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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

City of Magic: Aesthetic Value in the Los Angeles Magic Scene

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

by

Dalila Isoke Ozier

2020

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2020

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

City of Magic: Aesthetic Value in the Los Angeles Magic Scene

by

Dalila Isoke Ozier

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Sherry B. Ortner, Chair

In the vast Los Angeles entertainment complex, magic is often deemed one of the lowest forms of performance art, unworthy of respect or critical evaluation. In response to mainstream aesthetic evaluations that routinely devalue magical performance, Los Angeles magicians engage in a variety of strategies designed to re-legitimize the world of magic. Chief among these strategies is the construction of a competing aesthetic value system, one that allows magicians to reject mainstream assumptions about magic's artlessness and instead reassert magic as a form of genuine artistic expression. However, this new aesthetic system comes with its own brand of hierarchization, one that aligns the concept of "good magic" with the white, heteromale subject. Because of this, female magicians and magicians of color can often find it difficult to penetrate the upper echelons of the magic community. By exploring the roots and consequences of magic's devaluation, this dissertation uses participant observation and in-depth interviews to interrogate the ways in which Los Angeles magicians navigate the aesthetic value systems that undergird magical performance. In this way, we can investigate the broader impact that aesthetic devaluation has had on how magicians

are debased, derided, and disregarded within the modern entertainment machine—not just by laymen, but by each other.

The dissertation of Dalila Isoke Ozier is approved.

Jessica R. Cattelino

Graham M. Jones

Christopher M. Kelty

Sherry B. Ortner, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2020

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**Figure 1:** Screenshot taken by author

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# Biographical Sketch

## Education

### University of California, Los Angeles

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology (*degree pending*)

### University of California, Los Angeles

Master of Art in Anthropology

### University of West Georgia

Bachelor of Science in Anthropology with Philosophy minor, *cum laude*

## Professional Experience

### *Research Experience*

2017 – 2019 Graduate Student Researcher, UCLA

2011 – 2013 Student Researcher, University of West Georgia

### *Teaching Experience*

2013 – 2019 Teaching Apprentice, UCLA

2012 – 2013 Reader, UCLA

2011 – 2012 Tutor, University of West Georgia

## Grants and Awards

2015; 2016 Graduate Summer Research Mentorship

2015 Student Research Grant

2013 - 2017 Eugene V. Cota-Robles Fellowship

2012 Antonio J. Waring, Jr. Academic Scholarship

2012 Francis Wood Wilson Scholarship

2011; 2012 Antonio J. Waring, Jr. Research Scholarship

## Selected Scholarly Presentations

- Oct 2017 “Now You See Us: Fighting Queer Invisibility in Theatrical Magic.”  
Oral presentation at UCLA Queer Graduate Conference, Los Angeles, CA.
- Sep 2017 “The Honest Liar: Magicians, Spectators, and the Participatory Performance of Power.” Oral presentation at CLASP V, Boulder, CO.
- Apr 2016 “Competing Discussions of Gendered Violence in the YouTube Community.” Panel presentation at Thinking Gender 2016, Los Angeles, CA.
- Dec 2014 “Dark Enough to See the Stars: YouTube Celebrity and the Cycle of Abuse.” Poster presentation at the 113<sup>th</sup> American Anthropological Association Meeting, Washington, D.C.
- Apr 2013 “Talk Nerdy to Me: ‘Geeky’ Language as a Mechanism of Social Cohesion and Identity Formation in a Digitized World.” Oral presentation at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research, La Crosse, WI.
- Mar 2012 “Becoming American? International Student Perspectives on Identity and Culture.” Oral presentation at the Southern Anthropological Society Conference, Birmingham, AL.

## Leadership and Community Service

### *Conference Planning and Coordination*

- 2016 Racialized State Violence in Global Perspective, *Volunteer*  
2014 - 2016 CLIC-GSA Conference, *Vice Chair*

### *Other Volunteer Experience*

- 2014 - 2016 Crossroads, *Editor*  
2014 - 2015 AGSA 8-Year Review Committee, *Research Coordinator*

## Introduction

The magician—let’s call him Jonathon—was dressed all in black: oversized black vest embroidered with carrion birds, black T-shirt screen-printed with the name of some local band, ratty black jeans with frayed threads at the cuffs. Thick silver rings decorated each finger, wedged tightly beneath his hairy knuckles, and his eyes were keen and observant under the shadow of his bushy white eyebrows. Even if you didn’t notice the faint, square-shaped bulge in his pocket (courtesy of a well-worn pack of Bicycle-branded playing cards), or the double-sided dollar bill that he kept folded neatly in his wallet, you probably wouldn’t have had much trouble guessing his profession.

If we’d met at the quiet, hipster-friendly coffeehouse that we’d originally planned to visit, Jonathon might not have looked so out of place. However, the coffee shop turned out to be closed on Mondays, and his second choice—a local tavern that, according to the shabby chalkboard sign out front, sold The World’s Best Burgers—wouldn’t open until noon. Instead, we ended up at a family-oriented pizza parlor, complete with laminated tables, greasy linoleum floors, and a team of smiley, perky-voiced waitresses. As Jonathon and I made our way to our seats, we got more than a few curious looks, all of which Jonathon dutifully ignored.

“Tell me about your project,” Jonathon said, his tone kind but brisk. I took a quick, fortifying bite of *pizza napoletana*, then dove into my elevator pitch. The plan, I told him, was for me to spend the next couple of years hobnobbing with magicians in the Los Angeles area, learning the ins and outs of the magic business and figuring out what it takes to do magic for a living.

The pitch was rather vague and unfocused, and for good reason: I was making it up as I went along. My original research plan—that is, the one that I’d presented to my dissertation committee as part of my proposal—had centered on analyzing the nature of magician-audience interactions, particularly as it relates to gender, asymmetrical knowledge, and the collaborative

negotiation of power. During my proposal defense, my committee members warned me—with ever-increasing levels of urgency—that a project based on audience observation would be logistically difficult, especially if I didn't figure out a reliable way to quickly and efficiently log all observed interactions for the purpose of qualitative analysis, as well as to solicit interviews with audience members in order to gain an understanding of their interior lives. Without a workable method of accurately studying the audience, my understanding of magician-audience interaction would ultimately be one-dimensional and lopsided. Now, more than three months after my defense, I'd finally deigned to accept that my committee had been right.

By the time I met Jonathon, I was trapped in a professional panic. Up until this point, most of my interviews with magicians had been intended as a supplement to my observational work, and therefore focused on questions about the nature of the magician-audience relationship: how do you navigate a successful interaction when one interlocutor (the magician, usually male) knows the social script and another (the audience volunteer, usually female) does not? How do gendered understandings of agency and objectification influence the ways in which the magician and the audience are able to engage with each other? Does the asymmetrical distribution of knowledge produce a power differential between the magician and the audience? If so, how does gendered power shape the overall structure of the magical performance? But if magician-audience interaction was no longer going to be the focus of my project, I needed to figure out what new direction my research would take—and I needed to figure it out fast.

Jonathon listened to my pitch, and then, when I'd finally run out of meaningless buzzwords to throw around, said, "You know what's wrong with academics?"

*Inability to take criticism*, I thought. "No, what?"

"They think they know everything." He took a bite of pepperoni pizza, and then—with a faint grimace of distaste, familiar to any native New Yorker who's been forced to consume a

California slice—washed it down with a swig of Diet Pepsi. “They say they want to study magic, but they ignore our histories, our lectures, our essays.” To prove his point, he listed several dense, academic tomes that had recently been published, many of which I’d read as part of my doctoral qualifying exams. “Look at their bibliographies. Who do they cite? Academics! Not magicians—*never* magicians. [Academics] say they want to study magic, but they don’t bother to read what *magicians* have to say.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Because our opinions aren’t worth anything,” he said. “At least, not to *them*.” He glanced down at his pizza as if wondering whether to take another bite, and then apparently decided not to chance it. Instead, he leaned forward in his seat, fixing me with a steady, all-seeing stare. “So if what you want to do with your project is follow magicians around for a year, that’s all well and good. But remember: magicians were here first, and we know what we’re talking about. Don’t ignore what we have to say.”

Anthropologists have a long history of documenting the beliefs and behaviors of a given population—often through the benevolently biased lens of a Western observer—and then publishing these observations for both academic and popular consumption. This form of scholarly work can sometimes be valuable in that it highlights ways of thinking, feeling, and being that are often obscured by a global hegemony that systemically devalues and invisibilizes subaltern communities. Still, it can’t be ignored that anthropological research has often served as an instrument of imperial power: by circulating ethnographic narratives that encode “cultural difference” into rigid, ethnically-defined categories (see Pratt 1992, Pels and Salemink 1999); by allowing itself to be operationalized and instrumentalized by agents of the imperialist state (e.g. Habashi 2015); by feeding neatly into hegemonic regimes of knowledge production, with academic representations of disempowered subjects being held as more legitimate than “folk” representations

of the same (see Merilainen et al. 2008, Paasi 2015, Moreton-Robinson 2004). As anthropologist Audra Simpson (2007) writes: “In different moments, anthropology has imagined itself to be a voice, and in some disciplinary iterations, *the* voice of the colonised. This modern interlocutory role was not self-ascribed by anthropologists, nor was it without a serious material and ideational context; it accorded with the imperatives of Empire and in this, specific technologies of rule that sought to obtain space and resources, to define and know the difference that it constructed in those spaces and to then govern those within.” In this way, ethnographic modes of knowledge production are often undergirded by privilege, colonialist logics, and other mechanisms of Empire.

While I had often thought about the myriad of ways in which academic research in general—and anthropological research in particular—can contribute to the invisibilization of subaltern voices, it had never before occurred to me think about how similar (though, to be clear, not identical) invisibilizing processes might impact Los Angeles magicians—that is, a community of wealthy, white Westerners based in one of the world’s richest cities. By virtue of their relative wealth, power, and privilege, magicians are generally unaffected by the same differential access to power that affects, say, the indigenous groups for whom scholarly work often serves to reenact mechanisms of colonial dispossession (Moreton-Robinson 2004, Simpson 2007); the queer sexual communities for whom scholarly work systemically depoliticizes the queer experience, thereby “transforming systemic projects of resistance into commodified, private acts of rebellion” (Mohanty 2013: 968; see also Weiss 2015); the sex workers for whom scholarly work justifies policy discussions that include politicians, industrialists, and academics, but not the sex workers themselves (see Jello 2013). In this way, the invisibilizing mechanisms of academic research only serve to deepen and bolster the disempowerment of marginalized communities, and it’s difficult to imagine the same level of systemic disenfranchisement being experienced by Los Angeles magicians, a community that occupies a position of relative power.

But although magicians certainly aren't as politically disempowered by invisibilization as the disenfranchised communities who occupy the margins, that isn't to say that magicians are not devalued at all. As philosopher Chris Goto-Jones (2016: 35) writes, magicians and magic-oriented academics have "developed separate bodies knowledge about magic and separate systems of qualifications to recognize and grant access to them. [...] While the academy recognizes the expertise of magicians as performers, their status as 'professors of magic' is usually ignored or viewed as a quaint quirk of an eccentric subculture; magicians are at best amateur scholars." As Jonathon pointed out, some academics who study magic seem to blithely disregard the intellectual labor of the magicians themselves, preferring instead to treat them like clownish, unthinking beings who cannot rightly be understood as experts in their own domain. And magic's devaluation extends far beyond academia's condescending attitude toward magical knowledge. Magicians make for easy punching bags in stand-up comedy routines, with comedians drawing humor from the fact that magicians dare to care so much about a pastime that many non-magicians see as hokey, childish, and inartistic. In the Los Angeles entertainment scene, magic is often understood as one of the lowest forms of performance art, as criminally uncool as ventriloquism and clowning. And for every academic colleague who responded with enthusiasm whenever I brought up the topic of my dissertation, there'd be another whose nose would wrinkle with polite disgust: "Magicians?" they'd say, eyes narrowed, as if trying to figure out whether I was making a joke. "Like, with the top hats and everything? Why would you study *that*?" In this way, the magic community experiences something like a distant cousin to the marginality of the subaltern: a symbolic devaluation rather than a political one, less disenfranchisement than disregard. Obviously, this disregard is nowhere near as socially, politically, and financially damaging as other, more serious modes of marginalization. Still, by exploring the roots and consequences of magic's devaluation, we can answer important questions about taste and the social power of "cool"; how competing systems of aesthetic value are circulated

within overlapping communities of practice; and what forms of cultural production are allowed to be called “art.”

At its core, this dissertation is about value. Magicians—much like the other artistic workers who make up the local entertainment scene—are firmly enmeshed within a complex system of value that systemically hierarchizes creative products into aesthetic categories: “art” and “not art,” “cool” and “uncool,” “legitimate” and “illegitimate,” “tasteful” and “tasteless.” In response to mainstream aesthetic evaluations that routinely label magic as a form of kitsch, unworthy of respect or serious critical consideration, Los Angeles magicians engage in a variety of strategies designed to re-legitimize the world of magical performance. Chief among these strategies is the construction of a competing aesthetic value system, one that allows magicians to reject mainstream assumptions about magic’s artlessness; reevaluate magic as a form of artistic expression, complete with clear stylistic rules about what counts as “good” magic; and, in so doing, enables magicians to establish themselves as true artists. This aesthetic system comes with its own brand of hierarchization, one that aligns the concept of “good magic” with the white, heteromale subject. Because of this, female magicians and magicians of color can often find it difficult to penetrate a close-knit community that has long been built on homophily, protectionism, and geeky gatekeeping.

Additionally, the magic community’s valorization of the artistic possibilities offered by magical performance has had little impact on mainstream ideas about magic’s value—a particularly critical concern, considering how the increasing popularity of precarious, risk-bearing labor formations has normalized the (self-)exploitation and economic devaluation of magicians and other creative workers. By exploring the importance of taste—and distaste—in the hierarchical construction of the modern entertainment industry, this dissertation interrogates the ways in which Los Angeles magicians navigate competing aesthetic value systems that alternately valorize magical performance and revile it. Contemporary magicians have internalized standards of goodness that elevate white masculine



performers over their non-white, non-masculine counterparts. To talk about value, then, isn't just to debate how cool magic is, or whether magic counts as art: rather, it's to investigate the broader impact that aesthetic evaluation has on how magicians are debased, derided, and disregarded within the modern entertainment machine—not just by audiences and other laymen, but by each other.

### **The Setup: Background Information**

Los Angeles is a city of magic. Plucked from hardscrabble obscurity thanks to the efforts of boosterist businessmen, industrialists, and investors, what was once a humble frontier town was swiftly remade into proof positive of the power of imagination: a turn-of-the-century Eden whose orange-scented air would cure invalids of their ills; a verdant, idyllic paradise where the *pueblo's* predominantly white residents could fictionalize and glorify the halcyon days of Spanish missionization. Over the years, the city's history has been so thoroughly rewritten, its infrastructure so thoroughly redeveloped, that Los Angeles seems to be as much a real, tangible entity as it is a figment of the imagination—a palimpsest of illusions, layered one on top of the other, until the boundary between truth and fiction is indelibly blurred. Perhaps it is this very capacity for fictionalization and myth-making that has helped to secure Los Angeles's position as the entertainment capital of the world: as anthropologist Sherry Ortner (2010) writes, "...the products of Hollywood—movies and the larger world of cultural mythology of which movies partake—are all about illusions, and the boundaries around the production process, and especially around actors, are important for maintaining those illusions." Indeed, cultural production has neatly been instrumentalized as part of the city's myth-making project, weaving the idealized "Hollywood" image into the amorphous hagiography of Los Angeles. In this way, the Los Angeles entertainment industry has produced a unique social universe, one wherein the illusory logics and rhetorics of

Hollywood production has helped to shape not just the cultural landscape of the city, but also its infrastructures, its politics, and its labor formations.

So although Los Angeles isn't quite synonymous with magical performance in the same way as Las Vegas (best known for the marquee names that populate the Strip), Chicago (land of street hustlers and cardsharps), or Paris (the symbolic birthplace of modern magic), I would argue that Los Angeles is a key place to understand the development of the American magic industry. Thanks to the close proximity of the Hollywood entertainment complex, Los Angeles magicians are firmly enmeshed within a social system that links creative professionals via informal networks of performers, writers, directors, and producers. Because of this, the Los Angeles magic scene is unique in that Hollywood mechanisms of inclusion are effectively layered over the magic community's mechanisms of the same. If Hollywood is "a culture that thrives on exclusion," wherein "most people are obsessed with being even further 'inside,' on getting a first-look, the right of first refusal, the hottest invitations" (Vachon and Bunn 2006: 7), then the magic community is its geekier, more mysterious cousin. Throughout the world, magicians carefully police access by maintaining close social circles built on comradeship, vouchsafing, and secret-keeping, as well as by instrumentalizing "hierarchies of expertise" (Jones 2011: 45) that judge a potential insider's worthiness by evaluating his technical skill. In the Los Angeles magic community, then, the insider-outsider dynamic is effectively doubled: on the one hand, the oft-glamorized social mechanisms of the Hollywood machine, which centers the hierarchical ecosystem of "the Industry" as the key locus for professional growth; on the other, the careful community-building of the modern magic scene, which requires professional magicians to constantly prove that they are technically proficient...or, at the very least, well-regarded by their peers. To be a magician in Los Angeles, then, is not just to manage the aesthetic expectations of the magic community, but also to struggle to navigate a closed ecosystem that hierarchizes different modes of cultural production based on their perceived worth

to the Hollywood entertainment complex—an evaluative process that typically ends with magicians being placed somewhere toward the bottom of the social ladder.

That isn't to say, of course, that Los Angeles is the only place where magicians must fight to fit themselves into a local entertainment scene that routinely devalues magical labor. In his ethnography of the French magic scene, anthropologist Graham Jones (2011) noted the various ways in which magicians are disrespected within the world of professional entertainment: for example, not being provided a dressing room or complimentary drinks by the performance venue, small benefits that other hired performers often receive as a matter of course (ibid 195). In many cases, to work as a magician is to constantly have others within the entertainment industry deny your status as a "legitimate professional," a creative worker who is worthy of courtesy and respect. However, I would argue that if the global magic scene is one that exhibits "patterns of disvaluation in which doing magic is not considered a particularly respectable career choice by standards of either social utility or cultural merit" (ibid 195), then Los Angeles is a place wherein this experience of degradation is intensified. Here, the "social universe and cultural formations of Hollywood are literally soaked into the spaces and events of the city" (Ortner 2010: 221), with Hollywood's aesthetic value system shaping every aspect of an Industry professional's creative life: the connections he makes, the clubs and venues he visits, the performance style he develops, the gigs he's able to receive. Additionally, some young magicians—much like other starry-eyed artists who make their way to Los Angeles—are taken in by the "Hollywood Dream," the idea that if an aspiring creative professional works hard enough, meets the right people, and keeps their nose to the grindstone, they might, someday, get their big break. Because of this, anyone with the goal of "striking it big" is expected to internalize Hollywood values in the interest of getting ahead. As one magician told me: "Los Angeles isn't where you go to get good [at magic]. It's where you go to try

and get on TV.” Because of this, the Los Angeles magic scene is one wherein the professional space is firmly grounded within the aesthetic value systems of the Hollywood culture machine.

## **The Performance: Theory and Practice**

### ***Review of Relevant Literature***

#### *Theories of Value*

In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* (2001), David Graeber argues that when contemporary scholars say that they are engaging with a “theory of value,” they are generally drawing upon one of three bodies of work: on economic theory of value, which focuses on profit, commoditization, and desirability; and linguistic value, which focuses on a given word’s webs of meaning; and a sociological theory of values (with an s, a la “family values”), which focuses on morality and aesthetic goodness. The first school of thought has its roots in Marxist labor theory and the rejections thereof (Jaffe and Lusht 2003), with various theorists arguing about whether a given object is desirable because of its economic value or the other way around (see Lordon 2014); and about whether an object’s desirability is intersubjective and socially determined, or if said desirability is something that is inherent to the market, the material space, or the object itself (see Campbell 1991). The second school of thought has its roots in Saussurean Structuralism (1916[2011]), which holds that the value (i.e. meaning) of a given word was constructed via “meaningful distinctions,” with words only taking on meaning in contrast with words in the same language. As such, meaning-making is something particular to a given social context, necessarily shaped by the formal organization of ideas into hierarchies of goodness and badness (see Dumont 1982). The third school of thought is the most broadly painted and loosely defined, with different social theorists harboring vastly disconnected ideas about the topic: Clyde Kluckhohn, for example, whose comparative study of values focused on cataloging how different cultures conceptualize

“assumptions about the ends and purposes of human existence” and “what human beings have a right to expect from each other and the gods” (Kluckhohn 1949: 358-59); David M. Schneider, whose work used a moral relativistic frame to explore the webs of meaning and metaphoric value connected to kinship categories (see Feinberg and Ottenheimer 2001); Clifford Geertz, whose approach to cultural theory is largely grounded by the fundamental idea that “securing universal agreement about what is good, true, beautiful, or efficient in life is rarely possible across cultures” and that the “ecumenical impulse” to devalue (or even eradicate) difference is not a cause to be celebrated (Shweder 2005:2). In considering these three schools of thought, Graeber’s work demonstrates how each school pulls from similar ideas about goodness and desirability, as well as how to explore the ways in which each school’s theoretical flaws have reemerged in contemporary theories of value.

My dissertation project most closely draws upon Graeber’s work, critically recognizing the academic genealogy that has given the concept of “value” such a fuzzy, amorphous shape, as well as acknowledging how value systems are embedded within complex, dynamic structures of social production, imagination, and collective meaning-making. Additionally, I follow the lead of anthropologists like Arjun Appadurai (1988) and Fred Meyers (2001) in recognizing the ways in which value is socially constructed through economic exchange, with assessments of aesthetic goodness shaping—and, indeed, being shaped by—flows of capital. I also draw on the work of anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998), who acknowledged the ways in which the veneration of art objects is driven by ideology, and who also demonstrated how the production and circulation of art is necessarily “sustained by certain social processes of an objective kind, which are connected to other social processes (exchange, politics, religion, kinship, etc.)” (p. 3). By building on these anthropological theories of value, this dissertation project recognizes that aesthetic judgments are not products of personal taste so much as they are manifestations of social and political power.

### *Cultural Production in the American City*

Though U.S.-based anthropological research has existed as long as the discipline of anthropology itself (see Cattelino 2010), postcolonial critiques of ethnography as an American imperialist project (Maskovsky 2009, De Genova 2007, Moffatt 1992)—one that reifies a dichotomy between the anthropologist and the “Other” (see Marcus 1999, di Leonardo 1998, Fabian 1983)—have ushered in an era of critical reflection upon the manners in which anthropologists should engage with the United States as an object of ethnographic inquiry. Through the rigorous analysis of American cultures, histories, and political economies (e.g. Holmes 2013; Benson 2012; Cattelino 2008; Ho 2009), contemporary anthropologists have destabilized taken-for-granted understandings of white “heartland” (see Baker 2003) communities and/or white bourgeois communities as comprehensive visions of American life (see Cattelino 2010). This project contributes to this academic discourse by building upon the work of anthropologists who have studied American modes of cultural production—e.g. film (Ortner 2013; Sutton and Wogan 2009); couture and street fashion (Luvaas 2016, Kondo 1997, Hansen 2004); music (Peterson 2012, Alim 2006, Fox 2004, Mahon 2004)—as objects of cultural critique. By examining the Los Angeles magic scene as a site of generative meaning-making, this project explores questions about how gendered, classed, and racialized inequalities are articulated within the social field of an American performance community.

