the baggage of their Jewish identity. His memoirs also list numerous performances of plays such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *Ivanhoe* (and *Ivanhoe*'s various adaptations including *Isaac, the Jew of York* and *The Jewess*). As Ludlow's reminiscences suggest, Jewish performers were highly visible members of the Southern theatre circuit, as were productions featuring Jewish characters.¹

His autobiography also documents the constant presence of enslaved African Americans as well as white performers playing in blackface. He details encounters in stable yards and taverns, as well as in playhouses like those in Mobile where the seating was segregated among whites, "negroes" and "quadroons."² And one particularly memorable entry describes a lively week in the Louisville theatre that featured Thomas "Daddy" Rice performing his well-known "Jump Jim Crow" routine, followed by Junius Brutus Booth as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.³ Like Smith's diaries, Ludlow's memoirs testify to the complex performances of Jewish and African diasporic identities pervading the South. His encounters with "negroes" are often couched in comic language, as though he imagined them as routines akin to those on the minstrel stage. Similarly, his characterizations of Jewish performers as jovial, buffoonish, avuncular, or

¹ Noah Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It* (St. Louis, MI: G.I. Jones & Co., 1880). Accessed at <https://archive.org/details/dramaticlifeasif00ludl/page/n1>

² Noah Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It* (St. Louis, MI: G.I. Jones & Co., 1880). Accessed at <https://archive.org/details/dramaticlifeasif00ludl/page/n1>

³ Noah Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It* (St. Louis, MI: G.I. Jones & Co., 1880). Accessed at <https://archive.org/details/dramaticlifeasif00ludl/page/n1>

scheming,⁴ mimic familiar representations of stage Jews in nineteenth-century American culture. Consciously or unconsciously, Ludlow configured his encounters with Jewish and African diasporic figures as *performances* – perhaps intuiting that Jews and African Americans in the South were playing a series of roles tailored to meet white Southern Gentile expectations.

One of the ways in which Jews negotiated their performances of Southern, Jewish, American, and white identities emerged in a scrapbook that I had the chance to explore during the Summer Institute. It is housed in the Jewish Heritage Collection at the College of Charleston. The scrapbook from B.A.E. Rodrigues had been compiled by members of his family and memorialized the work of his father, Daniel Ottolengui, a member of a long-standing Sephardic Jewish family in Charleston. During his career Ottolengui played the part of a newspaperman, novelist, playwright, and sometime theatre manager. He underscored his links to Charleston's Jewish community by staging benefit performances for B'nai B'rith and KKBE. He showed himself a staunch Confederate by using his newspaper writing to openly celebrating States' Rights and the eventual demise of Reconstruction. He also displayed his blatant racism through a series of scurrilous poems, parodic novels, and other writings. The question of what it meant to be white *and Jewish and Southern* surface through Ottolengui's records. He performed each of these roles via his theatre work for the KKBE Synagogue and his theatre work to raise funds for the Widows and Orphans of the Confederacy. He imagined Southerners as a "race" (meaning white American), and the Jews as a "race," and he also saw African Americans as a "race" as well. For him it became a curiously fluid term that could connote pride, belonging, or insurmountable difference.

The family scrapbook offers a curated collection of the multiple identities that Ottolengui and his family embodied during the tumultuous time of the Civil War and Reconstruction. His racist poems and essays reveal a Southern white man struggling to make sense of a new world order -- a man who had grown up in a slave-holding family trying to relocate himself in a society in which the very foundations of his authority as a man and as a white person had been eliminated. His efforts on behalf of KKBE and B'Nai B'Rith, offer opportunities to question how

⁴ Noah Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It* (St. Louis, MI: G.I. Jones & Co., 1880). Accessed at <https://archive.org/details/dramaticlifeasif00ludl/page/n1>

he understood his role in the Jewish community to which his family had such significant ties. Did devotion or merely a sense of duty bring him into that orbit? Ultimately, Ottolengui's work invites scholars to consider what creates *legitimacy* in performance.

Next Steps:

As I noted above, my time with the 2019 NEH Summer Institute has inspired research on a new (possibly book-length) project tentatively titled, "Playing in the Land of Milk and Honey: Performing Southern, Jewish, and African Diasporic Identities, 1776-1915." I will be presenting some of my new research at the 2019 American Jewish Studies Conference in San Diego, as well as at the American Library in Paris and the American Library in Angers (the latter two learned about my research and invited me to give talks while I am in France as part of my upcoming sabbatical). I am also honored to have received a fellowship from the Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture that will allow me to pursue my research at the Jewish Heritage Collection in Spring 2020. I have applied for two additional research fellowships for the coming year to travel to archives along the Southern circuit where I hope to find additional records of African diasporic, Jewish, and Southern intersections.