As such, the proposed project contributes to the anthropology of urban life, particularly with regards to the role of the city as a key site of cultural production. While there is some epistemological risk of essentializing the “city” as a single monolithic entity (see Lynch 1996) as well of unnecessarily dichotomizing the rural and the urban (see Toulson 2015), the “city” remains useful as an object of critical discussion, with many anthropological voices pointing to the city as a gendered space wherein women must negotiate participation within an urbanized, internationalized,

and neoliberalized labor market (e.g. Mullings 2014, Repak 2010, Spain 1992, Wilson 1992, Low 1996, di Leonardo 1993). As such, this work engages with literatures that emphasize the gendered nature of the urban space, pointing to ways in which gendered actors negotiate their participation in urbanized labor markets (see Schmitz 2017, Kasmir and Carbonella 2008, Goodman 2000) and learn how to navigate intersecting networks of publics (see Brenner 2011, Gal and Kligman 2000, di Leonardo 1991). Through the examination of the magicians and non-magicians that make up the Los Angeles magic scene, this project contributes to academic discourse regarding the social and political infrastructure of the Angeleno urban space (e.g. Davis 2006; Gottlieb et al. 2005; Halle 2003; Fulton 2001), particularly with regards to the gendered structural processes of Los Angeles's male-dominated entertainment industry. More than this, this project provides an academic framework for understanding the ways in which aesthetic value systems influence the social infrastructures and labor formations within the urban space.

### *Studying Magic*

The study of magic is—forgive the pun—a rather tricky business. For one thing, there's all the secrets: as philosopher Chris Goto-Jones (2016) points out, “Magic is a field of knowledge that is shrouded (and shrouds itself) in secrecy, constructing an epistemic community that is (at least to some extent) separate from the conventional world of the academy” (p. 2). In becoming “custodians of restricted knowledge shared with a constituency of other stakeholders whom they may or may not know” (Jones 2011: 94), magicians have constructed a social environment wherein secret knowledge is carefully shielded from outsiders. This can present external researchers with various problems of access: in historiography, for example, when an inability to visit private, members-only libraries of magical texts makes it difficult for historians to familiarize themselves with key genealogies of magical thought; in ethnography, when penetrating layers of obfuscation and embellishment makes

it difficult for the ethnographer to separate truth from fiction. Related to this is the problem of scholarly bifurcation. As discussed earlier, there exist two main bodies of knowledge regarding the theory and practice of Western magic: the growing collection of scholarly research completed by non-magician academics, outsiders to the magical profession whose work magicians often view with a mix of suspicion and disdain; and the histories and theoretical texts written by self-styled “professors of magic,” magician scholars whose expertise is often disregarded by academics—thanks to a general lack of scholarly recognition, or to the aforementioned problems of access, or both.

Over the past decade, there has been an increased effort to address these gaps in the scholarly literature. For example, “scholar-magicians” like Eugene Burger, Lawrence Hass (see Hass et al. 2008), and Chris Goto-Jones have used their positions as both magicians and academics to help to bridge the divide between magical and academic knowledge, producing work that can be taken seriously within both the world of academia and the world of magic. Their efforts fit neatly within a broader scholarly push to not just treat magic as a subject worthy of academic interest, but to recognize the intellectual labor of the magical historians and theoreticians who already populate the discipline. This new breed of scholarship has focused on a broad variety of academic interests, ranging from exploring magical performance as a site of meaning-making and identity-formation (e.g. Dearborn 2008; Goto-Jones 2016; Bruns and Zompetti 2014), as a form of embodied labor situated within a precarious labor market (e.g. Stebbins 1982; Coppa 2008), as a culture of expertise built on the assessment of technical ability, (e.g. Rissanen et al. 2014, Jones 2011) and as a cultural product of the imperialist gentleman class (e.g. During 2009; Solomon 2008). In addition to expanding upon these scholarly works by adding the lens of aesthetic value, this dissertation also draws inspiration from the work of magicians like Jamy Ian Swiss (2002), Eugene Burger (e.g. Hass and Burger 2019), Robert E. Neale (e.g. Burger and Neale 1995), and Tommy Wonder (Wonder et



al. 1996), who have each extensively discussed the value, artistry, and aesthetics of magical performance.

This project expands the existing scholarly literature by examining magical performance through the lens of ethnography. Because ethnography recognizes the importance of cultural context when examining social phenomena, ethnographic fieldwork provides the best means through which I can examine the specific social mechanisms that undergird the Los Angeles magic community, particularly as it relates to aesthetic value. As such, my project most closely engages with other ethnographic studies on magical performance (e.g. Nardi 1988; Jones 2011; Stebbins 1982), which focus on portraying localized magic communities as unique and vibrant social worlds. Magicians in these cultural spaces engage in a broad variety of social activities: reifying informal networks via structured patterns of inclusion and exclusion, such as by protecting secret knowledge from members of the outgroup (Jones 2011, Jones 2014); engaging in processes of mentorship and collaboration that socialize magicians to the beliefs and behaviors of professionalized performance (Jones 2011; Stebbins 1982); enacting structural expectations regarding gendered and racialized performance (Nardi 2010, 1988, Goto-Jones 2016, Jones 2011); and carefully negotiating a social dialectic of magical and mundane (Nardi 1984). This dissertation builds upon this body of work by recognizing the ways in which these social processes are shaped by aesthetic value systems.

### ***Methods***

Like most ethnographic research, my project was grounded in participant observation. From October 2015 to April 2019, I explored all of the magical haunts this city had to offer, including: the Academy of Magical Arts' Magic Castle, a members-only clubhouse in Hollywood that many magicians unironically refer to as “the mecca of magic”; the Black Rabbit Rose in Hollywood, a speakeasy-style dinner theater that features an expensive cocktail menu and a setlist of spooky

variety acts; Magicopolis, a family-friendly performance venue and magic store located in downtown Santa Monica; Scot Nery's Boobie Trap, a Hollywood-based variety show where magicians, jugglers, contortionists, and other artists perform a smorgasbord of quick, four-minute acts. I set up alerts on my phone so that I wouldn't miss the pop-up shows that magicians would have at theatrical venues throughout the Los Angeles area, with my quest for magic shows taking me as far north as the San Fernando Valley, as far south as Long Beach, and as far west as Pasadena. Whenever possible, I also shadowed magicians as they performed gigs in private venues like birthday parties, bar mitzvahs, and corporate events. In addition to this, I also joined a few different magic classes that were being hosted around the city: one held by students at UCLA, less of a formal teacher-student arrangement than an *ad hoc* tutoring service for UCLA students interested in developing their magic skills; another taught by the magician Jon Lovick (professionally known as "Handsome Jack") at USC, again targeted toward university students; and a series of \$300 classes based at the Magic Castle, which attracted urban professionals with plenty of money to burn and, more often than not, a vested interest in eventually qualifying for Castle membership. In attending a broad variety of shows, immersing myself in a broad variety of classes, and meeting as many different people as possible, I was able to build a polyvocal, comprehensive idea about the Los Angeles magic scene.

Of all these different field sites, the most well-trodden stomping ground was the Magic Castle, the aforementioned members-only magicians' clubhouse. Though I was not myself a member, I didn't have much trouble finagling my way inside. Members regularly invited me into the club: sometimes as a dinner guest, which meant that I would have to pay for an expensive (and, frankly, not particularly appetizing) dinner in the club's fancy dining room in order to be allowed into the building; but more often as a personal guest, which meant that the member would personally escort me into the Castle, and then would either hang out with me the whole night or else leave me to my own devices. Additionally, I was at one point enrolled in the Castle's magic classes,

which entitled me to a guest pass that allowed me into the club, albeit not on any of the Castle's busiest nights. By the end of my fieldwork period, I was such a common sight that the bartenders knew my regular order (apple pie with a scoop of ice cream), and the bouncers and front desk attendants took to just waving me inside, even after my guest pass had long since expired. Going to the Castle so often allowed me to engage in what Clifford Geertz (1998) would call "deep hanging out," a form of participant observation wherein the ethnographer is informally immersed in a given social field. This method is uniquely able to produce a rich, evocative account of cultural value within artistic spaces (see Walmsley 2018), allowing the ethnographer to capture not just the feel and experience of existing within this social environment, but also to more intuitively conceptualize the social relationships that undergird a given scene. By chatting with, eavesdropping on, and just hanging out with the various people I met while exploring the Castle—the workers: bartenders and bouncers, ushers and cocktail waitresses; the members: professional magicians, hobbyist magicians, wealthy non-magicians who could afford the exorbitant price tag of non-magician membership; the guests: wide-eyed tourists from out of town, wives and girlfriends of current members, journalists—I was able to get a full idea of what it means to be a member (or, more often, *not* a member) of one of the most exclusive clubs in town.

In addition to participant observation, I also conducted one-on-one, in-depth, person-centered interviews with over sixty Los Angeles-based magicians, the vast majority of whom were either professional (with all of their take-home income coming from the magic industry) or semi-professional (with only some income coming from magic). In reaching out to potential interviewees, I deliberately oversampled female participants: while overall female membership in the professional magic community hovers at about ten percent, my interview pool was about forty percent female. This was by design: rather than expecting a small sample of women to speak for all female

magicians, oversampling female participants allowed me to develop a more representative idea of the full spectrum of thoughts and feelings experienced by women in magic.

The age range of interviewees was very broad: most participants were between 25 and 45 years old, with the youngest participants being 18 and the oldest being over 70. Socioeconomic backgrounds varied less wildly, with most interviewees coming from middle-class families, although there were a few outliers from very low-income or high-income backgrounds. In terms of current social class, the majority of participants were either wealthy or upper middle class: for professional magicians, this money was usually earned in consulting (e.g. designing magical effects for fellow magicians, film sets, or Broadway shows) or in high-paying corporate gigs (e.g. performing magic at business retreats); for semi-professionals, this wealth was usually generated through day jobs in high-income service professions, such as tech, film production, and finance<sup>1</sup>.

Almost all of the participants were white, with five Asian magicians, two Hispanic magicians, and two black magicians added into the mix. I attempted to oversample non-white performers in much the same way I oversampled female performers, but found it challenging to recruit non-white participants. One possible explanation for this is that the Los Angeles magic scene is overwhelmingly white, with more magicians of color being found in places like San Francisco, New Orleans, and Chicago. Another problem could be methodology: I generally used the “snowball” method when trying to recruit new participants, with the first few magicians that I interviewed referring me to more interviewees, who introduced me to more interviewees, who in turn introduced me to still more interviewees. While this is a good way to develop a sense of underlying social networks, it also tends to backfire if, say, your interviewees tend to only have white friends. Because

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<sup>1</sup> Salary information was usually self-reported: while research participants were often understandably reluctant to give me exact figures, they were comfortable giving me ballpark estimates that allowed me to approximate their class positionality. If salary information was not forthcoming, I would instead make careful estimates based on available statistics for their given profession.

of this, my project has had the unintentional side effect of reenacting the racial inequalities of the contemporary magic scene, with white performers forming the core of my research sample. As such, further exploring the experiences of non-white magicians—such as young magicians of color active on websites like Instagram, who I briefly discuss in Chapter 2—would be a useful avenue of future research.

Although many research participants waived their right to anonymity, I have chosen to fully anonymize all of the data, since I believe that many of the intensely private things that magicians told me—about the Magic Castle, about what it’s like to work as a magician, about what counts as “good” magic—could negatively affect their personal or professional lives. Since the magic community is so small and insular, anonymization is not just a matter of obscuring names (“one magician said...”) or using pseudonyms (“Jonathon” in the story above), but also of removing or changing personal details that might reveal a participant’s identity.

### **The Prestige: Overview of the Dissertation**

In Chapter 1, I examine the early development of the Los Angeles culture industries, looking at how mythmakers and boosterist rhetorics reinvented the city as a place of leisure and, as a result, enkindled the rapid growth of the city’s entertainment sector. By mapping the ways in which the growing power of the film and entertainment industries has shaped the material and political infrastructures of the city, I explore how magicians have carefully articulated themselves within the political and economic realities of the Los Angeles entertainment complex.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the cultural transformations during the early 20th century that helped to reposition magical performance as an “inartistic” artform, solidifying its place in the lowest rung of the Hollywood value system. In order to resist claims that magic is “bad art,” magicians have

developed a value system that carefully separates “good” magicians from “bad,” thereby reproducing the same aesthetic hierarchies that condemn magic to the margins of Hollywood entertainment.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I argue that these aesthetic hierarchies have aligned standards of magical “goodness” with the white, heteromasculine subject. Indeed, these discourses of aesthetic value help to justify the gatekeeping processes that discourage women, people of color, and members of other marginalized groups from penetrating key nodes of access.

In Chapter 5, I point out that magicians, like other creative workers within the Los Angeles entertainment complex, are firmly ensconced within webs of risk and precarity built upon flexible labor formations. But although creative workers in other industries have increasingly campaigned against the precarious aspects of artistic work, discourses of anti-precarity are largely absent from the Los Angeles magic community. This could be due to an aesthetic value system that strategically valorizes the technical labor of magical performance whilst simultaneously invisibilizing the precarious labor of creative work.

## Chapter 1: Castles

“Los Angeles has always been a company town,” said Karl, a magician I first met several months before at a movie premiere’s crowded afterparty. The party had taken place a few short days after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and Karl spent most of the night prowling about the room in grim, stone-faced disappointment, nursing a well-filled glass of rum and Coke and barking at anyone who looked at him askance. Now, however, he was gentle and calm-eyed, his soft, wrinkled hands folded neatly on the table in front of him. When I asked him what it was like to do magic here in Los Angeles, he thought carefully before answering, and when he finally spoke, his words were measured and slow. “Do you know what that means? Company town?”

I nodded. “But can you explain it to me anyway?”

He smiled a bit, then leaned forward in his chair. “Back in the day, big companies—mining companies, oil companies—would make these little towns where their employees could live. They’d build a bunch of neat, little houses that’d all look just the same, and also maybe a school, a general store, a church, a movie theater: everything a town might need, all organized around whatever mine or factory the company was operating in the area. And the people who’d live in that town would all work for the same company, or if they didn’t, their families did. Everyone wakes up at the same time to go to work, and gets home from the factory at the same time, and watches the same shows on TV. And if the company ever went out of business...” His smile tightened. “Well. No town.”

“And you think Los Angeles is like that?”

“Well...perhaps not in the typical, blue-collar way.” After a few beats of silence, during which he stared ponderously at his mug of tea, he said, “Do you know why everything here closes so early?”

I admitted that I’d never noticed.

“It’s not like New York,” he said, “where you can go get a tattoo and some Ethiopian food at three in the morning, if you want. It’s a cliché, I suppose, to say that New York is ‘the city that never sleeps’—but it’s true. And it’s not just New York: Chicago, Las Vegas...pretty much any major metropolitan area is going to have something that appeals to the late-night crowd. So why not Los Angeles?”

He looked at me expectantly, but I shook my head, not knowing how to answer.

“Because of the movies!” said Karl. “Big film studios wanted to keep their actors on a tight leash. So all the big stars lived in apartments that [the studios] owned, and the backlots were filled with bars and restaurants and whatever else so that the actors would never have to leave. And [the studios] made sure that other businesses in Hollywood and Culver City and wherever else shut down by midnight or so, so that the stars never had any excuse to be out late at night.”

We talked for a bit about the apartments that the movie studios used to own in what is now central Hollywood. Though ownership of the buildings had long since changed hands, they’re still a popular choice amongst aspiring actors, comedians, and singers in the area, who are all too happy to overlook their apartment’s aging plumbing and lack of central air conditioning if it means that they can brag that Clara Bow or Marilyn Monroe used to live in the penthouse suite. Many magicians, Karl told me, made their homes in the area, not in the least because the Magic Castle—a members-only magicians’ club—was located nearby<sup>2</sup>. If you ever find yourself here late at night, you’ll surely notice the blaze of lights on Hollywood Boulevard, as well as the giddy, drunken laughter of tourists marching their way up the Walk of Fame. Even so, the residential parts of the area feel strangely restful after dark, giving the whole neighborhood an almost suburban feel.

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, some Los Angeles magicians like to refer to this area as “Magic Mile,” a nickname that, rather unsurprisingly, has failed to catch on with the general populace.



“If [the studios] had wanted Los Angeles to have nightlife,” Karl said, “it would’ve. But they didn’t, so it doesn’t.” He smiled, triumphantly, then sat back in his chair. “You see? Company town.”

Just as Paris has its *haute couture*, Florence its leather goods, and Champagne its sparkling wine, so too has Los Angeles become almost synonymous with one of its chief cultural exports: Hollywood film. Ever since the movies first came to Los Angeles, the entertainment industry has become increasingly central to the city’s political economy (see Christopherson 2008), with mechanisms of cultural production becoming indelibly linked to the very concept of “Los Angeles.” Indeed, the symbiosis of cultural and economic production—inevitable, given the nature of capitalism—has created a feedback loop of sorts: the profitability of Hollywood film increases its symbolic value; which deepens the semiotic linkages between the product (film) and the place (“Hollywood”); which heightens the reputation of “Hollywood film” as a cultural product; which, in turn, raises its economic value and, resultantly, its symbolic power. Over the course of a single century, the Los Angeles entertainment industry has blossomed into a multibillion-dollar powerhouse, dominant enough to have shaped the social, material, and economic development of the city. And while I would not go so far as to call Los Angeles a company town, its every street and church laid out according to corporate design, it is unarguable that Hollywood<sup>3</sup>—and Hollywood’s wealth—have left an indelible mark on Los Angeles’s political-economic infrastructure.

In one of a series of articles for *The Atlantic*, the French intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy (2005) decried Los Angeles as an unintelligible “prototype of a city,” one with no definable urban center, no recognizable border, no history, no heart. He writes:

Kevin Starr, the excellent California historian, takes me not far from Chinatown, to Olivera Street [*sic*] and Old Plaza, which are supposed to be the nucleus of what was once called El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this chapter, I’ll often use “Hollywood” as a shorthand for the Los Angeles entertainment industry as a whole, not just the film industry.

la Reina de Los Angeles. But they are dead places. It's a neighborhood frozen in time. However much Starr leaps from house to house, with his considerable bulk proving surprisingly agile, with his ink-blue too-warm suit and his bow tie that makes him look like a private eye out of Raymond Chandler, to explain to me how gargantuan Los Angeles was born from this tiny seed; for all this, something isn't right. You don't feel any possible common denominator between this stone museum, these relics, and the vital, luxuriant enormousness of the city.

This idea (i.e. that Los Angeles is a formless, imaginary simulation of a city, its material infrastructure clumsily hiding an inorganic, artificialized design) is not an uncommon one—particularly, I'd say, amongst expats from New York, a place that perhaps more neatly fits the Platonic ideal of a city. However, I would argue that it is Los Angeles's very formlessness that reveals its underlying logic—that is, the logic of capital. Perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in the creative industries, whose ascent to economic primacy in the region (see Kleinhenz et al. 2012) has had a dramatic impact on Los Angeles's cultural mythologies, as well as on its material and political landscape. By exploring the nested web of hierarchies embedded within the Los Angeles entertainment industry in particular and the city's social structure as a whole, we can critically assess the mechanisms through which creative workers in the entertainment industry articulate themselves within existing systems of value, meaning-making, and power.

In this chapter, I will explore the importance of myth-making to the urban development of Los Angeles, explaining how boosterist rhetorics have served as tools of economic growth throughout the city's history, as well as how these rhetorics have been carefully reworked, reimagined, and recirculated in order to best suit the urban elite's most current strategy for capital accumulation. Indeed, myth-making is especially important with regards to understanding the development of the Los Angeles entertainment industry: not only did mythic narratives lure the entertainment industry to Los Angeles in the first place, they also cunningly incorporated the “Hollywood” concept into the overarching myth of the city, thereby re-centering cultural production as a key engine of economic growth and infrastructural development. Additionally, the consolidation

of cultural power within the film and television industries helped to disenfranchise workers in other creative industries (e.g. professional magic), forcing these workers to strategically exploit their proximity to the “Hollywood” myth in order to find a place amongst the city’s professional class. By unweaving the tangled relationship between Los Angeles’s magic community and more “traditional” culture industries, this chapter will demonstrate how magical performance in this city has been shaped by bourgeois tastes, established patterns of marginalization and disempowerment, and the political and economic realities of show business.

## **Part I: The Imaginary City**

### **Pistols and Other Cutlery**

On October 24, 1871, a mob gathered on la Calle de los Negros, close to what is now Union Station. Here, you could find plenty of businesses owned by Chinese immigrants: herb shops and washhouses, a general store, a medical practice, a small Chinese theater...but also plenty of saloons and *fan-tan* parlors, opium dens and brothel cribs (Faragher 2017). Apparently forgetting the fact that la Calle de los Negros had been a den of vice long before Chinese immigrants came to town, Los Angeles’s white and *californio* citizenry revolted against the “Chinese menace” that had infected the city with debauchery, and by the summer of 1871, violent crimes against Chinese residents had hit a new all-time high.

So it is perhaps unsurprising that on the 24th of October, when a dispute between two Chinese businessmen ended in the accidental death of a white bystander, Los Angelinos reacted with foam-mouthed rage. Frenzied by a rumor that the Chinese residents of la Calle de los Negros were “killing whites wholesale” (qtd. in de Falla 1960), five hundred men stormed the neighborhood with ropes, rifles, and handguns. Over the course of several hours, they lynched eighteen Chinese men in

the streets of Los Angeles, crying “¡Carajo la Chino!”<sup>4</sup> as they hung makeshift gallows from porches and carriages and rooftops.

Violence has long been written into the bones of this city: from the Spanish colonizers’ brutal regime of missionization, during which Indigenous people were shackled, whipped, raped, and killed by priests, soldiers, and other agents of the settler colonial project (see Teran 2016); to the age of banditry, vigilantism, and racial violence that accompanied California’s transition to American statehood (see Deverell 2005). So by the time a group of angry Angelinos murdered eighteen innocent men and left their brutalized bodies to hang above the streets of Los Angeles, the city had already solidified its reputation as one of the most violent cities in America. As an editor of the *Los Angeles Star* wrote in 1853 (qtd. in Faragher 2017):

There is no brighter sun, no milder clime, no more equable temperature, no scenes more picturesque, no greener valleys, no fairer plains in the wide world, than those we may look upon here...and yet, with all our natural beauties and advantages, there is no country where human life is of so little account. Men hack one another to pieces with pistols and other cutlery as if God’s image were of no more worth than the life of one of the two or three thousand ownerless dogs that prowl about our streets and make night hideous.

In many ways, frontier Los Angeles perfectly embodies the myth of the American West: “a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top” (Slotkin 1973:5), where the power and glory of the American empire is regenerated through the violence of the frontier. Despite this, popular understandings of Los Angeles’s history tend to begin at the close of the Victorian era, as if the glittering, 20th-century version of the city sprang fully formed from the sunbaked countryside. If—as the literary critic Thomas K. Whipple (1943:59) argues—the myth of the Old West is, for Americans, “our Trojan

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<sup>4</sup> Translated loosely as “Fuck the Chinaman!” Note the use of the feminine article *la* (as opposed to the masculine article *el*) when describing Chinese men, a symbolic emasculation that underscores the Angelinos’ contempt for Chinese immigrants.

War, our Volsunga Saga, our Arthurian cycle, our song of Roland,” then Los Angeles has been carefully written out of that narrative, erased from our country’s collective reimaginings of our bloody frontier past.

Plenty of scholarly works have previously tried to account for Los Angeles’s messy, amorphous relationship with its own history: *Thirdspace* (1996), for example, in which Edward W. Soja explores the blurry intersection between the material and the representational, confronting the ways in which the landscape of Los Angeles is simultaneously real and imagined; *The History of Forgetting* (1997), in which Norman Klein famously declared Los Angeles to be “the most photographed and least remembered city in the world” (p. 247), a city whose citizens are perennially in the process of rewriting their own collective memory; *City of Quartz* (2006[1992]) by Mike Davis and *Landscapes of Desire* (2000) by William McClung, both of which map the web of competing mythologies that have served to remake Los Angeles into a city of illusions. Evidence of this strange, blurry reality can be found throughout this city’s urban landscape—from Olvera Street, a “historic” district that presents a romantic, sanitized vision of California’s colonial past as a way to commodify the city’s relationship to old Mexico (Estrada 1999; Kropp 2001); to the Metropolitan Detention Center in Downtown LA, a sleek, stucco-and-glass skyscraper designed to look more like a museum than a prison (see Banham 2009:xx), thereby obfuscating and minimizing Los Angeles’s role as a key functionary of the carceral state (see Hernández 2017).

Of course, Los Angeles is not unique in how strategic mythmaking shapes its social, political, and material realities: consider Paris, London, or New York, all of which are cities that exist not just as lived spaces but also as dynamic, metadiscursive symbols. Still, there is something peculiarly dreamlike about the City of Angels, something that blurs the divide between “real” and “unreal” until one seems just as illusory as the other. As Edward W. Soja writes, “Los Angeles for the past century has been a fountainhead of imaginative fantasy, emitting a mesmerizing force that obscures

reality by eroding the difference between the real and the imagined, fact and fiction” (2014:1). In this way, Los Angeles more than any other city seems to perfectly embody Baudrillardian hyperreality (see Baudrillard 1994): a city so heavily mediatized and reimagined that its physical realities have been subsumed by an endless recursion of representations, redactions, and remembrances; a simulated place that exists not just in the material world but also in the realm of the imagination.

### **Rails, Riches...and Rebranding**

Shortly after the Chinese Massacre of 1871, residents of the Los Angeles *pueblo* learned that the Southern Pacific Transportation Company was extending its railroad. The planned rail line would begin in the sun-kissed metropolis of San Francisco, then go southeast from there to Fort Yuma—a route that would bypass Los Angeles completely. When pressed, the company offered to divert the main trunk of the rail line through Los Angeles County, but only if the impoverished municipality paid for 5 percent of the line’s projected value: \$610,000, or nearly \$11 billion in today’s currency (see Fogelson 1993).

After some heated deliberation, the rail subsidy was approved, and in September 1876, the region’s first transcontinental railroad rumbled into town, ready for an influx of new immigrants, tourists, and investors. But these expected new arrivals were slow in coming. With potential visitors cautioned away from by the eastern press—which sensationalized Los Angeles’s hard-won reputation for violence (see Faragher 2017) and constructed nightmarish imaginations of the city’s “malarial swamps” and “green tree snakes coiled in mossy tree branches” (Davis 1998: 11)—the urban development of the city threatened to stagnate. As critical geographer Mike Davis writes: “The railroad was at first a cruel disappointment, demanding much in tribute and delivering little in new trade...As late as 1883, local seers envisioned a purely parochial future” (Davis 2006:110-11) for

the city, rather than the bustling economic powerhouse that Southern Pacific—and its supporters—had once hoped for.

Southern Pacific had a problem. As an incentive to lay track in the area, the company had been gifted millions of acres' worth of government land—next to worthless now without an army of eager investors willing to buy it (Zimmerman 1985). Desperate to recuperate the company's investment in the region, Southern Pacific embarked upon an ambitious promotional campaign, blanketing East Coast cities with pamphlets and newspaper ads (see Gish 2007) that repackaged Los Angeles as a commodity.

With the bold flair of a carnival barker, Southern Pacific—along with its supporters, such as the newly created Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce—circulated pretty lithographs of plump oranges, golden rays of sunlight, rosy-cheeked women with vaguely “exotic” features (see Sullivan 2016). In doing this, they painted the crumbling backcountry *pueblo* of Los Angeles as “a magical lotus-land of sleepy adobes” (Klein 2008:32), a “Mediterranean” paradise freed of its hardscrabble frontier past. Brochures and newspaper ads championed the health benefits of Los Angeles's clean, citrus-scented air, luring as many as twenty thousand invalids to the city every year. Health-seeking retirees—convinced by images of the “fields of green and the homes of flowers and fruits, the balmy air, the brilliant sunshine pouring down its invigorating warmth upon the body and vitalizing the blood” (Netz 1915:56)—accepted the new myth of Los Angeles as scientific fact. Like Arachne at the loom, the city's boosters wove the new story of Los Angeles, and their shameless mythmaking helped to incite a frenzy of land speculation and in-migration. In 1887, just a decade after the original completion of the Southern Pacific line, “two thousand real-estate agents transacted over \$100 million in land sales” in the area (Davis 2006:111), several times what the region had once been worth.

Boosterism, then, has long played a key role in constructing the myth of Los Angeles, with Southern Pacific's need to attract real estate investors helping to magically transform Los Angeles from a dirty, unpaved backwater into an arcadian paradise. Indeed, this boosterist myth-making persisted throughout the twentieth century, with the city collecting a broad selection of new identities as a way to appeal to investors: the "city of the future" of the Jazz Age, when technorationalist boosters showcased Los Angeles's highways and oil derricks in order to present the city as a prototype of American progress (see Dinces 2005, Dyreson and Llewellyn 2008); the "leisure city" of the Great Depression, when civic organizations like the All-Year Club heavily promoted the city's recreational opportunities as a way to bolster the local tourist economy (Gish 2007, Zimmerman 1985, Riess 1981, White 2002); the "global city" of the Reagan Era, during which strategic investment in city centers and high-profile waterfront areas helped Los Angeles to reposition itself within an increasingly globalized and neoliberalized marketplace (Skot-Hansen 2019, Gottlieb 2007, Abu-Lughod 1999); the "sustainable city" of the late Anthropocene, which uses discourses of "urban revitalization" and "green design" to present Los Angeles as a leader in sustainable development (Swyngedouw et al. 2000, Ulin 2015). All these different myths have been strategically written into the story of Los Angeles, layered one atop the other, thereby generating an ambiguous, Janus-faced urban imaginary. In this way, the stories we tell ourselves about Los Angeles are inextricably linked with the city's relationship to capital.

### **The Ghost in the Machine**

In the late 1890s—less than two decades after the Southern Pacific and the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce remade the tiny town into a bustling tourist trap—the real estate boom went bust. Wealthy landowners became paupers overnight; whole townships limped into foreclosure (see



Netz 1915). By the end of the land rush, as many as one thousand people were abandoning Los Angeles every month (Zimmerman 1985), their California dreams in tatters.

Upon realizing that land speculation alone couldn't serve as a solid foundation for continuous urban development, the city's boosters turned their attention to industry (Scott and Soja 1994, Soja and Scott 1986, Davis 2002). Civic leaders like Harry Chandler—owner of the *Los Angeles Times*—and Harry Culver—real estate developer, as well as the founder of Culver City—used their political influence to entice aviation companies to the area, and local craft manufacturers became early developers of experimental, specialized machinery like airplanes and automobiles (Kleinhenz et al. 2012, Soja 1986). The discovery of rich petroleum deposits after World War I remade the Los Angeles Basin into the state's leading oil producer, with the region churning out so many barrels of crude that oversupply routinely caused oil prices to plummet (Quam-Wickham 1998, Tygiel 1996). Cheap immigrant labor from Europe, the Midwest, Japan, and Mexico fueled the mass production of tires, furniture, apparel, and other manufactured goods (Nicolaidis 2002; Scott and Soja 1994, Davis 2002 and Romo 1977). Between 1900 and 1930, the city's local manufacturing force grew tenfold, and by 1935, Los Angeles led the country in oil refining, aircraft manufacturing, automobile assembly, and—of course—motion picture production.

The rapid development of Los Angeles's industrial sector was in part driven by the strategic disempowerment of the city's labor force. Unlike in union-friendly metropolises like San Francisco, organized labor in early 20th century Los Angeles never managed to wield much political power or generate much popular support (Milkman 2000; Cross 1974). This is largely thanks to the efforts of the city's early oligarchs, who believed that drastically undercutting the high wage structure of San Francisco was the best way to establish Los Angeles as a major industrial center (McWilliams 1973). To this end, union-busters used a variety of tactics to suppress labor organizers, including the forced imprisonment of key strike leaders and the Ku Klux Klan's state-sanctioned harassment of rank-

and-file unionists (Davis 1997:362; see also Perry and Perry 1963, Scott and Soja 1996). “There is probably no city in America,” one Progressive Era unionist mused, “where such unfriendly sentiment obtains against organized labor as in this beautiful city of Los Angeles” (qtd. in Stimson 1955:426). Said another: “Los Angeles, in spite of its name, is a wicked city and sadly in need of someone who can point out the benefits of trade union organization and the iniquities of rampant capitalism” (qtd. in Kazin 1987).

Thanks to its militant anti-unionism, Los Angeles became a foremost producer of manufactured goods during the 1920s and 30s—a title it continues to hold to this day: according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics<sup>5</sup>, the city currently boasts upwards of 500,000 manufacturing workers, far more than the familiar blue-collar towns of Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Detroit. Even so, popular understandings of the city often disassociate it from America’s storied history of industrial development. Part of this disconnect could be due to aesthetics: compared to, say, the bloody stockyards of *The Jungle*’s Chicago, Los Angeles—once described by the city’s Chamber of Commerce as “a land of smokeless, sunlit factories” that are neatly ensconced within suburban enclaves of blissful, blue-collar laborers (qtd. in Sitton 2001:98)—doesn’t quite fit the archetype of Fordist mass production. More damning, however, is the global imaginary that situates Los Angeles in diametrical opposition to the older, more “traditional” cities that populate the Midwest and the East Coast. If—as critical geographers Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja (1996: 8) write—the presiding story of Los Angeles presents this place as “a bizarre Babylon by the sea, a unique and inimitable city of dreams,” then the working-class labor that built this metropolis has no place in Los Angeles’s exceptionalist creation myth. Because of this, Los Angeles’s “industrial job machine” (ibid 8) serves as a secret engine of the city’s economic growth, kept hidden beneath a thick layer of arcadian imagery. As such, the strategic myth-making that helped instigate the rapid urbanization,

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.bls.gov/regions/west/ca\\_losangeles\\_msa.htm](https://www.bls.gov/regions/west/ca_losangeles_msa.htm). Accessed January 16, 2020.

industrialization, and expansion of Los Angeles also serves to hide the uglier, less fantastical mechanisms that helped to make this growth possible.

## **Part II: Enter the Dream Factory**

### **Movie Magic**

“Magic is dead,” one frustrated theater manager complained to the *New York Dramatic Mirror* in 1898 (qtd. in Solomon 2010:28). Once upon a time, he’d worked alongside Alexander Herrmann, a magician so popular during vaudeville’s heyday that his steely, goateed countenance still springs to mind whenever contemporary audiences are asked to picture a stereotypical magician (see Steinmeyer 2005). But Herrmann the Great had died two years before, and this manager was now stuck shepherding a former burlesque star who’d only recently decided to try his hand at professional magic. “There have been no new inventions,” the manager fumed, after the burlesque star’s new magic show turned out to be a flop, “no new illusions for fifteen years. There has been nothing of late to startle the public or stimulate interest in this special form of entertainment... [Modern audiences] don’t want to be mystified. It doesn’t amuse them.”

Of course, his eulogy proved to be rather premature. Though legendary magicians like Alexander Herrmann and Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin had long since left the stage, magical performance was still very much in the midst of its Golden Age (Toulmin 2007, Gill 1976). In the United States alone, the turn of the twentieth century saw the rise of several popular magic acts, including T. Nelson Downs, a talented prestidigitator who was one of the first magicians to bring coin manipulation out of the parlor and onto the stage (Christopher 1996: 275; Gill 1976: 51); Adelaide Herrmann, Alexander’s widow, who went from assistant to headliner in the years following her husband’s death (see Steele 2012); and a young, up-and-coming escape artist named Erlich Weiss, who—somewhat aspirationally—renamed himself Harry Houdini in honor of the great

Robert-Houdin (see Silverman 1996). So while some forms of popular entertainment struggled with falling ticket sales and waning audience interest (e.g. Springhall 2008; Glenn 1995), Edwardian-era magicians still managed to find loyal fans across a broad variety of vaudevillian venues: carnival midways and circus sideshows, opera houses and music halls (see Solomon 2006, During 2002). In an era characterized by more disposable income, more leisure time, and an increased emphasis on the mass consumption of popular entertainment (Turcot 2016, Ashby 2010, Marrus 1974), successful magicians wielded a great deal of cultural power, their social prestige affording them a significant degree of influence over the entertainment-obsessed public.

It's also untrue that turn-of-the-century magic lacked innovation, seeing as many of the era's most successful magicians were early adopters of the latest technologies (Solomon 2006, Steinmeyer 2005). Consider, for example, the motion picture: magicians were amongst the earliest filmmakers, taking to cameras and movie projectors just as easily as they'd adopted trap doors, trick mirrors, and other "traditional" tools of the trade (Solomon 2006, North 2001, Low and Hopkins 2009). Perhaps most well-known amongst contemporary film historians is the French illusionist Georges Méliès, who invented a variety of innovative camera techniques that enabled him to "render physical impossibilities on the screen" (North 2001:74; see also Fischer 1979). David Devant—easily one of the greatest illusionists in British history (Steinmeyer 2005:125, Evans 1902:85)—started incorporating film exhibitions into his performances at London's Egyptian Hall just a few short weeks after he first encountered a projector (Solomon 2010:30). And the influence of magicians extended far beyond cosmopolitan urban centers like London and Paris: as part of their acts, popular traveling magicians like Harry Houdini, Horace Goldin, and Howard Thurston showcased both films and film-based illusions to audiences worldwide, aiding in the rapid diffusion of motion picture technology (Solomon 2010, Barnouw 1981, Steinmeyer 2005). As such, the early history of

film was driven by the symbiosis of movies and magic, with magicians emerging as some of film's earliest producers, directors, hypemen, and stars.

## **Welcome to Hollywood**

If Thomas Edison had had his way, New Jersey would've been the motion picture capital of America. In the early 1890s, William K. Dickson—one of Edison's many employees—developed the Kinetoscope, an early motion picture device that created the illusion of movement by passing light through sequential images. Much to Edison's surprise, the Kinetoscope was a whopping success: in the first few months that the Kinetoscope was on the market, the sale of viewing machines, short films, and other related items generated over \$85,000 of pure profit (Musser 1994:84)—about 2.5 million dollars in today's currency. Eager to capitalize on the Kinetoscope's success, Edison expedited the development of projection systems and movie cameras, many of which were branded with the Kinetoscope name. By the turn of the century, Edison owned most of the major US patents related to filmmaking, and aggressively leveraged his control of the market in order to monopolize the production, distribution, and exhibition of American motion pictures (see Bach 1999, Thomas 1971).

In order to escape Edison's aggressive patent litigation, independent filmmakers fled for the West Coast<sup>6</sup>. Southern California was a popular choice: thanks to the region's mild winters and sunny weather—a necessity in the days before indoor soundstages—as well as a natural landscape that provided varied backgrounds for film shoots, Southern California was uniquely suited to early film production (Beaton 1983). On top of this, relentless boosterism from the Los Angeles Chamber

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<sup>6</sup> Fun fact: the first film production studio to make the move west was the Selig Polyscope Company, which was founded in 1896 by William N. Selig, a well-known illusionist from Chicago (Solomon 2010:32). Another early *émigré* was Vitagraph Studios, founded by New York magicians Albert E. Smith and J. Stuart Blackton (see Musser 1983).

of Commerce helped to convince aspiring filmmakers to choose Los Angeles over other sunny SoCal cities like San Diego (see Frank 2012, Nielsen 1988:126). It didn't hurt that Los Angeles's craft-focused manufacturing sector was powered by cheap, "open shop" labor: without the benefit of unions, rank-and-file workers in the early Hollywood film industry were expected to work long hours without breaks, and received no overtime pay, no sick leave, no pension plan, and no unemployment compensation. Any troublemakers who tried to fight for better working conditions were routinely blacklisted, preventing organized labor from gaining much traction in the industry (Eyman 2010:69; see also Nielsen 1988, Sklar 1975, Lovell and Carter 1955). By moving film production to Los Angeles, filmmakers were able to hire skilled carpenters, electricians, and other specialists for half as much as they'd be worth in union-friendly markets like New York or Chicago.

And so the nascent film industry made its home in Hollywood, where land was cheap, the skies were clear, and local nightspots like the Hollywood Hotel were happy to ignore a local ordinance prohibiting the sale of alcohol (Frank 2012, Beaton 1983). As more and more film studios moved into the neighborhood, the industry experienced the benefits of economies of scale. In forming a village-like community wherein all of the necessary tools of film production and processing were close at hand, Hollywood quickly became the most cost-efficient (and, therefore, most desirable) place in the country to make movies: "The more popular [Hollywood] became as a studio site, location for ancillary activities, and place of residence and entertainment for the motion picture people, the more other production companies coveted Hollywood movie lots" (Beaton 1983:106). This had a dramatic effect on the nascent film industry, as historian Hillary A. Hallet (2017) writes: "In 1911, not a single foot of celluloid had been shot in Hollywood. By 1921, Los Angeles produced 85% of the movies shown in the United States and nearly two-thirds of those watched around the world." Less than two decades after motion pictures first came to California, Hollywood film was both a cultural institution and a multimillion-dollar empire.

In this way, the movie business came to have a dramatic impact on the material and political realities of Los Angeles. Studio expansion reshaped the city's geography, repurposing whole neighborhoods—Culver City, Universal City, Century City—for the purpose of film production, as well as erecting vast studio complexes that were large enough to be cities in and of themselves (Frank 2012). Real estate developers throughout Los Angeles constructed buildings in an eclectic hodgepodge of historical styles, taking their cue from the varied “façade landscapes” of Hollywood set design (see Banham 2009): Tudor mansions next to Mission Revivalist compounds, Medieval-style behemoths across the street from Frank Lloyd Wright originals. Perhaps most significant, however, was Hollywood's effect on the city's socio-political landscape: the growing economic centrality of motion picture studios disrupted the long-standing power of the Downtown elite (see Davis 2006), opening up new positions of authority to the *nouveaux riches* of the entertainment industry. Hollywood's ascent didn't just create a new locus of symbolic power in the city; it also enacted an entirely new social hierarchy.

### **Brave New World**

With the rise of motion pictures came a tectonic shift in the overarching structure of the American entertainment industry. One aspect of the change was purely geographic: as Hollywood film became increasingly central to the production of popular entertainment, Los Angeles—once merely a small-time stop on the vaudevillian circuit, too provincial to truly rival the glamor of more popular stops like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco (Singer 1992, Saloutos 1966, Agnew 2014)—was now the entertainment capital of the United States, if not the world (Williams and Wheatcroft 2013, Bakker 2012). The unprecedented emergence of motion pictures also indirectly led to the decline of live entertainment in America. During the 1920s, for example, many vaudeville theaters utilized a “vaudeville and pictures” format, wherein vaudevillian performers would serve as

mere opening acts for feature films, effectively upstaged by Hollywood (Solomon 2008:64). Additionally, the promise of higher salaries lured away established vaudeville heavyweights like the Marx Brothers, Mae West, and Fanny Brice, and later acts—Cary Grant, Judy Garland, Abbott and Costello, the Three Stooges—only used the vaudevillian stage as a launching pad for their film careers (see Springhall 2008, Woods 2016). By the time the Keith-Albee-Orpheum Company—owner and operator of the largest vaudevillian circuit in the country—was bought out by a new-money film magnate (see Kibler 1992, MacGowan 1956), live entertainment was already no longer America’s favorite past time.

As magician and historian Jim Steinmeyer (2005) writes: “The combination of the Depression, the popularity of motion pictures, and the decline of vaudeville and the music hall had conspired against live entertainment.” But while the techno-social upheavals of the 1920s and 30s certainly ousted professional magic from its “central place in the realm of mass entertainment” (Solomon 2008:63), magic still survived, albeit in an altered, diminished state. Some professional performers—believing that it was only through spectacle that magicians could distinguish themselves from Hollywood film and thereby “succeed in maintaining [magic] as an honorable profession” (Shirk 1929: 395)—mounted dramatic, large-scale touring shows, emphasizing magic’s “bigness” in order to resist its marginalization (Solomon 2008:64). Others fully embraced the movie business: superstar magicians like Howard Thurston and Harry Houdini aggressively pursued film careers (Solomon 2008:68-70; see also Bakker 2003), and professional magicians’ organizations throughout the country publicized the amateur magic of Hollywood stars in an attempt to boost membership (Solomon 2008:70). In this way, magicians strategically rearticulated themselves within a professional environment wherein the cultural power of the stage had been supplanted by that of the screen.



### Part III: The Most Magical Place on Earth

On December 12, 1939, five bodies—three of them children—were found strewn across the cliffs beneath the Angeles Crest Highway, apparent victims of a car crash. This was not unusual, in and of itself: at the time, the highway was little more than a mountain trail, and had already claimed quite a few overconfident automobile enthusiasts in its mere ten years of existence (see Aristeiguieta et al. 2000, Hoffman 1976, Hoffman 1968). More concerning, however, was the fact that Laurel Crawford—the only survivor of the alleged accident—had recently taken out insurance policies on four of the five victims. And when Crawford was asked why he did not immediately report the crash, which had occurred several hours before the bodies were finally discovered, he seemed strangely unbothered: “They were all dead anyway,” he told the police (Uelmen 1981:23).

Shortly after failing to save Crawford from life in prison, defense attorney William Larsen decided it was time for a career change<sup>7</sup> (Uelmen 1981). A few years before the Crawford case, Larsen had started *Genii* magazine, a trade publication for magicians that featured magic news, book reviews, reports from professional magic clubs, and even some magic routines, many of which were invented by Larsen himself (see Maven 2012). Now, Larsen decided to turn his hobby into a full-time job, forming a touring show with his family and performing magic at resorts throughout Southern California (Uelmen 1981, Bronner 2015). By the time William died in 1953, both he and his wife Geraldine had become well-known magicians on the West Coast, William with his touring show and magazine and Geraldine with her stint as host and resident magician on one of the world’s first televised magic shows (Hollis 2001:48; see also Larsen 1941). But while William dreamed of

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<sup>7</sup> I heard from multiple research participants that William Larsen was in fact a “mob lawyer,” kept on retainer in service to a Los Angeles-based organized crime family, and that he stopped practicing law after receiving one too many threats from either the local feds or members of a rival gang (depending on who was telling me the story.) But while Larsen’s mob ties seemed to be a generally accepted truth amongst the people that I spoke to, I can’t find any concrete, definitive evidence that proves that he was a made man, or that he left his law practice for any reason more salacious than boredom or disillusionment.

someday forming a magic-oriented gentlemen's club, he died without being able to realize that vision. After William's death, his two sons—Milt and Bill Jr.—took over as editors of *Genii*, and in 1960, they (along with a couple of like-minded friends) created the Academy of Magical Arts, Inc. with the express intention of fulfilling William Larsen's goal of establishing a private social club for Los Angeles magicians (Schiller 2010:114; see also Nardi 2006).

At the time, Los Angeles wasn't much of a center for magical performance. Whereas cities like Chicago possessed a thriving magic community—thanks to a street culture of grifters and cardsharps, a live entertainment scene that remained strangely unaffected by the rise of cinema and television, and many well-established cultural institutions like the magic supply shop Magic, Inc. (see Witter 2013, Bloom 1981)—Los Angeles's magic scene was much more subdued. While the city offered a few professional opportunities for magicians (e.g. televised appearances on variety shows), and also had its fair share of interested hobbyists and amateurs, there wasn't quite the same culture of innovation, professionalization, and mentorship that you might find elsewhere (Solomon 2008, Steinmeyer 2005, Singer 1993). As one magician explained to me, "If you really wanted to do magic, you had to go to New York or Chicago, or maybe London. [Los Angeles] wasn't really an option." Another said: "Los Angeles didn't have a magic community back then. I mean, you might say that it barely has one *now*, but...back then?" He laughed, bitterly and without much humor. "*Real* magicians were somewhere else."

Then came the Academy of Magical Arts, and with it, the Magic Castle. Opened in 1963 in a once-decrepit mansion that had long been a fixture of the Hollywood hills<sup>8</sup>, the Magic Castle created

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<sup>8</sup> The mansion—formally christened the Holly Chateau—was built in the early 1900s by a real estate magnate named Rollin B. Lane. Lane had originally planned to develop the land into a sea of orange groves, perhaps inspired by the typical, Mediterranean-infused promises of the Booster Era. However, Californian drought ruined his plans for development, and the city's tumultuous boom-and-bust real estate cycle prevented him from offloading the property. Eventually, the Lane family moved away, and the mansion was used first as a home for the elderly, then as an apartment building. By the time the Larsen brothers got involved, the

a members-only meeting place for local magicians and magic enthusiasts, thereby inspiring something of a renaissance for Los Angeles magic. Talented magicians who'd been rendered unemployed by the nation-wide decline of live entertainment gravitated to the City of Angels, where they could associate with like-minded performers without having to grub for a paycheck.

Consequently, the Castle became a place where aspiring magicians could learn from experienced mentors—for example, Dai Vernon, who served as the Magic Castle's Magician-in-Residence from 1965 until his death in 1992, and is considered by many to be one of the greatest magicians of the 20th century (see Jay 1988, Hass 2008:23). As a “master teacher...for two generations of magicians,” Vernon explicitly indexed the language of confidence men and cardsharps as part of his lectures, revolutionizing close-up magic by bringing sleight-of-hand to the foreground (Hass 2008:23-24). In this way, the creation of the Magic Castle injected a degree of respectability and inventiveness into the Los Angeles magic scene that heretofore could only be found in well-incubated cities like New York or Chicago. As magician Steve Spill (2015) writes about the emergence of the Los Angeles magic community during the 1960s and 70s:

It was a largely dormant period [in America] in terms of work for professional magicians, both the supper club and vaudeville eras were long dead, and the Castle was the place to go when there was no place to go. It was a place to find a kindred spirit willing to compare the merits of controlling cards<sup>9</sup> with the overhand shuffle as opposed to the double undercut or the pass. All the greats were there, and most were resourceful enough to find a way of easy living without work.

Another key aspect of the Castle's allure was its ability to take advantage of Hollywood's symbolic capital. When the Castle first opened, the Larsen brothers—both of whom worked in television, Milt as a writer and Bill Jr. as a producer—leveraged their industry friendships in order to

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mansion was a long-established Hollywood landmark, but one sorely in need of extensive renovation (Schiller 2010, Nardi 2006; see also Zollo 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Quick vocabulary lesson: a card control is any mechanism you might use to preserve a particular card at a specified position in the deck -- for example, a trick shuffle that allows you to keep the desired card at the top of the deck.

boost membership (see Schiller 2010:114-15). As one magician explained to me: “When they first opened the Castle, the Larsens started out by asking all their showbiz buddies to join. And those people talked it up to other people, who talked it up to other people, and so on. So the Castle became this underground hangout for people in the [entertainment] industry.” Over the course of the 1960s and 70s, the Magic Castle became a regular stomping ground for industry superstars like Johnny Carson, Orson Welles, and Cary Grant<sup>10</sup>, the last of whom even served as a member of the Castle’s Board of Trustees (McCann 1998). As the Magic Castle increasingly became known as a celebrity hangout, so too grew its prestige, cultural power, and sense of exclusivity. This appealed not just to those with an interest in magic, but also to those tempted by the possibility of rubbing shoulders with the Hollywood elite. As one magician told me: “Nobody cared about the magic, not really. They cared that it was a private club. They cared that you had to be a member to get in. ‘Oh, Cary Grant might show up? I gotta get in there!’”

The Castle’s air of prestige is also bolstered by the careful performance of class. During the initial renovation of the Castle’s interior, the Larsen brothers salvaged luxe building materials from old Los Angeles mansions that had been slated for demolition (Schiller 2010:116). Strategic interior design remade the building into an archetype of Victorian glamor: gilt chandeliers, antique bannisters, filigreed wallpaper—the kind of place that Robert-Houdin or Hermann the Great might have visited, once upon a time. The Magic Castle’s strict dress code intensifies the monied effect: coats and ties for the men, dresses or pantsuits for the women. As magician and sociologist Peter

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<sup>10</sup> A gratuitous Cary Grant story, courtesy of Milt Larsen: “Cary Grant loved magic, and when we opened the castle, he was one of our very first members. That was in the era of superstars. When Cary walked into a room, there was a hush. You don’t get that with stars today. Well, he was here waiting for some guests to arrive one night, and my brother and I sat with him at the upstairs bar. He got fidgety and his guests were very late in meeting him, so finally he excused himself and went to wait in the lobby. He was down there about 15 or 20 minutes, and when people came in, he said, “Welcome to the Magic Castle. If you go over to that little owl and say ‘open sesame’”—he did the whole entrance speech, and people would come upstairs to the bar and say, ‘Where did you get that guy? He looks just like Cary Grant!’” (Arnold 2013)

Nardi writes of what it's like to visit the Magic Castle today: "You are in another space and time, a warm British club by way of the Disneyland Haunted House and a performing arts museum," where attendees "dress up amid the warm woods and fireplaces of a 19th-century mansion" and "willingly accept...the old-fashioned nature of the experience" (Nardi 2006:66-65). In mimicking and embodying the *habitus* of Gilded Age high society, visitors to the Magic Castle can enact recognizable emblems of symbolic power in order to reify their own positions as members of a prestige class. This, in turn, raises the cultural clout of the Castle in the eyes of non-magicians in Los Angeles. In an interview with *Los Angeles* magazine (Gardetta 2006), magician and historian Jim Steinmeyer explained it thus:

You have to remember that in the early 1960s, when Milt [Larsen] started thinking of a magic club, no group in America was of less interest or more disenfranchised than magicians<sup>11</sup>. Saying to your friends "I'm a magician" was worse than saying nothing—like saying "I do balloon animals" before they even invented balloon animals. Suddenly, magicians who had no respect at all for what they did could say, "Hey, you want to come over to my private club? You gotta dress up." L.A. is very class conscious in its own way...

As Steinmeyer points out, the heightened prestige of the Magic Castle appeals to the class consciousness of the Los Angeles bourgeoisie. As in many modern metropolises, Los Angeles's class structure is extremely segregated and polarized: at the top, the highly paid professional class, largely occupied by workers in high-income service jobs (e.g. doctors, lawyers, real estate developers) and the creative industries; at the bottom, an underclass of low-paid service and manufacturing workers; and squeezed tightly between them, a small, shrinking middle class (Soja and Scott 1996; see also Katz 2015, Friedmann 1986). This class polarization manifests itself within the spatial and political organization of the city, with the "haves" enclosing themselves within wealthy, predominantly white enclaves that are kept carefully separate from the increasingly blighted neighborhoods occupied by

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<sup>11</sup> I don't really agree with Steinmeyer here. We're talking about the 1960s, the very height of the Civil Rights Era, so I'm fairly confident that I can name at least *one* group that was far more disenfranchised...

the “have-nots” (Davis 2006:223; see also Arvidson 1999, de la Cruz-Viesca 2016). For Los Angeles’s professional class, social exclusion serves as a key element of class performance, whether it’s through the militarized construction of gated communities in neighborhoods like Brentwood and Beverly Hills; the annexation, privatization, and gentrification of public spaces like parks and libraries (see Davis 2006); or the conspicuous patronage of private, exclusionary establishments like country clubs and private schools. In this social environment, an invitation to the Magic Castle—or, better yet, a membership—serves as a mark of honor amongst the city’s bourgeoisie.

Back when the Academy of Magical Arts was first created, becoming a member was as simple as paying a membership fee (see Schiller 2010). Today, any magicians who want to join would have to first get a referral from an existing member, before then auditioning in front of a panel of judges. If accepted, the new member is welcomed into the fold; if not, they are assigned a mentor who can help them prepare for their next audition (and, if necessary, the one after that) until the applicant is finally accepted. On the other hand, anyone who wants to join without first auditioning gets placed on the waiting list for non-magician “associate” members, and—if they ever make it to the top of the list—must pay a few thousand dollars’ worth of members’ fees each year, several times what magician members are expected to pay.

Associate members receive silver membership pins, while magicians wear gold. But even without the pins, it’s easy to tell the two groups apart: many associate members are high-powered professionals in Big Business or the entertainment industry, archetypal representatives of the post-Fordist professional class (see Grusky 2018, Hood 2016). “You can smell the money on them,” one magician told me while we sat together at one of the Castle’s many bars. “See that guy?” He pointed,

indiscreetly, to a silver-haired man who's sitting on the edge of his barstool, chatting with a woman half his age. "I could buy a car with that watch. I could buy a *house* with that watch."<sup>12</sup>

As the Magic Castle boomed in popularity—particularly amongst the city's well-funded upper class—it became increasingly woven into the fantastical urban imaginary of Los Angeles. The building itself—a pale, bulbous form that looms high above Hollywood Boulevard, turreted and Chateausque, a Victorian archetype of a haunted house—was officially identified as a historical landmark in 1989, and is as much a key feature of the Hollywood landscape as Capitol Records, Grauman's Chinese Theater, and the Hollywood Walk of Fame. By incorporating these sites into the mythic narrative of the city, Los Angeles transforms them into important cultural exports. For tourists, a visit to the Magic Castle provides the opportunity to experience the commodified image of the city that is marketed to the world as the "real Los Angeles" (Moore 1985, Benton 1995, Shiel 2013). With its velvet ropes and Gilded Age glory, the Magic Castle fits neatly into the nested web of illusions that makes up the "Hollywood" image: new money and old glamor, salacious secrets and celebrity culture, the seductive promise of prestige. "From the time you enter to the time you leave," Milt Larsen once told a reporter, "you're in a wonderland. When you walk into our reception room and say 'open sesame' to a carved owl in a bookcase, and it slides open, your mind goes to fantasy. And fantasy is what it's all about" (Wakim 2018).

In recent years, the Magic Castle's luster has faded somewhat. Some of these cracks have been visible since the beginning: for example, many of the magicians that I spoke to complained about the Castle's "boys' club" atmosphere, which has historically made it difficult for women to be fully accepted into the community. In many ways, these obstacles mimic what can be found in the

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, I saw plenty of nice watches amongst the Magic Castle's gold-pinned members, and several of the magician members that I interviewed were millionaires in their own right. The real difference is one of proportion: while magician members tended to range widely between the middle and the upper class, associate members were almost exclusively well-to-do.

overall structure of the global magic scene, which is a steely bulwark of old-timey clannishness: as Peter Nardi (1988:764) explains, “When the gatekeepers of [professional magic], the images in the literature, and the role models are predominantly male, access is difficult for women to attain.” Because of this, a visit to the Magic Castle can sometimes feel “like that little clubhouse in the *Little Rascals*,” as one magician told me. “No girls allowed!” Another identified problem was long-standing patterns of racialized harassment and exclusion amongst the Castle’s members: while non-white members have been allowed into the club since its opening in the 1960s—somewhat of a rarity for the time period—some members of the club carried their racial prejudices with them into the Castle, creating a toxic environment for magicians of color. “The problem wasn’t [the Larsen brothers],” one magician told me. “They didn’t have a single racist bone in their body, okay, and if they ever noticed someone saying something they didn’t like, they’d shut it down, end of story. But they couldn’t be everywhere at once.” And while the Castle has made some attempts in recent years to recruit a more diverse body of members and performers, the club remains overwhelmingly white and male (see Nardi 2006:88). Because of this, the club’s carefully maintained image—designed to recall the etiquette and excesses of the Victorian era, thereby transporting visitors back to a “traditional” time (ibid 87) wherein magic once reigned supreme—can at times feel like a cruel joke, reifying the historically embedded systems of power that continue to dismiss and disenfranchise marginal voices.

Other problems are of a more modern make. For example, one common complaint amongst the magicians that I spoke to was the overabundance of invited guests: on any given night, non-members tended to make up the vast majority of Castle attendees, disrupting any illusion of privacy and camaraderie that the club might’ve once had. “It’s the least *private* ‘private club’ I’ve ever been to,” one magician said while we waited in line behind a pack of drunk, rowdy tourists. “It’s Disneyland,” another told me, rolling her eyes. “Just with worse food and longer lines.” Another



commonly reported issue was the hit-or-miss quality of the nightly performances: “It’s kind of a mixed bag,” said one magician. “Some weeks, the line-up’s really good, and you remember why you got into magic in the first place. But a lot of the time, it’s just a bunch of old white guys telling the same stupid jokes they’ve been telling since the eighties.” And while some believed that the quality of performances had gotten better since magician Jack Goldfinger was placed in charge of booking talent a few years before, others mourned what they saw as evidence of a discipline in decline. Indeed, many of the magicians I spoke seemed to unknowingly echo a quote from a magazine profile of the late magician Ricky Jay (Singer 1993:34), who notoriously refused to visit the Magic Castle while he was still alive: “...all too often the club is a tepid swamp of gossip, self-congratulation, and artistic larceny—a place where audiences who don’t know better are frequently fed a bland diet of purloined ineptitude.”

Even so, the Magic Castle remains a key aspect of the modern myth of Los Angeles—particularly amongst the city’s professional class. Local press agencies habitually write up in-depth profiles of the club, their reporters usually striking a tone halfway between indecorous and awed. High-powered entertainment executives broker deals in the Castle’s candlelit dining room; tech millionaires chat idly about apps and IPOs while they wait in line for the next show. And whenever any colleagues, acquaintances, or friends of friends learned that my dissertation project was about magic, they’d quickly steer conversation toward the Castle, an eager glint appearing in their eyes. They’d tell me that they’ve heard that Katy Perry is a member, as is Neil Patrick Harris, as is Steve Martin, as is Johnny Depp; they’d ask if the building was full of secret passageways, or if I knew how all the tricks worked, or (half-jokingly) if I’d ever seen a ghost. Then, unfailingly, the million-dollar question: “Can you get me in?”

## Conclusion

“Why Los Angeles?” Karl asked me, as our conversation was beginning to wind down. Las Vegas, he told me, might’ve been a better choice if I wanted to learn more about the magic business; New York or Chicago if I wanted to experience what it was like to be part of a thriving magic community. All Los Angeles had going for it was the Castle — “...and if [the Castle] lasts another ten years,” he said, in his gentle, unhurried way, “I’ll eat my shoe.” As we began to pack up to leave, he continued: “A lot of [young magicians] come to L.A., expecting it to be everything they imagined it to be. Sunshine and rainbows. Dai Vernon sitting across the table. I tell all of them the same thing: there’s no magic here. No new techniques, just old ideas plagiarized from dead men. No good magicians, just thieves, blowhards, and drama queens. Get out while you can, before you get stuck.” I heard similar advice from many (though, to be clear, not most) of the magicians that I met over the course of my research project, and while they disagreed about where I would need to go to find “real” magic (with some even insisting that I needed to be as far from America as possible before I’d find anyone worth talking to), they all agreed on one thing: coming to Los Angeles to study magic was like looking at a copy of a copy of a copy—superficially similar to the real thing, but ultimately nothing more than a fabrication. In their world-weary complaints, I hear echoes of the Depression-era writer John Fante, who, in his semi-autobiographical novel *Ask the Dust* (1939), writes about Los Angeles thus:

The old folk from Indiana and Iowa and Illinois, from Boston and Kansas City and Des Moines, they sold their homes and their stores, and they came here by train and by automobile to the land of sunshine, to die in the sun, with just enough money to live until the sun killed them, tore themselves out by the roots in their last days, deserted the smug prosperity of Kansas City and Chicago and Peoria to find a place in the sun. And when they got here they found that other and greater thieves had already taken possession, that even the sun belonged to the others; Smith and Jones and Parker, druggist, banker, baker, dust of Chicago and Cincinnati and Cleveland on their shoes, doomed to die in the sun, a few dollars in the bank, enough to subscribe to the Los

Angeles Times, enough to keep alive the illusion that this was paradise, that their little papier-mâché homes were castles.

However, it's this very feeling of hopeless artificiality that makes Los Angeles such an appealing place to study magical performance. Los Angeles is a city of illusions, its heavily mediatized landscape undergirded by a web of boosterist mythologies that blur the boundary between “real” and “unreal.” Well-established patterns of strategic mythmaking have historically helped to shape Los Angeles's urban development, remaking the city's social and material infrastructure in order to reify and commodify the “Los Angeles” concept. And the Los Angeles entertainment industry—particularly the film and television industries—serves as both a consumer and a producer of these myths, with creative industries internalizing, reimagining, and regurgitating commodified images of Los Angeles through a variety of cultural mediums. Just as this mode of cultural production deepens the semiotic association between Los Angeles and its entertainment centers, so too does it heighten the symbolic power of the film and television industries. In this environment, institutions like the Magic Castle have to carefully orient themselves in relation to the Hollywood cultural complex as a way to hold onto the prestige that magical performance—once one of the most popular forms of American entertainment—has long-since lost. Because of this, any complaints about the lack of “real magic” in Los Angeles must be properly contextualized within a cultural economy that privileges the symbolic power of Hollywood over other forms of creative expression, a social landscape defined by the performance of class and the valorization of bourgeois tastes, and a pervasive urban imaginary that circulates hyperreal mythologies as a way to commodify the city and stimulate economic growth.

Over the course of the twentieth century, magicians in Los Angeles have doggedly rearticulated themselves within the established systems of value that undergird the modern entertainment industry. As creative workers in a cultural economy that disfavors magical performance, magicians strategically utilize “Hollywood” class markers in order to successfully

navigate a socially stratified urban landscape. In doing this, they simultaneously revile and embrace Los Angeles's hyperreality, intertwining their own cultural mythologies with those of the city and thereby solidifying magic's place as part of Los Angeles's entertainment landscape.

## Chapter 2: Bad Magicians

Visit the Vista Theatre today, and you'd be forgiven for thinking that you'd somehow found your way back to Old Hollywood. Located at 4473 Sunset Drive—the same site where, more than a century ago, D. W. Griffith once filmed much of *The Birth of a Nation* (see Bahn 2014)—the theater first opened in 1923, featuring a mixed bill of motion pictures and vaudeville acts. The discovery of King Tut's tomb a year earlier had inspired the theater's owners to adopt an Egyptian style: a box office that mimics the gilded-wood opulence of a pharaoh's tomb; walls inscribed with faux hieroglyphics that approximate the names of Egyptian monarchs and divinities, albeit in a careless, inaccurate scrawl; life-size death masks that line the sides of the single-screen auditorium, peering down upon the audience with a grim, imperious air. Thanks to its retro aesthetic and unabashed affection for all things kitsch, the theater fits neatly into the hipster enclave of Los Feliz, comfortably nestled amongst a labyrinth of bike repair shops, artisan coffeeshouses, and hot yoga studios.

It was November 2016, and I had come to the Vista to meet George, a local magician who'd invited me to the premiere of a magic-centric documentary. The invitation came with a word of warning: "The movie's a bit dry," George confessed, basing his assessment on a cut of the film he'd seen a few weeks prior. "You probably won't like it all that much." Still, the premiere was sure to be packed with Los Angeles-based magicians, and he thought it might be as good a place as any for me to introduce myself around.

I found George out on the sidewalk, and we headed into the theater together, talking idly about nothing in particular. The gathering crowd seemed to be a rather mixed bunch: magicians, many of whom George seemed to know personally; some actors that I recognized from B-movies and cult television shows; producers and other high-powered industry professionals, identifiable mainly by their well-pressed suits and confident bearing; a few members of the local press, looking

faintly bored. “A pretty good turnout,” George said, sounding relieved. “I know that Marcie—” A friend of his, and one of the film’s directors. “—wasn’t sure they’d find much of an audience, but it seems they don’t have to worry about that.” At least the filmmakers would be able to recoup the cost of booking the Vista for the premiere, George said, even if the audience ended up hating the film.

George needn’t have worried. Filmed over the course of a four-year period, the movie—*Magicians: Life in the Impossible*, directed by Marcie Hume and Christoph Baaden—takes an almost ethnographic look at the lives of four different professional magicians, following them as they hustle for gigs, navigate fraught personal and professional relationships, and devote long, arduous hours to practice and study. While I have a few complaints about the film—for example, the fact that the filmmakers chose not to address the fact that Jan Rouven (one of the documentary’s main subjects) had recently pled guilty to felony charges of possession, receipt, and distribution of child pornography—the documentary presents a well-constructed argument about the not-so-glamorous realities of the magic business. When the film screening ended, it did so to raucous applause.

After the show, George and I headed toward the exit, avoiding the large crush of people that had moved to congratulate the directors on a job well done. “The last cut of the film wasn’t all that good,” he told me as we walked. “The editing was all over the place, the humor wasn’t there.” Over at the far end of the room, a man in a red baseball cap waved at George, who dutifully took my arm and steered me in that direction. “But now? It’s actually a good movie! And not just a ‘good magic movie’—a good movie, full-stop.” He smiled at me, eyes sparkling. “What did you think?”

Before I could answer, the man in the red hat spoke. “I hated it.”

George frowned. “Oh, come on, Phil.”

Phil shrugged, unrepentant. “They made us look like losers! They made us look like geeks! A bunch of middle-aged dorks, playing with cards in motel bathrooms: lonely, broke, barely getting by. They were laughing at us!”

“It’s a documentary, Phil. It’s a realistic take—”

“But why make a documentary about *those* guys?” said Phil. “One guy loses his house. Another gets divorced. It’s ridiculous! Why not David Copperfield, or David Blaine, or...or...? Somebody cool, somebody who can show people that not all magicians are dorks.”

“Look, Marcie worked hard on this,” said George, with a faint hint of steel in his voice. “Try not to ruin the whole night.”

“I’m not trying to ruin anything,” said Phil, shrugging. “You asked me what I thought, so I told you. And if anybody else asks, I’ll tell *them*, too.”

After a few more tense words, George finally led me away. While we waited outside for a car to take us to the afterparty, I asked him if he knew why Phil was so angry. “When Marcie first started this project,” George told me, his voice taking on a conspiratorial tone, “she interviewed dozens of magicians, maybe even hundreds—but I don’t think she ever bothered to talk to Phil. He’s clearly still holding a grudge.” He forced a smile. “Just forget about him.”

I didn’t, of course. Although George—along with every other magician who ended up having to listen to Phil’s complaints that night—seemed quite convinced that Phil’s annoyance was solely rooted in his personal grievance with the filmmakers, I wasn’t so sure: after all, Phil’s remarks seemed to be colored not just by bitterness, but also by genuine embarrassment. The documentary’s non-glamorous look at professional magic negated the more charismatic image that Phil would have preferred; more than that, the film revealed this non-glamorous image to an audience full of non-magicians, thereby exposing the magic community to the social threat of ridicule. And while it might be tempting to think of Phil’s image-obsessed response to the film as being somehow exceptional,

concern amongst magicians regarding media representations of and stereotypes about magic was a recurring theme throughout my research project.

In this chapter, I will explore how the magic community's emphasis on image management acts as a direct response to the systemic devaluation of magic as an artform. Judgments of aesthetic value—for example, the act of deciding what does and does not count as “good art”—necessarily reflect the cultural hierarchies embedded within the socio-political space; because of this, the categorization of magical performance as “bad art” fundamentally correlates to magic's marginal position in the modern entertainment landscape. In order to resist this systemic devaluation, magicians enact complex strategies of image management—for example, the rhetoric of the “bad magician,” which allows self-professed “good magicians” to externalize examples of bad art and thereby socially distance themselves from societal expressions of distaste. Indeed, these strategies have the unintended side effect of socially stratifying the aesthetic tastes of the magic community, thereby reproducing long-established systems of inequality and devaluation. In invoking the image of the “bad magician,” contemporary magicians repurpose justify structural hierarchies of aesthetic value.

## **Part I: Good Taste**

### **The False Coin (Or: Philosophies of Aesthetic Value)**

If you wanted to start a fight amongst Enlightenment philosophers, perhaps the quickest way would be to ask a roomful of them to define beauty. At the time, there were two competing schools of thought on the subject. On one side were the Rationalists, who held that reason was the primary function through which we judge the beauty of objects: anyone who wants to determine the aesthetic value of a book or a symphony or a vintage of wine does so using the same rigorous, systematic logicism found in mathematical thinking. On the other side of the debate were the



Empiricists, who argued that aesthetic judgments were much too immediate to be arbitrated by logical thought. Instead, they held that our perception of beauty was driven entirely by sensory experience, with individuals relying on an internal sense of *taste* (as opposed to reason) in order to determine the beauty of an object. As Enlightenment-era novelist Jean-Baptiste Dubos (1748: 238-239) explains:

Do we ever reason, in order to know whether a ragoo [*sic*] be good or bad...? No, this is never practiced. We have a sense given us by nature to distinguish whether the cook acted according to the rules of his art. People taste the ragoo, and tho' unacquainted with those rules, they are able to tell whether it be good or no. The same may be said in some respect of the productions of the mind, and of pictures made to please and move us.

This philosophical debate was largely settled by the early 1900s, when the empiricist view of aesthetics—that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, rather than in the objective form of the beheld—had become so standard as to be considered cliché. However, general acceptance of the idea that beauty is a matter of subjective interpretation did not usher in an era of aesthetic relativism, wherein all tastes are considered to be equally valid; indeed, anyone can quite easily be accused of *bad* taste (see Brown 2003, Gracyk 1990). When, for example, literary critic Lee Lemon (1965: 223) writes, “We know that ‘Poor Soul! The center of my sinful earth’ is a better poem than ‘Ozymandias,’” he implicitly critiques the aesthetic tastes of someone like me, who vastly prefers “‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings; / Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’” to any of Shakespeare’s sonnets. As pointed out by culture critic Jennifer Tsien (2011), the careful delineation between “good” and “bad” taste in the arts has historically been used to impose a strict aesthetic hierarchy and, in so doing, defend cultural spaces from perceived interlopers. Consider, for example, the case of eighteenth century France: when the spread of literacy allowed for increased access to literature, prominent thinkers like Voltaire and Montesquieu staunchly condemned the Gothic

books that were popular amongst the masses: these books, the intellectuals argued, were prime examples of “bad” writing, both too foreign (thanks to its Germanic invention) and too feminine (thanks to its emotionality) to be held in high regard. By mocking, parodying, and critiquing the Gothic style, Enlightenment-era *philosophes* strategically restricted “good” forms of cultural appreciation to the intelligentsia. This tradition of rabid protectionism continues to this day, with social groups carefully drawing battle lines between “good” and “bad” art as a form of identity management: from the systemic devaluation of country music and the “white trash” who enjoy it (Fox 2004) to the ironic consumption of “trashy” reality shows (McCoy and Scarborough 2014). In this way, accusations of bad taste serve as a key aspect of public life, providing ample opportunities for moralization, identity formation, and social control.

In the opening chapter of *Toward an Anthropological History of Value* (2001), David Graeber points out that there are three main ways that the word *value* has historically been utilized within social theory: *values* in a sociological sense, focusing on the moral frameworks that individuals use to judge goodness and rightness (e.g. the “traditional values” that politicians like to brag about on the campaign trail); *value* in a political economic sense, which measures the desirability of objects, particularly with regards to what one might pay to obtain it; and *value* in a linguistic sense, with words of the same inherent *value* being understood semiotically as having the same meaning (e.g. with the word “red” and the word “rojo” both referring to the same underlying concept.) And while it might be tempting to see each of these definitions of *value* as being fully distinct from the others, it is actually more like the old parable of the blind men and the elephant: one person sees *value* as moral judgment, another as commoditization, a third as meaning-making, but in truth, they are all recognizing different aspects of the same whole. In the same way, the concept of taste—or *aesthetic value*—must be understood as something that exists at the crossroads between the moral imaginary and the socio-political space, with accusations of bad taste being motivated not by random

idiosyncrasies or individual desires, but by specific social, material, and political realities. In this way, competing (yet complementary) systems of valuation guide the way in which we understand, enact, and reify a shifting dichotomy of “goodness” and “badness.”

## **Trash**

Once, while waiting in the crowded jury room of a Los Angeles courthouse, sociologist Karen Sternheimer (2007) took note of the different ways in which the roomful of potential jurors responded to the episode of *Jerry Springer* that was playing on the television. While some of the jurors happily watched the show, many others did their best to make it clear to all around them that they had no interest in watching “that trash,” ostentatiously turning their heads away from the screen or grumbling aloud about the courthouse’s choice of programming. It was, Sternheimer noted, a rather explicit example of class performance, with individuals using conspicuous expressions of distaste in order to publicly display their allegiance to a particular social class. “Americans rarely discuss class,” she writes while reflecting about the experience, “[instead] maintaining the illusion that we live in a classless society.” In truth, however, social stratification divides the United States along class lines, and anyone who wants to successfully navigate this structural environment must align themselves with the tastes expected of a member of their social group. Indeed, the transition to late capitalism has only intensified the social necessity of class performances, with ideologies of taste allowing individuals to imagine that they can still “realize their expectations of upward social mobility” (Conroy 1998:74) in an increasingly rigidified economic environment that has decimated the American middle class.

In this way, taste is deeply relational, bringing together people who have similar levels of cultural capital whilst simultaneously reassuring them that members of their social class are fundamentally different from any other. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1993) points out, our social

context gives pattern to our tastes, guiding our aesthetic choices with regard to cultural objects like food, interior decoration, clothing, and art. And while those with similar tastes do not necessarily share a class consciousness, they are still unified by virtue of being “placed in homogenous conditions of existence imposing homogenous conditionings and producing homogeneous systems of dispositions capable of generating similar practices” (Bourdieu 1984:101). These systems of dispositions become embodied as *habitus*, prescribing to each of us a set of ruling principles that steer us toward patterns of behavior appropriate to our social class (see Bourdieu 1990). It’s this form of social conditioning that encourages members of a given social class to prefer items that fit within a particular aesthetic framework—or, conversely, to think of certain cultural objects as being “beneath” them, as Sternheimer observed during her trip to the courthouse.

Tastes stand in hierarchical relation to one another, reinforcing the stratification of the existing social system. Based on his research in post-Gaule France, Bourdieu argued that the aesthetic values of the bourgeoisie—*haute cuisine* rather than comfort food; antiques rather than mass-market furniture; opera rather than popular music—serve as the prototype for “legitimate” culture (Bourdieu 1984: 199): although members of different social groups might adamantly disagree about which cultural products are truly “good” (particularly when it comes to food), bourgeoisie tastes are systemically recognized within mainstream culture as being more worthy and distinguished than those of the working class. And while various critics have rightly chastised Bourdieu for overemphasizing the *belle lettriste* form of culture favored by the French intelligentsia as opposed to the more modernist style of the business elite (see Lane 2000), his argument regarding the ways in which symbolic emblems of the ruling class are systemically legitimized has been recognized in a broad variety of social contexts (e.g. Banks 2019, Friedman and Kuipers 2013, Strong 2009, Trondman 2004). In this way, the expression of taste—and of distaste—serves as a mechanism of

hegemonic power, allowing dominant social groups to inflict symbolic violence upon the subaltern and, in so doing, reinforce the domination of the ruling classes.

The end result is a taxonomy of taste that mimics the hierarchies embedded within the social space, with the tastes of the ruling class being canonized as legitimate while the tastes of the working class are demonized as illegitimate. Indeed, the social status attached to these tastes is understood by individual social agents as being a function of the cultural objects themselves: prestige television, in this view, is inherently “classier” than *Jerry Springer*, and any social status derived from one’s choice in entertainment is purely a reflection of the individual’s good taste. In truth, however, it is capital—not inherent value—that serves as the basis for an object’s valorization. Indeed, the very fact that the role of capital remains unrecognized only serves to further reinforce the symbolic power of the ruling class, since the assumed “goodness” of bourgeois aesthetics—and, conversely, the assumed “trashiness” of more proletarian tastes—legitimizes a social system that holds that the dominant are inherently superior to the dominated.

## **Part II: The Magician and the Fool**

### **Prestige**

When the anti-witch hysteria of the Middle Ages finally began to wane, magic shows swiftly became a keystone of European entertainment. Presenting themselves as heirs of the ancient traditions of alchemy and sorcery (Lachapelle 2008: 320), traveling magicians plied their trade at markets, street fairs, and circuses, interspersing feats of sleight-of-hand with more “traditional” spectacles like juggling, sword swallowing, fire breathing, ventriloquism, and mime (Clarke 2001, Schmidt 1998, Randi 1992, Howarth et al. 2001). The work was far from glamorous: in early modern Europe, itinerant performers occupied marginal positions on the social ladder, only a rung or two above the vagrant poor (Kerr 2008, Moryson 1903). And while the general public maintained a

fervent interest in magic throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, members of the cultural elite were far less enthused—for example, William Hogarth, a famed 16th century artist and satirist who publicly mourned the fact that the British public had become so “debauch’d by [the] fool’ries” of popular magic acts that British institutions of high art were falling to the wayside (Hogarth 1723, Wagner 1993). Even as the rapidly expanding leisure market of the late-18th century opened new theatrical venues to magical performers (Schmidt 1998: 276), magic remained a “low” artform, firmly misaligned with the tastes of high society.

Then came Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin. In the mid-1800s, Robert-Houdin turned from clock-making to conjuring, and quickly became one of the earliest pioneers of “modern magic” (Jones 2010, Lachapelle 2008). He performed his magic not on the street, but in elegant, velvet-curtained opera houses and the front parlors of wealthy patrons who could afford to pay for private performances. Instead of donning the garish, occultish costumes of the traditional magician, he opted for a top hat and tails, the uniform of the upper class (Goto-Jones 2016, Schmidt 1998). And during his performances, Robert-Houdin borrowed the rationalist rhetoric of contemporary *philosophes*, presenting his magic as “experiments” or “demonstrations” that could empirically illustrate the mysteries of the natural world (LaChappelle 2008: 322-323, Goto-Jones 2016, Nadis 2005). The end result was a new model of magical performance, one that fully embraced both the class consciousness and the logical positivism of the industrial era. As historian Sofie LaChappelle (2008:321) explains: “On stage, [Robert-Houdin] never looked like a mysterious sorcerer, the descendant of medieval occultists, but rather like an entrepreneur of the industrial age or an inventor—a new magician for a new scientific age.”

Thanks in no small part to Robert-Houdin, Western magic was newly remade in the image of the bourgeoisie. Over the course of the 19th century, magicians increasingly positioned themselves as gentlemanly “professors of magic” (Goto-Jones 2016:15), borrowing the aesthetic

styles of the scientific elite in order to escape the marginal status of lowbrow entertainment. In becoming a medium for Enlightenment-era secularism, the new “modern” magician transformed into a symbol of Western progress (Cook 2001:169), with traveling magicians soon emerging as key “civilizing” agents of the imperialist project (see Jones 2010, Schmidt 2008). Popular books in the style of academic texts explained the tools of the magician’s trade, educating the public both about both the practice and the aesthetic value of magic (see Goto-Jones 2016:16). Exclusive magic societies—such as London’s famous Magic Circle, opened in 1905—modeled themselves off contemporaneous gentleman’s clubs, allowing magicians to cultivate a genteel class identity that appealed to aristocrats and the educated middle class (Goto-Jones 2016:21). So while Victorian-era magic never quite gained enough prestige to be labeled a “high art,” its hyper-modernist rebranding helped to legitimize it as an honorable profession. As French magician Abdul Alafrez (2003: 545) once put it:

J’abrège : si Robert-Houdin importe tant dans l’histoire des magiciens [...] ce n’est pas seulement parce qu’il a beaucoup innové et laissé des traces écrites [...] c’est aussi, et surtout, parce qu’il a conquis un nouveau public et renouvelé les références de la magie. Balayant les allusions au diable ou à l’occulte, les manteaux étoilés et les chapeaux pointus, les drapés noirs et les formules cabalistiques, il a inventé un art de salon, pratiqué par un magicien vêtu comme ses clients ; c’est en maniant une rhétorique para-scientifique, et en s’adressant à un public bourgeois, qu’il a donné à la magie ses lettres de noblesse.

To say it simply: if Robert-Houdin is so important in the history of magicians [...] it is not just because he made plenty of innovations and left behind a significant written record of his work [...] it is also, and above all, because he conquered a new audience and renewed how magic was represented. Gone were sweeping allusions to the devil or the occult, the starred capes and the pointed hats, the black robes and cabalistic formulae. He invented an art meant for the *salon*, a magic performed by someone dressed like his audience, a magic performed by someone who wielded a pseudo-scientific rhetoric. By addressing a bourgeois public, Robert-Houdin gave magic its proof of nobility.

## Hierarchies of Cool

A couple of weekends after the *Magicians* premiere, George met me at the Castle for brunch. On weekdays, the Castle is usually only open to guests during the evening, with bouncers stationed at the door in order to keep out anyone under the age of twenty-one. On the weekend, however, the Castle relaxed its strict age requirement during brunch hours, making it a popular time for members to bring their families for a visit. Around me, small children in starched clothes bounced on the balls of their feet, waiting anxiously to be allowed inside, whilst bored teenagers smacked their teeth and shoved their hands into their pockets.

“A lot of my friends hate coming here for brunch,” George told me, while we waited together in the unusually long line: while the Castle typically wasn’t too busy during brunch, some corporation had booked the bottommost floor of the Castle for a private event today, making the place more crowded than usual. “Too many kids around, they say. Well, I like it! The Castle isn’t as crowded during the day—well, usually. And if you want to see a show, you don’t have to wait in line for an hour: you can just go.” The brunch itself, he added, was a pretty good deal: for less than twenty bucks a head, you got access to the all-you-can-eat buffet in the dining room, complete with coffee and orange juice. “Saved my life when I was in my twenties. I was, you know, a bachelor. I’d never lived on my own, didn’t know how to cook. But on Sundays, I could come here, get plenty of food, study in the library, jam with my friends. I could spend all day here! It was heaven.”

When we finally made it up to the buffet, we were told by the *maitre d’* that the dining room was over capacity. So instead, George steered me toward the Castle’s front room, where he swiftly flagged down the bartender and ordered each of us a cup of black coffee.<sup>13</sup> “So what did you think of the documentary?” he asked me. “Did you like it?”

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<sup>13</sup> If he’d asked first, I’d have told him that I don’t drink coffee.



After dutifully talking about the movie for a bit, I pivoted the conversation toward Phil's tirade. "It seems to me...I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems like he was really worried about image, about how magicians were being represented. Any idea why?"

George thought for a long moment, trying to choose his words carefully. "Men like Phil are...well, they're sensitive. You have to understand that a lot of magicians—not all of them, but enough—they didn't have many friends when they were kids. They didn't know how to talk to people. I won't say that they were bullied, not exactly...but they were definitely outcasts. So when they found magic, it gave them something that made them feel good about themselves. Something that made them feel like they belonged. But despite all the work they've put into learning magic and knowing magic and doing magic, they're still outcasts. And they don't like being reminded of that."

Long gone are the days of Robert-Houdin, when professional magicians could expect to garner at least some level of prestige. In the complex social alchemy of the modern entertainment landscape, magicians—along with jugglers, ventriloquists, clowns, and other purveyors of the variety arts—are social outcasts, generally considered to be worthy targets of mockery and derision. Talk show hosts and late-night comedians happily skewer the prevailing image of the modern magician: strange, awkward men who exist in a state of arrested development, living in their mother's basements and finding it difficult to talk to women without having a deck of cards in hand. As anthropologist Graham Jones (2011:19-20) explains: "On the one hand, magic is an activity in which self-motivated individuals cultivate an extremely demanding kind of specialized technical knowledge upon which they rightfully pride themselves. On the other, it is a practice that outsiders sometimes construe as trivial or stigmatize as socially marginal." In describing the Los Angeles magic scene, journalist Dave Gardetta (2006) put it far less kindly:

At the pinnacle of the [cultural] ziggurat sits moviemaking, followed by television, music, publishing, pornography, Paris Hilton, video games, Web content, and theater. Keep descending: cover bands,

boardwalk jugglers, single-actor life monologues. It's a hierarchy of cool as much as it is of status, income, New York Times coverage, and the ability to penetrate foreign markets through ancillary branding platforms. At the base of the pyramid you will find magicians—typically conceived in the popular imagination as kings of hokum, patrons of the pirate shirt, masters of the mullet residing in the cornball basement. The Magic Castle, in this anthropology, is a safe house for guys who couldn't get laid as teenagers, who dreamed of alter identities—Merlin! Prospero! Melvin!—then wrapped themselves in the security blanket of magic and stepped into adulthood.

Of course, Gardetta's proposed typology suffers from the same reductionistic rigidity that hamstring the "high culture vs. popular culture" model of aesthetic hierarchies. Consider, for example, Internet-based content creators: while Gardetta judges these "micro-celebrities" (Senft 2013) as being somewhere near the base of the cultural pyramid, a younger person might be far more inclined to identify social media stars as key loci of symbolic power (see Khamis et al 2016). As such, we can see that any heavy-handed attempt to "objectively" classify modes of cultural production within a strict hierarchy acts in and of itself as a kind of aesthetic judgment, strongly influenced by the classifier's own social identity. Additionally, there's something academically unsatisfying about conflating "coolness" with symbolic power: the porn industry, for example, might be "cool" (as Gardetta argues) in the sense that it's well-liked—or at least well-consumed—by the general populace, but that coolness does little to reduce the social stigma of sex work (Lee and Sullivan 2016, Voss 2015). But while Gardetta's model of the entertainment industry is certainly crude, it does point us toward a central truth: namely, that in the dialectic between "good" and "bad" art, magic falls somewhere toward the "bad" end of the spectrum, ripe for caricature and ridicule.

How did magic become such a low-status artform? In the previous chapter, I explained how the rise of film and television led to the commensurate decline of live entertainment: when superstars of the stage were supplanted by those of the screen, magicians and other live performers

were increasingly relegated to marginal positions in the entertainment industry. As philosopher Jason Leddington (2016:253) writes: “Once among the most popular and profitable forms of public entertainment, magic is now widely ridiculed as a sideshow art better suited to children’s parties and the absurdity of the Las Vegas strip than to realms of ‘serious’ art and culture.” This change, I should point out, fundamentally altered magic’s relationship to modernity. If magic during its Golden Age symbolized the anti-traditional, the experimental, the hyper-modern, today’s magic instead feels old-fashioned: by enacting the well-trodden theatrical structure of the magic show, contemporary magicians “giv[e] us permission to suspend the modern world” (Nardi 2006:68) and to embrace the trite traditionalism of a bygone age. The end result, of course, is kitsch: a trashy simulacrum of high art, as far removed from contemporary bourgeois sensibilities as Kewpie dolls and velvet paintings of Elvis; an “aesthetic of deception” (Călinescu 1987:229; see also Sontag 1964) that knowingly lends itself to self-parody by its performers and ironic consumption by its audience.

Another clue about magic’s decline in status can be found in Phil’s central complaint about the documentary: “They made us look like losers!” he fumed. “They made us look like geeks!” An oft-cited scholarly definition of the word *geek* comes from social theorist J. A. McArthur, who argues that “To be a geek is to be engaged, to be enthralled in a topic, and then to act on that engagement” as part of a community built on common expertise: anime geeks, trivia geeks, theater geeks, comic book geeks— anyone who “becomes an expert on a topic by will and determination” and who actively engages with that topic rather than passively experiencing it (McArthur 2009:62). To this, I would append Christopher Kelty’s observation that “geekiness” encompasses a mode of thinking, working, and being that unites like-minded experts within a shared social imaginary (Kelty 2005). As such, the magic community—a “culture of expertise” wherein magicians navigate a complex web of social processes built on the valuation of expert knowledge (Jones 2011:17; see also Boyer 2008)—neatly fits the archetype of a geek subculture, however much men like Phil might prefer it didn’t.

And although the global rise of a techno-capitalist consumer culture has helped to transform the word *geek* from a pejorative to a badge of honor (see Knepper 2018), the consumption behaviors associated with “geek chic” tend to focus on the popular (e.g. superhero films, video games, sci-fi TV) rather than the peripheral (e.g. HAM radio, stamp collecting, magic.) Indeed, truly inaccessible, mysterious, and esoteric forms of “geeky” knowledge remain a source of derision within mainstream society. As Kathryn E. Lane (2017:13) explains when discussing the depiction of geeks in popular culture:

When we, as viewers, laugh at the geek character who is unable to comprehend a basic social interaction while simultaneously being able to reprogram “600 lines of arcane [computer] code,” we’re allowed to acknowledge that there are parts of our society and its functions that we don’t understand or control. By laughing at the nerd, we’re giving ourselves permission to laugh at ourselves without feeling threatened.

Thanks to its geekiness and its kitsch, magic has been systemically reclassified as a low artform. While institutions like the Magic Castle have (as argued in the previous chapter) carefully leveraged an air of celebrity and exclusivity in order to appeal to the urban professional class, this has done little to improve magic’s overall reputation. As one magician said while discussing the non-magicians who frequented the Castle: “Go ahead and ask them, any one of them, and they’ll tell you straight up: they don’t like magic. They think it’s stupid. Look at the audience during a show, and you’ll see them rolling their eyes, whispering to their friends, laughing behind their hands. ‘Oh, how silly! Oh, I could never!’ If they like coming to the Castle, it’s because they like that they can get in and other people can’t. [Magicians] are nothing but a joke to them.”

### **Part III: The Art of Making Art**

It’s June 2016, a few short days before finals week. Around me, a horde of stressed undergrads were bent low over their laptops and textbooks, scribbling madly on well-worn index

cards and leaving smears of highlighter on their wrists. But the young magician I'm sitting with—Matty, a UCLA student that I first met the previous year—wasn't particularly worried about his classes. At the moment, his main concern was trying to perfect a trick he'd recently invented: while the idea was solid, Matty said, the mechanics of it weren't coming together as nicely as he'd hoped. My job was to watch him perform endless variations of the same trick, then offer uneducated feedback about which variation I preferred: "It's good to hear a layman's thoughts," he told me, tone earnest. "When you've been doing magic long enough, it's sometimes hard to think about it the same way the audience does."

As I watched him continue to work on his new invention, I asked him what he planned to do after he graduated. Did he want to do magic professionally?

"Sure, I want to perform," he said with a bashful smile. "Maybe not full-time—maybe just at night, or on the weekends...whenever I can fit it in around my day job. I don't think I could make a lot of money from it, but..." He shrugged. "I love magic. And, you know, I'd like to perform, even if I'm not good enough to go pro."

"Not good enough?" I said with some surprise. Despite his young age, Matty was easily one of the most talented close-up magicians I'd ever seen.

Matty smiled a little. "I've got a long way to go. The technique might be there, but..." He glanced down at the deck of cards in his hands, then awkwardly set them aside. "Derek Delgaudio...I don't know if you've heard of him? He has a show playing at the Geffen right now."

"Yeah, I've seen it!" Halfway between performance art and magic show, Derek Delgaudio's *In & Of Itself* was organized around a series of six artistic vignettes, each one using magic to explore deep philosophical questions about the nature of identity, memory, and truth. In one scene, for example, Delgaudio speaks about the prejudice he and his family faced when his mother began a romantic relationship with another woman, with the ensuing whirlwind of intolerance culminating in

someone lobbing a brick through the front window of the family's home. Suddenly, the golden brick that has been on stage throughout the show becomes imbued with new meaning, and when Delgaudio finally makes the brick disappear, the familiar trick provides not just the usual sense of wonderment but also of catharsis. Thanks to the sizable discounts that the Geffen Playhouse offered to UCLA students, I'd already seen *In & Of Itself* a couple of times, and was strongly considering going back for a third round. "It's a pretty good show."

"It's an *amazing* show," said Matty, clapping his hands for emphasis. "That's what I want to be able to do with my magic. I want to be creative. I want to tell a story. I want to make the audience *feel*. Sure, I might be *technically* proficient, but that's not enough. If I want to be good, I need to grow a lot more as an artist."

"Grow as an artist," I repeated, somewhat surprised: it was the first time I'd heard the phrase used to refer to the act of learning magic. "So...do you consider yourself an artist?" When Matty seemed unsure how to answer, I hastily revised the question: "I mean, do you think that magic is an artform?"

He frowned at me. "Of course it is!" he said, clearly hurt. Then, after a moment of awkward silence, he added: "Wait, scratch that. Yes, sometimes magic is art. But sometimes it isn't."

I wasn't quite sure what he meant by this, and admitted as much.

"Magic is just like any other medium," he said. "Give somebody a camera and they're a photographer; give them a paintbrush and they're a painter. But that doesn't make them artists, right? It's the same with magic. In the right hands, it's art. But in the wrong hands...?" He sighed, then changed the subject.

As the conversation began to wind down, I apologized to Matty for the thoughtless way I'd phrased my earlier question about magicians being artists: I'd only intended it as a segue for me

asking about what he would need to do in order to become a “good” artist, and it was only thanks to my clumsy wording that it seemed that I was implying that magic wasn’t an art at all.

Matty flapped a hand, waving away my apology. “It’s not your fault,” he said. “I mean, I get it. People—people who aren’t magicians, I mean—they just don’t see magicians as artists.”

“It’s not that I don’t see magicians as artists...” I began to explain, but, after seeing the skeptical look on Matty’s face, I figured it would be a better idea for me to give up and change tacks. “If people don’t think of magic as art, why do you think that is?”

“Honestly? It’s because a lot of magic *isn’t* art. And unfortunately, that’s the only kind of magic that people tend to see.”

While Matty was the first magician I heard say something like this, he was certainly not the last: although the vast majority of the magicians I met considered magic to be an artform, they also readily acknowledged that many non-magicians would vehemently disagree. When asked what might have caused magic’s lack of artistic status, they offered a few different theories. Some blamed the fact that a magician’s labor is, by necessity, invisible to the audience (see Coppa 2008, Rein 2019), making it difficult for laymen to judge artistic skill in the same way they might be able to judge a potter or painter or pianist<sup>14</sup>. Other magicians—particularly those who had experience working in other segments of the entertainment industry—argued that comedians, spoken word poets, and other purveyors of the performing arts are all often denied the label of “artist” when judged by mainstream society; the devaluation of magic, then, is par for the course. Still others upheld an aesthetic framework that categorized magicians less as artists than as craftsmen, seeing magic as a discipline that emphasizes virtuoso skill more so than it does creative expression (see Becker 2008); for these magicians, being called an “artist” was almost tantamount to an insult.

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<sup>14</sup> We’ll come back to this point in Chapter 5.

But by far the most popular theory about magic's lack of artistic status centers on the specter of the *bad magician*—that is, the kind of magician who produces bad art. These bad magicians come in a variety of forms: the shy, awkward teen who replicates tricks from blurry YouTube videos, not bothering to inject his own ideas into the lifeless routine; the elderly uncle who clumsily pulls sweat-dampened quarters from behind a nephew's ear; the businessman who performs simple, predictable card tricks at the company party, gleefully ignoring his audience's lack of enthusiasm. According to this theory of magic's devaluation, it is thanks to the work of these bad magicians that magic itself has become semiotically linked to artlessness and mediocrity. "Kids these days want to learn magic from YouTube, from Instagram," one magician fumed. "And then they take that half-learned knowledge and make their own YouTube videos, trying to teach *other kids*. I mean, come on! You see these kids at [magic conventions] and they have no idea how to hold the cards without flashing all over the place. They're too used to performing for the camera; they can't translate it to a three-dimensional space. [...] If that's the only magic people get to see, of course they're gonna think that magic sucks." Another explained: "For most people, their only experience of magic is bad magic. If they want to see *good* magic, they have to actually look for it—and the only people looking for *good* magic are magicians."

This is not an altogether unfamiliar argument: in art criticism, for example, there exists an ongoing debate about how the proliferation of "bad" forms of cultural production affects the societal devaluation of artworks, artists, and artistic practice (see Sleightholm 2002)—in this view, the accusation of distaste generates a polluting effect, with all cultural products of a similar kind ending up tarred by the same brush. However, there are a few key problems with the "bad magician" theory of magic's devaluation. For one thing, it's predicated upon the idea that non-magicians are primarily exposed to magic by innominate hobbyists, rather than, say, by the high-profile performers who populate the Las Vegas strip. Additionally, the apparent social pollution of "bad magic" seems far



more all-encompassing and absolute than what might be found in other artistic disciplines. Consider the aforementioned example of modern art: someone who expresses distaste for modern artworks—i.e. the oft-heard maxim “My kid could paint that!” when faced with a Jackson Pollock—can still appreciate other forms of painting and sculpture that they perceive to have more aesthetic value (see Melcbionne 1998); indeed, these expressions of distaste against “bad” art have little effect on modern art’s overall sense of prestige. Distaste for magic, on the other hand, is far more all-encompassing, increasing the possibility that magic’s low status stems not from the social pollution of “bad magic” but from some other source: its geekiness, for example, or its kitsch. As magician Jamy Ian Swiss (2002) points out:

Why does magic continue to suffer its embarrassing standing? [...] If asked, many magicians insist that this condition is due to the existence of “so much bad magic out there.” But this is nonsense. There has always been bad singing, bad music, bad dance, bad painting and sculpture -- yet these performances and static arts continue to maintain their respected station, unthreatened by the presence of poor and incompetent practitioners.

Even so, the image of the “bad magician” remains central to contemporary discourse about magic’s perceived lack of aesthetic value, and by expressing distaste for forms of “bad magic”—cheap gags, clumsy sleight-of-hand, recycled jokes, plagiarized routines—magicians enact a hierarchy of goodness and badness: some magicians are heralded as masters of the craft, either by virtue of technical mastery or by possession of an artistry that transcends technique; at the same time, other magicians are denigrated as hacks (e.g. party magicians, comedy magicians, lyrical magicians), philistines (e.g. corporate magicians, balloon magicians, social media magicians), or even imposters. In explaining this last viewpoint, one magician told me: “Every asshole with a deck of cards thinks he’s a magician. That doesn’t make it true. [...] Anyone who does [bad magic] isn’t a *real* magician, and until the public learns how to tell the real magicians from the fakes, they’re never going to care

about magic.” By drawing battle lines between good and bad magic, contemporary magicians instrumentalize social protectionist rhetorics in order to advance a project of aesthetic reevaluation and renewal.

Because of this, “bad magician” rhetorics serve a key social function—namely, saving face. If we understand *face* as “an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (Goffman 1955:213), we can see that expressions of distaste amongst magicians offers a salient mechanism of identity construction and image management: by publicly distancing themselves from the aesthetic styles of “bad magic,” magicians can prove—both to themselves and others—that they are purveyors of the right kind of magic, and therefore worthy of approval. In doing this, a magician can resist the symbolic threat posed by magic’s general lack of prestige, thereby maintaining (or, in some cases, restoring) a positive self-image and overcoming any lingering sense of embarrassment or shame. Additionally, the narrative of the bad magician unites self-professed “good” magicians against a common enemy, thereby strengthening community ties. Once, for example, I attended a close-up show at the Magic Castle wherein the featured performer displayed all the archetypal characteristics of a bad magician: a repertoire of unoriginal tricks, many of them simple gags that required little effort or skill; a cartoonish, hackneyed persona that seemed more suited to a children’s party than a nightclub; a litany of stale one-liners that might as well have been copied from a joke book. The two magicians that I watched the show with were furious by the time it ended, not in the least because the non-magicians in the audience seemed to accept the subpar performance as a matter of course. After speaking to me at length about the disastrous effect this show would ultimately have on the audience’s perception of magic as a whole, one of the magicians turned to the other. “You’d tell me if I were *that* bad, right?” she said, only half-joking. The other magician’s response was swift: “We could *never* be that bad.” By evoking the image of the “bad magician” via expressions of distaste, magicians can ally themselves to each other as a way of deepening relational

intimacy. So while the dichotomization of aesthetic tastes within the magic community does little to repair magic's overall reputation outside the magic community, it helps magicians to save face by socially distancing them from examples of bad art.

However, the prevalence of the “bad magician” rhetoric has the (arguably unintentional) side effect of alienating magicians who don't align with a specific set of aesthetic tastes. Consider, for example, social media magicians, who are almost universally reviled—particularly amongst older magicians—for their perceived lack of artistry, their clumsy technique, their inability to translate their performances to “real world” contexts, their (alleged) use of editing and trick photography, and their tendency to carelessly expose magical secrets to their followers. Many (though, to be clear, not all) of the magicians that I spoke with over the course of my research project categorized social media influencers as prime examples of the “bad magician” stereotype<sup>15</sup>. As one magician explained: “I think those magicians on YouTube use the camera as a crutch. They can do as many takes as they want, control the angles, maybe even sneak in some tricky editing to make their effects look as cool as possible. It's not real magic. [...] Maybe you could say that YouTube magicians are good at making *movies*, but they aren't good at doing *magic*.”

This aesthetic devaluation of social media magic downplays the expertise required to produce a magical effect in the disenchanted (and thoroughly mediated) world of the Internet. Indeed, it's possible to see a genealogical linkage between the short-form videos produced by contemporary social media magicians and the “trick films” made by magicians like Georges Méliès at the turn of the century (Gaudrereault 2007, Christie 2004): in order to successfully subvert the expectations of the audience and thereby produce a magical effect, both social media magic and Meliesian magic require a high level of mastery of the narrative syntax of short film. Additionally, I

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<sup>15</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, I found disdain for social media magicians to be most common amongst older magicians.

would like to point out that many of the most popular social media magicians are young men of color who, thanks to systemic gatekeeping processes in the mainstream magic community (see Nardi 1988), find it difficult to access more traditional modes of mentorship, apprenticeship, and knowledge circulation. Because of this, expressions of distaste with regards to social media magic<sup>16</sup> help to enact a pattern of aesthetic devaluation that further discourages the participation of marginal groups. Indeed, in many cases, the “bad magician” rhetoric uncannily mirrors the same boundary-marking processes that cultural elites have historically used to create institutions of high art.

### Conclusion

In the first of a series of essays for *Genii* magazine, magician Jamy Ian Swiss (2002 [1993]) argues that the reason that magic maintains such a low status on the “food chain of the performance arts” is because of its over-emphasis on technical proficiency. A magician’s fundamental goal, Swiss argues, is to fool the audience: without deception, there can be no magic. But while the act of fooling serves as an essential component of a good magical performance, it mustn’t be understood as the *only* component: “...Fooling the audience is, in and of itself, not a measure of greatness,” Swiss says. “A magician who has learned to fool the audience is little more than a musician who has mastered the scales, a painter who has learned his brushstrokes, an actor who has learned to remember his lines and not bump into the furniture.” In order to produce truly good art, magicians must learn to instrumentalize deception in service to some higher purpose, transcending the level of mere technical proficiency in order to achieve true artistic depth. And while some “constipated

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<sup>16</sup> Because I didn’t speak to very many social media magicians over the course of my research project, I’m unfortunately unable to speak about this with as much depth as I might have liked. A more thorough, categorical look at the aesthetics and practices of social media would be a useful avenue for future research.

purists” might insist on a more limited definition of good magic, Swiss argues that a truly artistic, transcendent mode of magical performance can take on a multitude of forms:

The possibilities [of good magic] are truly as infinite and varied as the range of human intellect and emotion. It can be glorious or banal, mean-spirited or enlightening, the depths of tragedy or the heights of humor. It may simply be the exploration and exposure of an interesting and unique character—an important opportunity to share in the human experience by gaining insight into another person’s life and mind. The human condition is the very essence of good theater, and indeed good art.

In some ways, expressions of taste and distaste within the magic community align with Swiss’s inclusive definition of “good magic,” allowing for some level of variety in what might be considered acceptable modes of artistic expression: for example, someone might easily label both Derek Delgaudio and David Copperfield as “good magicians,” even though they have vastly different performance styles, audiences, and presentational modes. Still, the assessment of aesthetic value within the magic community is necessarily articulated within the socio-political space, producing a taxonomy of “good” and “bad” taste that mirrors established patterns of systemic devaluation: it is no coincidence, I think, that many of the forms of magical performance that are assessed as being “bad magic” or “not real magic” are in fact associated with female performers (as in the case of lyrical magicians), performers of color (as in the case of social media magicians), or the working class (as in the case of the non-glamorous, workaday magicians who staff cruise ships and birthday parties.) In attempting to socially distance themselves from the image of the “bad magician” and thereby reduce the threat of social pollution, magicians rigidify a definition of good art that aligns with existing structures of exclusion; indeed, the rhetoric of the “bad magician” allows magicians to reimagine exclusion as meritocracy.

## Chapter 3: Black Magic

For better or for worse, *Penn & Teller: Fool Us* is what many laymen first think of when asked about the contemporary magic scene. The show has a simple enough format: contestants perform a short routine in front of the eponymous duo—Penn Jillette, a hulking giant of a man with the booming voice of a carnival barker; and Teller, Penn’s mute counterpart, who moves about the stage with the “eerie grace” (Lehrer 2009) of a silent film star. If neither Penn nor Teller can figure out how the trick works, the contestant is awarded a Fooled Us trophy, handily monogrammed with the initials FU. With its rotating cast of world-class performers, *Fool Us* is often fun to watch. However, its central premise has the (probably unintended) side effect of indelibly tying “winning” to “fooling,” thereby encouraging the viewing audience to prioritize deception over other key aspects of magical performance. If—as the magician Jamy Ian Swiss (2002) once argued—“a magician who has learned to fool the audience is little more than a musician who has mastered the scales,” the magicians who’ve won the FU trophy are rewarded solely on the basis of technical proficiency, rather than on showmanship, creativity, and other important qualities. Still, thanks to the millions of views that clips from the show get on social media sites like Facebook and YouTube, contestants who appear on *Fool Us* get a reliable publicity boost, making it a choice gig for many of the magicians I met during my time in Los Angeles<sup>17</sup>.

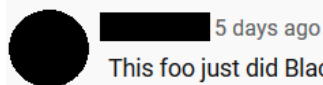
The show’s first season featured an appearance by British magician Chris Dugdale. For his *Fool Us* debut, Dugdale—communicating with the studio via video call—asked Penn to randomly select a number from a glass bowl, which would determine which member of the audience would assist with the trick. The chosen volunteer was a bald black man named Leroy, who spoke in an indeterminate garble and walked with a stiff, soldierly gait. The video guided Leroy through the

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed, I should mention here that several of the magicians I interviewed for this project have appeared on the show.

convoluted steps of Dugdale’s trick, which involved the magician in the video accurately predicting items chosen by randomly selected members of the audience. Finally, at the conclusion of the performance, Leroy peeled off the rubbery brown skin that covered his arms and face, revealing the pale, sweaty visage of Chris Dugdale himself.

Although Penn & Teller weren’t fooled by the trick, their comments were ultimately laudatory. “I don’t think there’s anything more powerful in magic than a human being turning into another human being,” said Penn, speaking on behalf of himself and his mute partner. “I remember, when you watch *Mission: Impossible* and they do that ‘peeling the face off’ thing, that is done with *huge* amounts of movie magic, and to see that done live is astonishing. [...] That is a trick that we would perform in our show and be very, very proud to perform.”<sup>18</sup> My own thoughts on the trick are far less complimentary, and can be rather neatly summed up by this anonymous comment left on a YouTube clip of Dugdale’s performance<sup>19</sup>:



This foo just did Black Face in front of every one.

👍 8 🗨️ REPLY

Since the nineteenth century—when white performers would “black up” their faces with burnt cork in order to portray comic black characters, usually for an audience of white working-class men (Bucholtz and Lopez 2011, Mahar 1999)—blackface performance has played a key role in the racial imagination of white Euro-America. These performances relied on “a dialectic of romance and repulsion” (Lott 2013: 90), with white performers and audiences demonstrating an erotic fascination with the black body whilst simultaneously targeting said body with anti-black ridicule. In circulating

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<sup>18</sup> Amongst all of the magicians I know who’ve seen this performance, opinions are split about how genuine these compliments actually were. I’m personally inclined to think that Penn was just being polite.

<sup>19</sup> Comment retrieved from TSM Ninja (2018 Sep 20) “Magician TRANSFORMS & FOOLS Everyone Besides Teller!! | Penn And Teller Fool Us Chris Dugdale.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZ1VuK1yQHI>. Accessed November 23, 2019.

racist narratives that depicted black people as foolish, lazy, gullible, and superstitious, blackface minstrelsy “reproduc[ed] the abject status of blackness” (Hartman 1997: 29) by reasserting white superiority and the justness of the hegemonic social order. As historian Saidiya Hartman (1997: 32) writes: “The appropriation of Sambo’s affect, the donning of blackface, and the audience’s consequent identification with the minstrel mask provided whiteness with a coherence and illusory integrity dependent upon the relations of mastery and servitude and the possession of a figurative body of blackness...” In more recent years, the “donning of the blackface mask” (ibid 32) has moved well beyond the minstrel stage, with non-black social actors reproducing racial subjection in a broad variety of performative contexts. Consider, for example, the “linguistic minstrelsy” of Hollywood film, wherein white performers imitate black speech as a way of affecting urban coolness (Bucholtz and Lopez 2011, Bucholtz 2011), or the “high-tech blackface” of sports video games, which allow creators and players to enact white fantasies of black athleticism (Leonard 2004, Chan 2005). By taking “possession of the black body” (Hartman 1997: 32) through blackface performance, white social actors recirculate essentialized understandings of black identity (Duan 2017: 94), thereby reasserting their own dominance within the established social order.

For the *Mission: Impossible*-like theatrics of his final transformation, Chris Dugdale could have dressed in drag, or costumed himself as an elderly white man. That he instead chose prosthetic brown skin—a literal blackface mask—seems significant. And while many modern examples of neo-minstrelsy are driven by the desire to capitalize on black “coolness” (see Duan 2017, Bucholtz 2011), I would argue that the use of blackface in magical entertainment—a field that has long remained predominantly white and male—has a vastly different purpose. In an earlier chapter, we briefly discussed how colonialist attitudes about race, class, and gender influenced the development of “modern magic” during the nineteenth century, with the racialized colonial subject being understood as too irrational, credulous, and superstitious to fulfil the gentlemanly archetype of the ideal



magician. Because of this, the role of magician was preserved for the white masculine subject, whilst the racialized Other was relegated to the role of assistant or audience member. Dugdale's choice in costume plays into these ideas. For one thing, careful juxtaposition presents "Leroy," the obedient black helper, in direct contrast to the white magician: Leroy's deference versus Dugdale's authority, Leroy's credulity versus Dugdale's guile. For another, magic's historical association between blackness and spectatorship adds an extra layer of verisimilitude to Dugdale's flimsy disguise: who would suspect Leroy of being the magician if, after all, the archetypal magician is white? By dressing up as a black man, Dugdale was able to play into racialized assumptions about the centrality of the white subject and the marginality of the black object.

Many of the white magicians I met during my time in Los Angeles presented magic as a deracialized space, one wherein the twin precepts of colorblindness and meritocracy had rendered racial politics irrelevant to contemporary magical performance. But considering the ways in which race influences how magicians construct their performances, interact with their audience, and engage with other members of the magic community, it seems likely that race is, in fact, conspicuously entwined with the current structures and infrastructures of the modern magic scene. In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which the racial imaginary of the magic community has been shaped by colonialist ideology, generating a dialectic between the white, "modern" performer and the non-white, "primitive" spectator. Additionally, I will discuss how black magicians have historically attempted to overcome this assumption of black primitivity by repackaging their blackness in a way that would be more intelligible to white consumers. By recognizing the contemporary magic community as an inherently racialized space, I will demonstrate the complex interpersonal strategies black magicians use to navigate a social field built around a white default.

## Part I: Savage Minds

In the September of 1856, the famed magician Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin—long since retired—headed to the French colony of Algeria to complete one last job. He'd been coaxed out of retirement at the request of the French military, whose authority amongst the locals was reportedly being threatened by an order of Islamic mystics known by the French as the *marabouts* (see Jones 2008, Leeder 2010). These Muslim clerics were reportedly fomenting rebellion amongst some of the local tribes, encouraging them to resist colonial authority. According to military intelligence, the source of the *marabouts'* influence was their alleged ability to perform miracles: walking across hot coals, deflecting bullets, eating glass. The best way to erode the *marabouts'* power, then, would be to expose them as mere charlatans. As Robert-Houdin (1859: 372-3) writes in his memoirs: “The government hoped [...] by the aid of my experiments to prove to the Arabs that their Marabouts' trickery is nothing but child's play, and therefore could not be done by true emissaries from Heaven. Naturally, this allowed us to show them that we are their superiors in everything, and that, as far as magicians are concerned, no one is a match for the French.”

In a series of performances that a French general would later call “the single most important campaign in the pacification of indigenous Algeria” (Jones 2008: 51), Robert-Houdin toured the countryside with the intention of “outmagicking” the rebellious *marabouts*. By liberally peppering his show with electromagnets, automata, and other high-tech symbols of industrial progress, Robert-Houdin's shows were “reportedly successful in convincing the ‘primitives’ of how advanced their colonial masters were” (North 2001: 73). Amongst Robert-Houdin's French contemporaries, his adventures in Algeria were widely considered a victory for the empire (Jones 2010, Seldow 1971). “Today the marabouts are totally discredited among the natives,” said one newspaper, “who, by contrast, hold the famous illusionist as an object of veneration” (qtd. in Seldow 1971: 17). Another proclaimed that “showing the Arabs a Christian superior ... to their phony shereefs, who have

tricked them so often, would encourage them...to resist—through knowledge of the cause—their own shameful excitement” (qtd. in Seldow 1971: 13).

While it’s debatable whether Robert-Houdin’s performance was as revolutionary amongst the indigenous populace as the self-congratulatory colonialists made it seem (see Jones 2008, 2010, 2017; Leeder 2010), Robert-Houdin’s storied triumph in Algeria has had several long-lasting impacts. For one thing, the image of Robert-Houdin conquering anticolonial upstarts with the power of French ingenuity “gilded [his] reputation in the public imagination, confirming him as a great patriot and national hero” (Jones 2008: 51). For another, it helped to affirm a distinction between modern magic—“a harmless mode of entertainment amenable to bourgeois sensibilities” (Jones 2011: 205)—and the superstitious chicanery of the Algerian natives, thereby redefining the popular image of the magician as one founded upon scientific thought, legitimate forms of expertise, and good taste. And by depicting the *marabouts* as charlatans—and their intended audience as dupes—Robert-Houdin’s story reinforces a rhetorical framework that depicts the African colonial subject as cripplingly irrational, duplicitous, fanatical, and naïve, thereby justifying the “civilizing” effect of imperialist expansion.

Many of the magicians that I met during my time working on this project—especially those with more than a passing interest in magical history—cited Robert-Houdin’s memoirs as gospel, often bringing up his storied trip to Algeria whenever they wanted to make a dramatic point. “When Robert-Houdin took his show to Africa,” one magician said, trying to impress upon me the symbolic power of Western magic, “they [the locals] had *no idea* what was even happening. [...] Those people treated him like a *god*.” Another referenced the trickery of the Algerian *marabouts* in order to demonstrate the difference between “honest liars” (i.e. Western magicians) and dishonest ones, between good magicians and bad. “Before Robert-Houdin went to—I forget, was it Nigeria?” (I corrected him.) “Algeria, okay. [The locals] there were being, basically, preyed upon. They were

being lied to. It took someone from the outside to come in and say, ‘Hey, that isn’t real magic. Hey, maybe you shouldn’t trust those guys.’ [...] And I think there’s something very cool about that.” A third magician brought up the Algerian mission when negatively comparing the social status of present-day magicians to that of their nineteenth-century counterparts: “The *government* asked [Robert-Houdin] to come work for them. That’s how seriously they took [magic] back then. Can you imagine that happening today? Can you imagine the president calling up David Copperfield to go help bring peace to the Middle East? It’s not gonna happen!” In this way, Robert-Houdin’s trip to Algeria has become important within the social imaginary of the magic community, serving as both a cultural touchstone and a key locus of meaning-making and identity-formation.

However, there are a few problems with taking the much-mythologized story of Robert-Houdin’s Algerian triumph as read. For one thing, the idea that Islamic religious sects were fomenting anti-colonial rebellion—the entire impetus for Robert-Houdin’s journey to the French colony—was a product of anti-Arab hysteria, grounded in heavily biased ethnographic accounts that presented “Islam as an ideological system rather than a religion” (Saaïda 2013: 79). For another, it isn’t true that the *marabouts* were maliciously tricking their countrymen with counterfeit miracles, as the French colonizers erroneously believed. Rather, they were holy men who utilized illusionary techniques in order to “mimetically represent, according to well-established performance conventions, the historical miracles of popular saints” (Jones 2008: 51). By misrepresenting indigenous religious practice as blatant charlatanism, contemporary magicians engage in colonialist logics that figure “non-modern, non-Europeans as incapable of distinguishing between real and simulated magic” (ibid 51), thereby presenting Western colonizers as intellectually (and morally) superior to their “primitive” colonial subjects. Indeed, in using Western illusionism as an interpretive framework for understanding the beliefs and behaviors of the *marabouts*, colonial rhetoric effectively

reframes indigenous ritual systems as entertainment (Apter 2002: 589), thereby cheapening and spectacularizing local religious practice. As anthropologist Graham Jones (2010: 71) writes:

It is not entirely clear whether, in deploying a magician, the French intended to dispel the ignorance they attributed to indigenous people or exploit it (Robert-Houdin himself suggests both motives...). Either way, the subsequent representation of his performances as a successful instance of the modern disenchantment of primitive superstition reaffirmed French convictions of cognitive superiority [...] By unfavorably comparing Algerians' supposed credulity toward the alleged trickery of indigenous ritual practices to their own attitude of incredulity towards conjuring as a form of disenchanted entertainment, the French used magic as a powerful marker of cultural difference and divergent social evolution.

In an earlier chapter, I discussed the ways in which the image of the “modern magician” that was first introduced during the nineteenth century was explicitly designed to realign illusionism with the founding principles of the Enlightenment era—namely industry, scientific rationalism, and colonial expansion. As such, the idea of the “modern magician” is necessarily positioned within a dialectic of rationality and irrationality, wherein embracing the former requires the wholesale rejection of the latter. By situating magic within discourses of modernity, the “modern magicians” of the Golden Age could be strategically operationalized as symbols of European progress, justifying imperialist expansion by reasserting the inferiority of the primitive Other. The story of the Algerian trip fits neatly into this project, strategically positioning Robert-Houdin in dialectical opposition to the *marabouts*: the gentlemanly Frenchman versus the savage natives; the scientific thinker versus the superstitious fanatics; the “honest liar” versus the immoral, unscrupulous charlatans. In this way, Robert-Houdin’s story about his time in Algeria parallels similar stories told by magicians who traveled around Africa, Asia, and the Americas during magic’s Golden Age. The magician Howard Thurston, for example, said of his time in India that journalists from “native” newspapers believed him to have genuine supernatural powers, and that he once freed himself from a violent, riotous

mob by threatening the gullible locals with his ability to cast “evil spells” (Thurston 1928, Steinmeyer 2012). Similarly, Harry Kellar<sup>20</sup>—Thurston’s mentor and predecessor—claimed that he’d gained enough notoriety in Mexico for his “diabolical” magic that a government official asked him to “impress the natives with the power of civilized man...to try his arts on the half-naked savages” (Kellar 1886: 32). Kellar agreed, and later wrote, proudly, that the “natives” were so startled by the show’s fiery final act that they ran away in fear: “Not one of them stopped until completely out of sight, and they could not be induced by any means to return” (ibid 52).

The negative comparisons invoked by the rational-irrational dialectic extend far beyond the colonial project. Women and members of the working-class—understood within the hegemonic imagination as being just as irrational, superstitious, and in need of domination as the racialized colonial subject—were also held up as enemies of the modern man (see Coppa 2008, Jones 2008). Because of this, the “modern magicians” of the Victorian era used assistants who were either Indian men or English women, a practice that allowed the magician to strategically demonstrate his superiority over his non-masculine, non-Western counterparts (Coppa 2008: 86). The threat of pollution by the irrational Other also affected how modern magicians chose to present themselves on stage: driven by a “fear of the orientaling and feminizing effects of magic on the British male body” (Beckman 2003: 42) and a need to align themselves with the genteel “upper reaches of the global power structure” (Coppa 2008: 86), modern magicians eschewed turbans and mystical robes in favor of top hats and tails—the uniform of the European gentleman. By the dawn of the 1900s, the reification of the rational-irrational dialectic—and the resultant modernization and hyper-rationalization of magical performance—had firmly secured the Western image of the ideal magician as someone who was wealthy, white, and male.

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<sup>20</sup> Fun fact: When Harry Kellar finally retired in 1908, he made his home in the restful, orange-scented hills of Los Angeles (Steinmeyer 2005), which—as you might recall from Chapter 1—had a reputation at the time for being perfect for retirees.

This dialectic—rationality versus irrationality, reason versus credulity, modernity versus primitivity—continues to shape the ways in which contemporary magicians think about magical performance. As Graham Jones (2017: 152) writes: “At least since Robert-Houdin’s [memoirs], representations of indigenous and/or primitive people who believe in supernatural magic—or of the ritual experts who exploit those beliefs—have been commonplace in magician’s travel narratives.” Consider, for example, David Blaine: his 2002 television special *Fearless* features a segment that takes him to Haiti, where his signature card tricks are accompanied by shots of confused onlookers who don’t seem to understand what’s happening, as well as by a droning, teacherly narration that muses about how “magic and voodoo are considered the same thing” by the supernatural-obsessed locals (see Jones 2017: 152-3). The similarity between Blaine’s observations and those of his Golden Age predecessors is so stark that it’s almost difficult to believe that they were recorded over a century apart.

Additionally, discourses of rationalism inform the interpretive frameworks that magicians use when trying to determine what constitutes “good” magic. Once, for example, when I asked a magician about his distaste for lyrical magicians—that is, the (usually female) magicians who incorporate elements of song and dance into their routines<sup>21</sup>—he said: “They’re just a bit too emotional, you know? A bit too touchy-feely. Magic isn’t really about that. [...] I can appreciate the artistry of it, but it just isn’t magic.” Another magician—a mentalist, specializing in mind-reading and other such acts—firmly told me that he would never be the kind of mentalist who insisted that his tricks were a product of supernatural ability. “If I tell you I know what you’re thinking because of your body language, that might be a lie,” he explained. “If [another magician] tells you he knows what you’re thinking because he can read minds, that’s also a lie. [...] But my lie is going to be a lot more ethical than his, because it’s grounded in reality, not paranormal nonsense.” A third

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<sup>21</sup> For more about the aesthetics of this dance-oriented form of magic, see Bruns and Zompetti 2014.

complained about magicians who incorporate “woo-woo stuff” in their performances, explaining that magic was at its best when it carefully distinguished itself from the supernatural. To illustrate his point, he discussed the case of two different magicians who had recently performed the same levitating table trick at the Magic Castle, albeit a few months apart. “The first guy talked about how he’d inherited [the table] from his dead grandmother, how he thought it might be haunted, blah blah blah. Boring! The second guy talked about the power of imagination—that’s it. He never denied that the floating table was just an illusion, never claimed to have supernatural powers. [...] That made the trick *more* powerful, not less.” In this way, the quest for rationalism—and the concomitant rejection of irrationalism—has led to a predilection amongst magicians for forms of magical performance that are sufficiently detached, demystified, and disenchanting.

Ideas about rationality also affect how magicians engage with their audience. Just as Robert-Houdin’s memoirs categorized his audience’s reactions by social station—contrasting the “playful, self-reflexive detachment” of the educated bourgeoisie with the childlike credulity of women, racialized colonial subjects, and the working class (Jones 2017: 30)—so too are contemporary magicians influenced by pervasive stereotypes about the supposed credulity, emotionality, and irrationality of particular marginalized groups. Once, for example, I complained to a magician about the fact that I somehow always managed to be chosen as an audience volunteer<sup>22</sup>—a state of affairs I found to be both mortifying, thanks to my crippling stage fright, and annoying, since being called up to the stage quite neatly disrupted my ability to take field notes. Half-joking, I asked this magician

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<sup>22</sup> “Volunteer” is an interesting word for it. While some magicians do favor a volunteer-based strategy for bringing audience surrogates into the spotlight—for example, by asking members of the audience to raise their hand if they’d like to join the magician onstage for the next trick—many others seem to prefer to unilaterally select their own volunteer. If the person chosen seems unwilling or reluctant, the magician might gamely switch to someone else...or, more likely, they’ll double-down, using peer pressure (e.g. “Why don’t we give her a round of applause?”) and other mild forms of coercion in order to get the chosen volunteer to acquiesce. Indeed, I once saw a magician grab his selection by the wrist and then drag her up to the stage, even as the “volunteer” repeatedly tried, in vain, to free herself from his grip and flee back to her seat.



what it was about me that made me so likely to get chosen: the fact that I was young and female, much like the prototypical magician's assistant?

"Yeah, probably," she said, stirring her coffee. "Also, you're black."

I blinked at her, startled.

"It's a really common thing with magicians," she continued, still focused on her coffee. "The idea that, you know, black people give better reactions. White people might just smile a little bit, like, 'Oh, okay, that's cool.' But black people? They really *react*. They aren't as reserved." She glanced at me, then quickly added, "That's the stereotype, anyway. I mean, did you see David Blaine's new show?"

She was referring to the 2016 special *Beyond Magic*, which had aired a few weeks before. I hadn't watched it.

"There's a reason [Blaine] always asks guys like Dave Chapelle and Steve Curry to be in his specials," she said with an awkward smile. "When black people see magic, they go big. They *emote*. [...] It's like they think they've seen something *really* magical."

## **Part II: The Magical Negro**

On March 23, 1849, Henry Brown packed himself into a cloth-lined crate, carrying with him a bladder of water, some biscuits, and an awl with which he could make some extra air holes, if necessary. His compatriots nailed the crate shut, and Brown was shipped via Adams Express to Pennsylvania: a free state. After a brutal twenty-seven-hour journey—during which Brown's box was so roughly handled that, at one point, Brown "felt [his] eyes swelling as if they would burst from their sockets" (qtd. in Walls 2014) and feared that he would soon die—Brown finally arrived in Philadelphia. When members of the local chapter of the Underground Railroad cracked open the crate, Brown emerged, "a large black man unfolding from a little wooden crate like some genie from

a bottle” (Wolff 1996: 27) and greeted his rescuers with a song. Thanks to the sensational nature of his escape from slavery, Brown—now commonly called “Box” Brown, for obvious reasons—quickly became a crowd favorite on the abolitionist lecture circuit (see Cutter 2015, Ruggles 2003, Magus 1995).

The centerpiece of Box Brown’s anti-slavery lectures was a wooden crate: a replica of the little wooden box that once carried him to freedom. In using this box to reenact the “spectacle of his own entrapment,” Brown’s routine became a kind of “inverted magic act,” a twist on a trick that would eventually become a popular go-to amongst stage magicians: Metamorphosis, an effect that “hinge[s] on dramatic substitutions of one person or thing for another” (Brooks 2006: 118). If the goal of fugitive slave narratives is—to paraphrase Frederick Douglass’s autobiography—to compel the audience to see “a slave made [into] a man” (Douglass 1845: 66), Brown achieves this using the symbolic dematerialization and reconstruction of his own body. By building off of the theatrical language of nineteenth-century illusionism, Brown “reanimated magic’s illusory play of the body” in service to African-American liberation, reimagining the black body “as a tool of defiance, as a site of illusion, theatrical mastery, and reinvention” (Brooks 2006: 121).

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Brown’s already spectacular abolitionist lectures were soon accompanied by a magician’s repertoire of illusory performances—escapology, mesmerism, feats of sleight-of-hand—in addition to scholarly lectures on scientific subjects like mycology, the study of fungi, and trichology, the study of hair loss (see Cutter 2015). In this way, Box Brown—now advertising himself as Professor Box Brown, adopting the same scholarly appellation common to other magicians of the time period—closely followed the rationalistic playbook of magic’s Golden Age, adopting scientific rhetoric and a teacherly persona in order to repackage himself as a man of science. Still, Brown’s blackness firmly distinguished him from the “modern magicians” who served as his contemporaries. For example, symbols of bondage—shackles, in the case of his escapology

act; hypnotic compulsion, in the case of his mesmerism—were a core feature of his show, allowing Brown to symbolically reconfigure the story of his enslavement “in a way that gave him control over its ultimate outcome and meaning” (Cutter 2015, Ruggles 2003). Additionally, Brown presented many of his illusions in the guise of African folk magic (Cutter 2015, Magus 1995), playing off Orientalist assumptions about African supernaturality (see Deslippe 2014, Goto-Jones 2016) in order to reposition his work outside of the thoroughly disenchanting world of “modern magic.” At a time when Western illusionism increasingly juxtaposed European science with indigenous superstition, Brown crossed the symbolic boundary between the rational and the irrational, embracing the presumed connection between blackness and “the ineffable, the esoteric, the exotic, and the unmentionable” (Shinn 2002: 248) in order to achieve a mystifying effect. In this way, Brown overcomes a mainstream vision of magical performance that emblemizes the white gentleman as the ideal magician—not by resisting colonialist assumptions about black enchantment, but by embracing them. At the same time, he complicates labels of “primitivity” and “irrationality” commonly associated with African magic by styling his performances with the same scientific rhetoric and gentlemanly dress utilized by his white contemporaries.

Brown was not alone in having to negotiate the complex racial politics of black performance in order to sustain a successful career in magic. Consider, for example, Richard Potter, a ventriloquist and illusionist active during the early 1800s (Haskins and Benson 2001, Hodgson 2018). Potter painstakingly scrubbed all “race talk” from his shows, featuring none of the plantation songs, “Negro dances,” or racialized jokes that were a common feature of (black) vaudevillian entertainment at the time. Even so, Potter’s performances were indelibly shaped by his blackness. Unlike white ventriloquists—who were infamous for their offstage practical jokes, largely at the expense of black victims (Johnson 2016: 266)—Potter avoided such pranks: perhaps out of common decency, or perhaps because he knew that “an audience that laughed along with white

[ventriloquists] would be less comfortable watching a black man [...] inflict discomfort on others” (ibid 267). For similar reasons, Potter avoided rhetorics of enlightenment science during his shows, assuming that white audiences during the antebellum period would not accept scientific posturing from a black man. Consider also the case of Black Herman, a prominent magician during the early 20th century whose act played fully into ideas about black supernaturality. He claimed to be immortal<sup>23</sup>, sold talismans meant to ward off racism, and told his audience that his conjuring tricks had been taught to him by African witch doctors (Chireau 2007, Deslippe 2014, Cullen et al. 2007). By seriously “evoking the authority and majesty” of black supernaturality (Cullen et al. 2007: 114), Black Herman rejected mainstream ideas about the supposed primitivity and disreputability of African folk magic, thereby reclaiming “superstition” as a tool of black empowerment. So if Golden Age “modern magic” can be understood as a performance of whiteness—wherein the magicians reenact the presupposed superiority of the white masculine imperialist over the non-white, the non-Western, the poor, and the female—then the “black magic” performed by magicians like Brown, Potter, and Black Herman can be similarly understood as a performance of blackness. Successful black magicians must carefully and strategically engage in acts of racial performativity, such as by embracing preconceived notions of black supernaturality in order to sidestep accusations of inauthenticity, or by avoiding “uppity” behaviors that would make their audience feel threatened and belittled. In doing this, black magicians repackage their blackness in a way that will be readily accepted and consumed by their audience.

In everyday life, members of marginalized groups—women, racial minorities, queer folk, people with disabilities—have long had to perform a polymorphous set of identity roles in order to safely navigate a world blighted by hegemonic ideology, structural inequality, and systemic violence

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<sup>23</sup> At Black Herman’s funeral, mourners reportedly pricked his feet with needles in order to make sure that he was really dead.

(see Schueller 1999: 234). This need to strategically perform “Otherness” necessarily extends to the stage, where performers must work to fit themselves into an arena constrained by the ruling principles of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy. Because of this, black performance provides marginal bodies with “a way for getting along in a constricted world” (Lott 2013: 40), allowing black performers to use self-commodification and identity play in order to overcome the cultural and material constraints that stifle black lives. By “resourcefully work[ing] within and around the racial strictures of Euro-American show business” (Jones 2014), magicians like Brown, Potter and Black Herman were able to finagle their way past a racialized rational-irrational dialectic that has historically relegated people of color to the role of duplicitous shaman, hapless dupe, credulous admirer, or smiling assistant. In reworking their performance of blackness to fit the interests and sensibilities of their audience, these magicians managed to penetrate a field that has long been monopolized by white men.

### **Part III: How to be Black**

In November 2008, when Senator Barack Obama was elected the first black president of the United States, many white Americans upheld Obama’s election as proof positive that we now lived in a “post-racial” society, a utopia built on the twin principles of colorblindness and meritocracy (Feagin 2013). One reporter<sup>24</sup> said of Obama, “He is post-racial by all appearances. You know, I forgot he was black tonight for an hour.” Another<sup>25</sup> proclaimed: “A man of mixed race has now reached the pinnacle of U.S. power only two generations since Jim Crow. [...] One promise of

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<sup>24</sup> “MSNBC's Matthews On Obama: 'I Forgot He Was Black Tonight' | RealClearPolitics”. [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2010/01/27/msnbc\\_matthews\\_on\\_obama\\_i\\_forgot\\_he\\_was\\_black\\_tonight.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2010/01/27/msnbc_matthews_on_obama_i_forgot_he_was_black_tonight.html). Retrieved November 26, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> “President-Elect Obama: The Voters Rebuke Republicans for Economic Failure,” Wall Street Journal, November 5, 2008, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122586244657800863.html>. Retrieved November 26, 2019.

[Obama's] victory is that perhaps we can put to rest the myth of racism as a barrier to achievement in this splendid country." As sociologist Joe Feagin (2013: xiii) argues, this perspective re-envisioned racism as a "cancer in the body" that Obama's election surgically excised. By engaging in this discourse, we can beatifically ignore that "our society was built from the beginning with racial oppression as a central part of its societal structure" (ibid xiii) and that racism is therefore not so much a "cancer in the body" as it is the body itself.

Six years after Obama's historic election, the Society of American Magicians—one of the oldest and largest magicians' associations in the country—elected its own first black president: Kenrick "Ice" McDonald, known for his use of live tropical birds during his illusionist act. And just as Obama was once understood within the public imagination as a harbinger of post-racial utopia, so too have many American magicians taken up McDonald's election as evidence that the contemporary magic scene does not have a "race problem." For some, this is because the grinding wheels of progress have ferried the magic community away from its racist past, ushering in a new era of meritocracy that affords equal opportunity to all, regardless of racial background; for others, it is because magic never had a "race problem" to begin with, and that anyone who perpetuates the "myth of racism" is lying for the sake of melodrama. Either way, post-racial thought has become the guiding principle of the American magic community, situating contemporary understandings of race and racism within discourses of colorblindness (see Bonilla-Silva 2006).

Because of this, much of the discussion of racism within the Los Angeles magic scene focuses on individual instances of racial prejudice: a racist joke told during a lecture at a national magic convention; a local hiring manager rumored to favor white performers; a slur-ridden hate campaign directed against a black magician who'd become mildly famous on Instagram. In the post-racial imagination, these acts must be understood as anomalies—unfortunate, yes, but ultimately unimportant: mere potholes on the road to progress. However, rather than thinking about these

events as outliers, I would argue that such events might more accurately be understood as symptomatic of larger structural issues within the magic community. Indeed, I think this heightened emphasis on overt acts of racial prejudice distracts from the more insidious trademarks of systemic racism—namely, the myriad of ways in which black and other non-white performers are systemically belittled, exoticized, or otherwise made to feel unwelcome within a community that has long been encoded as a prototypically white space.

“The Civil Rights Movement is long past, yet segregation persists,” writes sociologist Elijah Anderson (2015: 10). “The wider society is still replete with overwhelmingly white neighborhoods, restaurants, schools, universities, workplaces, churches and other associations, courthouses, and cemeteries, a situation that reinforces a normative sensibility in settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present.” While these “white spaces” vary wildly in kind, their most distinctive feature is “their overwhelming presence of white people and their absence of black people” (ibid 13), which is usually caused by an insidious cocktail of exclusionary mechanisms. The American court system, for example, historically forbade people of color from testifying against white people, thereby producing a space wherein “truth developed as distinctly white, as only white people ever spoke legal truths” (Carlin 2016: 453). Even though people of color are no longer formally barred from testifying in court, the fact that “the speech, narrative structures, and behavior codes” (ibid 453) of the American courtroom developed within an all-white context has made it so that non-white actors who fail to appropriately conform to white standards of behavior are automatically assumed to be untrustworthy. Consider also the discriminatory housing policies that have helped to bolster the spatial segregation of white and black residential areas, making it so that a black person who enters a white neighborhood is often automatically treated with fear and suspicion (Lambright 2019, Kurwa 2019). When navigating an environment that upholds whiteness as the default and blackness as an aberration, a black person

must engage in strategic acts of performance that legitimizes his right to move freely within a white space: by being “vouched for by white people in good standing” (Anderson 2015: 13), for example, or by styling himself through speech and behavior as an authentic member of the in-crowd. Even so, a black person’s status within a white space remains both ambiguous and uncertain, since his right to exist can be challenged at any time by defenders of the white default.

So how did magic develop into a prototypical example of a white space? In the early days of American magic, black magicians were stymied by the same social strictures that limited the opportunities of other black entertainers, having to deal with hostile audiences, shakedowns from racist booking managers, and hotelkeepers who would freely deny black performers lodging during their time on tour (see Johnson 2016). Indeed, discriminatory hiring practices in show business continued well into the Civil Rights Era, limiting the ability of black magicians to find regular work. Additionally, the magic community itself has historically been built around closed social networks, access to which is generally obtained through personal references (Nardi 1988: 764); because these groups were largely founded upon the careful cultivation of white gentleness (Goto-Jones 2016: 21; see also Jones 2008), black magicians during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries found it especially difficult to be welcomed into the fold. And even when black magicians did manage to make it onto the stage, colonialist ideas about the irrationality of the primitive Other—discussed earlier in this chapter—had long-since aligned the image of the “modern magician” with the white heteromale subject (see Jones 2008); this, coupled with the routinization of white standards of performance, made it so that black magicians had to bend over backwards to present themselves in a way that white magicians and audiences would accept. Because of this, black magicians have long been discouraged from pursuing careers in magical entertainment, causing the American magic community to remain overwhelmingly white.



In navigating the social reality of the modern magic community, magicians of color must reckon with the “white racial frame” (Feagin 2013) that affects how they are envisioned, categorized, and treated by others within the community. One magician, for example, told me of a time he and another magician of color visited the Magic Castle to attend a members-only lecture. An usher stopped them at the entrance to the lecture hall, informing them that this area was for members only. The two members pointed to their golden membership pins, and then—when that wasn’t enough to convince the usher, who insisted that the pins were silver rather than gold—pulled out their membership cards for the skeptical usher’s inspection. “It just didn’t compute for him,” the magician said of the experience. “Like, he wasn’t expecting us to be members, so he couldn’t *see* us as members, even though the evidence was right there in front of him.”<sup>26</sup> Curious, I asked if the two magicians of color were the only ones stopped and questioned by the usher. The magician laughed: “Of course we were!” Another magician told me how once, during a private workshop, the master magician who was leading the session made a racist remark about Asians and dogs. “I called him out on it,” she said. “Like, ‘That’s not nice. Why would you say that?’” The master magician rolled his eyes, then asked the rest of the class to speak up if they thought what he’d said was offensive. The students, all of them white, stayed silent. “I stopped going [to the workshop] after that. I just couldn’t take it anymore.” A third magician told me that whenever he attended a magic conference, he was often discouraged from actively participating in the late-night jam sessions during which magicians show off new tricks, experiment with different techniques, and provide constructive

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<sup>26</sup> There are clear parallels between this story and a similar story told by a black man who worked as an airline pilot, a profession just as prototypically white as the magic scene. “I was flying with a black captain and we were waiting in the lobby, in full uniform, and a white guy walked up to him and said, ‘Can you get my cab for me?’ The captain looked at him and said, ‘The only thing I know how to do is fly airplanes.’ The man said, ‘I understand that, but can you get my cab for me?’ He just couldn’t get it through his mind that he was talking to a pilot” (Evans 2012). As sociologist Joe R. Feagin (2013: x) writes about this exchange: “He does not ‘see’ the uniforms of these black pilots or the possibility that they are indeed major airline pilots, but rather only observes them as black men.”

feedback. “It’s like I’m not even there. I make a suggestion: ‘Oh, maybe you should try this?’ No one will even *look* at me. Someone asks a question: ‘Does anybody know about such-and-such?’ I tell them the answer, and it’s like I didn’t say anything.” Because of his race, he said, white magicians often assumed that his expertise as a magician must be worthless and suspect. “It’s not like anybody will tell me, ‘Hey, you can’t be here. You don’t belong here.’ But then again, they don’t have to.” In this way, magicians of color contend with a social environment wherein whiteness is upheld as the default, and wherein non-white social actors have their positions within the community consistently challenged, questioned, or minimized by other magicians.

The existence of the white racial frame necessarily extends to the stage. In a professional space wherein whiteness is socially constituted as unmarked and racially neutral, non-white performers are inherently racialized, “hypermarked against the unmarked spaces of white intelligibility” (Yancy 2016: 9). As one magician explained to me: “As soon as you step on stage, the audience is thinking, ‘Wait, he’s not white.’ That’s what they’re all thinking, even if they don’t know that’s what they’re thinking about.” This, he said, was why many magicians of color explicitly acknowledge race during their shows, even though many white—i.e. “racially neutral”—magicians do not. “No matter what,” he said, “[the audience is] going to think about you as ‘the Asian guy’ or ‘the black guy’ or whatever. If you don’t say anything [about race], that just gives them free reign to decide what your story is. But if you talk about race, you can take control of the narrative.” One magician, for example, prefaced his performance by ironically claiming that he was a “street magician”: “I’m from the street. Everything I *do* is street magic.” By juxtaposing a rather genteel repertoire of tricks—cutting up and restoring a silk handkerchief, for example—with increasingly absurd assurances that he learned his magic on “the street,” this magician winkingly critiqued prejudicial assumptions that associate blackness with “the putative danger, crime, and poverty of the

iconic ghetto” (Anderson 2015: 13)<sup>27</sup>. Another magician—who was participating in a multi-billed, variety-style show in which he was the only performer of color—joked that the dramatic change in skin tone might be enough to give the audience eye strain: “Take a second, okay. Give your eyes some time to adjust.” A third magician flirtatiously referred to himself as “your chocolate lover” and bragged jokingly about the sexual prowess of black men, thereby simultaneously mocking and leaning into racialized assumptions about black hypersexuality (see Collins 2004, Yancy 2016). Through strategic articulations of their own blackness, black magicians negotiate their fraught positions as racialized bodies in a prototypically white space, thereby producing work that has been rendered intelligible to the white racial frame that shapes contemporary magical performance.

As we can see, race—or, more specifically, the racialization of non-white bodies—is incredibly salient to the contemporary magic scene: both in terms of how black and other non-white magicians present themselves onstage, as well as how they must work to navigate a community that has long been structured in a way that systemically excludes, minimizes, and discredits non-white participants. So while it might be tempting to embrace the myth of post-racialism when thinking about contemporary magic, it’s important to recognize how the utopic imagery of a “post-racial America” is grounded by the very same white racial frame that upholds whiteness as the default.

### **Conclusion**

Once, while I was waiting in line outside of the Magic Castle’s close-up theater, I overheard a conversation between two magicians, one black, the other white. The black magician told a story about a regional magic conference he’d recently attended: while trying to find a seat in a crowded lecture hall, a fellow attendee loudly said, “That [racial slur] *better* not sit next to me.” The black magician looked around to see how other members of the audience had reacted to what the man

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<sup>27</sup> This approach to black performance can also be found outside of the American magic community. One French magician of Afro-Caribbean descent, for example, has been known to wear fake dreadlocks and tells jokes about voodoo in order to confront racial stereotypes about blackness (Jones 2011: 126).

had said, hoping to find a friendly face, but realized that everyone in the audience seemed to be studiously avoiding making eye contact with him. Overwhelmed by the sudden feeling of being “alone in, like, this sea of white faces,” the black magician fled the lecture hall.

The white magician frowned. “Maybe you misheard him.”

“I know what I heard,” said the black magician.

“But, I mean, I’ve never heard anything like that. I’ve been to, like, a thousand conferences, and I’ve never heard anything like *that*.”

The black magician shot him a dubious look. “Really? Never?”

“Of course not!”

The conversation continued like this for a while, with the black magician describing various uncomfortable experiences he’d had at magic conventions over the years, and the white magician insisting that the black magician must be mistaken about what had really happened. Finally, as the door opened and the waiting attendees began filing into the theater, the white magician threw up his hands. “You know, not everything is about race,” he said. “That’s all I’m saying. Why do you have to bring race into everything?”

This idea—that candid discussions about racism bring “race” into a space that is meant to be post-racial—seems to be common amongst white American magicians, and for good reason: because the white racial frame through which many magicians understand magic upholds whiteness as racially neutral, white magicians are able to experience the community as an effectively deracialized space. If—as Sarah Ahmed (2007) points out—white bodies and white spaces are oriented toward each other in such a way that whiteness is rendered invisible even as it shapes the way individual social actors view the world, so too must it be true that white magicians find it difficult to understand their social world as an inherently racialized space. Because of this, conversations about race can often be fraught, complicated by the fact that the events that non-

white magicians see as racially charged will often be viewed by white magicians as racially neutral. As philosopher George Yancy (2016: 8-9) says about his difficulty explaining the omnipresent whiteness of academic conferences to his white colleagues:

...In terms of predominantly white philosophical conferences, white philosophers can disappear as racialized. Their white bodies can move with ease, unraced, comfortable, and safe. [...] Their bodies are mobilized by the entire scene: white interviewers and white interviewees as candidates for jobs—sporting tweed jackets, bow ties, pipes; white bodies frantically eager to make impressions on other white bodies—white hair, white skin, contorted white faces deep in philosophical reflection, looks of perplexity, slight hints of wine and cheese breath, and strained eyes red with intensity. The entire philosophical performance, with all of its props and accoutrement, constitutes a site of effective (white) history. The same process of white intellectual formation occurs within the context of other academic value-laden spaces where young white sociologists, psychologists, historians, religious studies scholars (men and women) come to inhabit such spaces without question, without critical self-reflexivity, without readjusting their white gazes, without noticing that something has gone awry. Yet, as a Black body, my body becomes stressed within such white conference spaces and such white academic spaces. White bodies move through those spaces habitually, and, as such, their bodies “trail behind actions.” Black bodies, however, are stressed and their appearance becomes hypermarked against the unmarked spaces of white intelligibility. In short, then, such philosophical spaces “do not ‘extend’ the surfaces of [Black bodies and bodies of color].” My Black body becomes the racialized figure against the white ground. Within such spaces, one is hyperattentive to one’s movements, to one’s presence and collective absence.

So while “Why bring race into it?” might be the usual battlecry of those who believe we live in a post-racial world, I think it’s more accurate to recognize that race isn’t being “brought into” the space so much as it was always there. By acknowledging the contemporary magic community as an inherently racialized space, it becomes possible to seriously address the structural inequalities that systemically discourage magicians of color from feeling wholly welcomed into the magic community.

## Chapter 4: Women in Boxes

Early in the winter of 2016, I waited outside the Magic Castle, my cold-numbered hands stuffed awkwardly into the pockets of my coat. I had been here only a few times before, and almost always during the day, when the Castle was quiet and unlit. Now, however, a horde of tourists crowded the entryway, fidgeting with their phones and huddling against each other for warmth.

I hesitated next to the front door, unsure of my next move. I'd been invited here by Lara, who thought it would be a good idea for me to attend the monthly Women Magicians' Association meeting that would be taking place here tonight. However, she hadn't yet responded to any of my texts—likely due to the Castle's wonky cell reception—and without a member of the Academy of Magical Arts to act as my escort, I wouldn't be allowed inside. Not knowing what else to do, I hovered anxiously near the front door, waiting for my phone to ring.

Eventually, the bouncer noticed me, and took pity. “You waiting for someone?”

I smiled with relief. “I'm here for the WMA meeting,” I told him. “I'm supposed to—”

His brow furrowed. “The what?”

The Women Magicians' Association (WMA) got its start in January 2014, shortly after the Academy of Magical Arts invited Angela Sanchez—a history major at UCLA, and one of the founding members of UCLA's magic club—to present her honors thesis about the history of women in Western magic. Her presentation highlighted the ways in which sexism and patriarchy has influenced the development of Western magic, and included the startling admission that female magicians currently accounted for less than 10% of the Academy's membership. “Being a magician means being privy to information that your audience doesn't necessarily have,” she later told a reporter (Womack 2016) when explaining her research. “Information equals power, and women in power have always been threatening to a patriarchal society.”

After her presentation, Sanchez was approached by Lituo Huang, one of the members of the audience. Huang pointed out that plenty of female magicians had come to watch Sanchez's presentation—a rarity, considering that the Academy's members-only lectures on magic usually attracted an overwhelmingly male audience. Why not take advantage of the surplus of women in the room by passing around a sign-up sheet and starting up a new, women-focused magicians' group? Soon enough, the WMA was born.

“W-M-A,” I told the bouncer, carefully enunciating each letter. “The Women Magicians' Association.”

He smirked. “Oh,” he said knowingly, his eyes taking on a mean glint. “So you're one of *those*.”

When Lara finally got my text messages (“My phone barely works here!” she told me with an apologetic smile) and came to escort me into the Castle, I told her about the bouncer's odd reaction. “We hear that kind of thing a lot,” she said, shrugging. The creation of the WMA had reignited local discussions about the lack of gender parity within the magic community, and while some magicians welcomed these discussions, others bristled at the implication that magic (and, by extension, the magic community itself) was inherently sexist. And although the WMA received a certain measure of endorsement from the Academy of Magical Arts' higher-ups—many of whom reportedly viewed the recruitment of more female members as a major institutional goal—the organization made it clear that the WMA was in no way affiliated with the Academy, and was, therefore, not entitled the Magic Castle's political or financial support. In the two years since the group had formed, WMA members

had had to deal with a wide array of dismissive, patronizing, and blatantly hostile comments<sup>28</sup>. “Just forget about it,” Lara told me with a roll of her eyes. “That’s what I do.”<sup>29</sup>

Much of the contention surrounding the Women Magicians’ Association seemed to hinge on the question of its necessity: why, many detractors argued, did women feel the need to “segregate” themselves from other magicians? What did the WMA offer to female magicians that they couldn’t easily find elsewhere in the magic community? Magic, the argument goes, is a meritocracy, blind to social identifiers like race and gender; as such, the creation of a women’s group violated magic’s position as a genderless space, unnecessarily bringing identity politics into a community that idealizes impersonal, apolitical measures like expertise, talent, and technical skill. “It’s discriminatory,” one male magician told me. “You can’t, you know, create a club that you can only join if you’re a certain kind of person. [...] That’s not what magic is about.” Another said: “If I tried to create a *Men* Magician’s Association, I’d probably be called a misogynist. But a club just for women, that’s somehow *not* sexist?” And while I could probably write at length about the resentment and self-righteous anger that tends to erupt whenever men feel excluded from a given social space (see Kimmel 2017), I would like to focus instead on the odd claim that the magic community is genderless. As Angela Sanchez pointed out during her lecture, women make up less than 10 percent of members of the Academy of Magical Arts; similarly grim statistics can be found at professional magicians’ organizations worldwide (see Nardi 1988, 2010). So while most—if not all—contemporary magic clubs are nominally open to people of all genders, many magic clubs are, in effect, *Men* Magician’s Associations: spaces wherein masculinity is upheld as the default.

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<sup>28</sup> An example: Matty, the UCLA student I mentioned in an earlier chapter, was a junior member of the Magic Castle, and often referred derisively to “those girls” in the WMA—a particularly odd choice of words, considering that even the youngest member of the WMA was nearly a decade Matty’s senior.

<sup>29</sup> While working on this project, I’ve come to realize that whenever a research participant says to “just forget about” a given social phenomenon, the anthropologist should politely ignore them.



In this chapter, I will explore the systemic mechanisms of exclusion that have conspired to preserve the magic community as a white, masculine, and heteronormative space. Gatekeeping processes within the magic community control key nodes of access in order to protect the in-group from being invaded by perceived outsiders. Indeed, this gatekeeping is often justified by discourses of aesthetic value that insist that women, people of color, and members of other marginalized groups are excluded from the in-group not because of their social identity, but because of their lack of merit. By interrogating the evaluative structures that reserve true “goodness” for magicians who match the white masculine ideal, I will demonstrate how the myth of meritocracy contributes to the continued marginalization of female magicians.

## **Part I: Keepers of the Gate**

### **Access**

As late as the 1970s, elite institutions of higher education fought hard against rising calls for coeducation. At Yale: “Oh, save us from the giggling crowds, the domestic lecture, and the home economics classes of a female infiltration” (qtd. in Geismar et al. 2010). At Princeton: “What is all this nonsense about admitting women to Princeton? A good old-fashioned whore-house would be considerably more efficient, and much, much cheaper” (qtd. in Malkiel 2018). At Dartmouth: “For God’s sake, for Dartmouth’s sake, and for everyone’s sake, keep the damned women out” (qtd. in Malkiel 2018). Indeed, when these schools did finally open themselves up to female applicants, they did so not because of some “high-minded moral commitment to opening education opportunities to women” (Malkiel 2017:31), but out of the mercenary desire to boost enrollment numbers. Women who attended these schools during the early days of coeducation found themselves in hostile territory: jeered at during lectures; catcalled in the dining hall; taunted with bawdy drinking songs at frat parties and football games (see Malkiel 2018, Miller-Bernal and Poulson 2004, Ng and Rexford

1993, Lever and Schwartz 1971). Long after coeducation became a reality, regular acts of misogyny helped to symbolically preserve these colleges as “male” spaces, hammering home the message that women just didn’t belong.

Of course, it wasn’t just female students who faced this form of systemic exclusion: racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia also helped shape the social structure of the Ivy League. Consider the case of R. Inslee Clark: in 1966, when Clark—then the new dean of admissions at Yale—made administrative changes that placed increased emphasis on attracting a diverse body of incoming students, he was summoned to defend himself in front of the Yale Corporation, the governing body of the school. “You’re admitting an entirely different class<sup>30</sup> than we’re used to,” one of the trustees told him. “You’re admitting them for a different purpose than training leaders.” Times are changing, Clark replied: the future leaders of America might soon come from non-traditional sources—women and Jews, racial minorities and public school students. “You’re talking about Jews and public school graduates as leaders,” the trustee spat back. “Look around you at this table. These are America’s leaders. There are no Jews here. There are no public school graduates here” (Kabaservice 2004: 259). When writing about this telling exchange, philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2019) asks: “Did the speaker have so little self-knowledge that he truly believed that ‘natural’ merit and leadership ability had produced the all-white, male, Protestant, preppy board of trustees? Or was he defiantly announcing his determination to keep the ‘club’ the way it was, excluding outsiders?”

The answer, of course, is both. Gatekeeping processes—that is, the social practices through which institutions or individual agents (e.g. hiring committees, admissions officers, talent scouts)

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<sup>30</sup> From the context, it’s clear that he means *class* here in the educational sense, as in “Welcome, Class of 1970!” However, in light of the rest of the conversation, it’s interesting to think about the word *class* as being nested within a complex web of meanings: *class* in a sociopolitical sense, describing the hierarchical arrangement of individuals within an overarching social structure; *class* in an ontological sense, wherein different groups of phenomena are associated by “type” or “kind”; *class* in a biological sense, a taxonomic rank based on inherent qualities that link related organisms.

control key nodes of access within social networks (see Husu 2004)—have an outsized impact on the overall structure of the social system, influencing “the entry or access to an arena, allocation of resources and information flows, setting of standards, development of the field or the agenda, or the external imago of that arena” (Husu and de Cheveigné 2010). These gatekeepers systemically reenact mechanisms of structural inequality, gifting them with the ability to “grant privileges and allow access to some and deny it to others” (van den Brink and Y. Benschop 2014:464). In doing this, they carefully (and strategically) maintain a strict boundary between the in-group and the out-group, saving protected spaces from corruption by perceived outsiders. If asked, however, these gatekeepers will not acknowledge the role that homophily, tribalism, and systemic bias might have played in their evaluative process; instead, they will inevitably “legitimize their choice and support for candidates with arguments of quality” (ibid 478). In this view, a board of Yale trustees that includes no women, no people of color, no Jews—and, I would add, also includes no one who is openly queer, no one with a disability, no one from a low-income background—does so not because of structural inequalities, but because these “outsiders” just aren’t as *good* as wealthy white men.

### **Man is to Good Art as Woman is to Bad (Or: Politics of Aesthetic Value)**

Shortly after becoming professor emeritus at Princeton University, historian Nell Painter decided to go to art school. Her newfound career path took her from a BFA at Rutgers to an MFA at the famed Rhode Island School of Design, where she was routinely set apart from the other students by virtue of her gender, her blackness, and—perhaps most damningly—her age. Of course, exclusionary mechanisms tended not to explicitly acknowledge the role that racism, sexism, and ageism played in her Otherization; instead, these marginalizing processes centered on rhetorics of aesthetic value, focusing not on her social identity, but on whether or not she was a *real* artist. When

discussing the logical frameworks of a particularly “malevolent” teacher who doggedly insisted that Painter was not—and could never be—an artist, Painter writes:

[His] definition of An Artist was ontological (as in “to be”) rather than epistemological (as in “to learn”) or pedagogical (as in “to teach”) or performative (as in “to act”), or even commercial (as in to have a gallery): he was saying that since anything can find its way into a gallery, and tastes vary so widely that just about anything can find a buyer, an inexpressible something, some inward quality of being, hard to pin down and beyond the market, must, therefore exist on the exciting side of the line separating An Artist artists from inferior beings, i.e., from me.

Painter’s experience is far from unusual. In the art world—as in countless other spheres of existence—women, people of color, and other members of marginalized groups have faced centuries’-worth of systemic devaluation. Even though women represent more than sixty percent of students in art schools in the United States, female artists are underrepresented in museum exhibits, permanent collections, and gallery shows, and receive both less press coverage and lower pay than their male counterparts (see Reilly 2015, Turner 2018). The mainstream acceptance of artists of color is actively hindered by mechanisms of racialized power that systemically pathologize and denormalize non-white voices (Gooding-Williams 1996:631), thereby “maintain[ing] White bodies—and the narratives and understandings that emanate from them—as central to the wider field of visual arts” (Khan and Asfour 2018:188). Of course, the lack of adequate representation of marginal voices in the arts is usually blamed not on structural inequality, but on lack of talent. To paraphrase art historian Linda Nochlin (1971): if women and people of color are truly just as good as their white male counterparts, why—as defenders of the hegemonic order like to argue—have there never been any truly *great* female artists or artists of color? In considering the broader implications of this type of rhetoric, Nochlin writes:

The fact, dear sisters, is that there *are* no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or

Matisse, or even, in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol, any more than there are Black American equivalents for the same [...] In actuality, as we all know, things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and, above all, male. The fault, dear brothers, lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education— education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs and signals. The miracle is, in fact, that given the overwhelming odds against women, or blacks, that so many of both have managed to achieve so much sheer excellence, in those bailiwicks of white masculine prerogative like science, politics or the arts.

In this way, we can see that gatekeeping processes often thrive on rhetorics of aesthetic value—not just in fine art, but in many other male-dominated fields. Consider, for example, the case of female comedians: rather than blaming the lack of women in comedy on the industry’s well-entrenched sexism and misogyny (see Pérez and Green 2016, Kay 2018, Lawson and Lutzky 2016, Weaver 2016), comedians and audiences alike tend to prefer an aesthetic argument—that is, that women just aren’t funny. In this way, the exclusion of women can be rationalized as a natural byproduct of the meritocratic process. In recognizing these discourses of “goodness” as necessary mechanisms of gatekeeping, we can see that gatekeeping isn’t something that is solely operationalized by people in positions of power; rather, it is also internalized, enacted, and recirculated by “rank-and-file” members of the community, thereby allowing exclusionary rhetorics to suffuse the entirety of the social space.

### **Who Gets to be a Geek?**

In the summer of 2014, Zoe Quinn—co-creator of *Depression Quest*, an interactive fiction game designed to simulate mental health issues—was accused by a disgruntled ex-boyfriend of having sex with games journalists in exchange for positive reviews. Obviously, the accusation was

false. Even so, it granted political reactionaries the perfect excuse to launch GamerGate, an anti-feminist harassment campaign—not just against Quinn, but also against many other prominent game developers, games journalists, and game studies scholars who were seen as key arbiters of a progressivist conspiracy (see Aghazadeh et al. 2018, Barnes 2018, Mortensen 2016). And although people who participated in this firestorm of harassment liked to insist that their main goal was to fight for “ethics in games journalism,” it is far more accurate to think about the GamerGate movement as a reaction against the social pollution of a symbolically white masculine space. As queer theorists Sarah Beth Evans and Elyse Janish write (2015:126):

As more nonmasculine, nonwhite, nonhetero players claim expertise and status in gaming, and as these players more vocally demand representation and acknowledgement, they subvert, tweak, and play with norms and expectations in both game spaces and gaming culture generally. GamerGaters packaged their fear of this queering of video game spaces into one manifestation, ever the foe of gamers: the feminist. As the controversy played out, it only became clearer that GamerGaters used the guise of investigating breaches of ethics in games journalism to veil their attempts at protecting the masculine privilege of video game spaces by punishing vocal feminist activists.

In the media, hate campaigns like GamerGate—and the ideologically similar ComicsGate, which focused on the presence of “fake geek girls” at comic book conventions (Lund 2018, Reagle 2015, Scott 2019)—tend to dominate discussions about “toxic geek masculinity” (Salter and Blodgett 2017, Hills 2018). But while rape threats, murder threats, sexual harassment, and other forms of violence are certainly key mechanisms of geeky gatekeeping, outright aggression is not the only (or even the most common) method through which white male geeks attempt to defend themselves from perceived outsiders. As discussed in Chapter 2, the “geek” social identity is organized around a culture of shared expertise, granting increased social capital to members of the in-group by virtue of their possession of specialized knowledges and skills (see McArthur 2009, Kelty 2005). Because of this, the policing of expertise serves as an excellent way to keep out anyone

undesirable. Certain forms of geeky knowledge are privileged over others, enacting regimes of value that systemically deprecates queer, feminine, or otherwise alternative tastes (see Coppa 2006).

Even nonwhite, nonmasculine, nonhetero geeks who engage in the *right* form of geeky behavior are not immune to the possibility of rejection. Female geeks, for example, must work harder than their male counterparts in order to constantly “prove” their geekiness (see Scott 2019, Bucholtz 2002), with any perceived lapse or misstep—not knowing who Gary Gygax is, for example, or mistaking a Romulan character for a Vulcan—being taken as evidence that these women aren’t *real* geeks, and therefore deserve to be expelled from the community. In this way, women, people of color, and members of other marginalized groups are held to higher standards of “goodness” than the white masculine in-group, making it difficult—nigh impossible—for minority voices to be judged as aesthetically valuable.

## **Part II: No Girls Allowed**

### **A Man’s World**

“Do you know what’s funny?” a wrinkled, white-haired magician named Edgar told me while we sat together at one of the Castle’s bars, sharing a slice of banana cream pie. It was the spring of 2018, by which point I had become such a regular at the Castle that the bouncers often mistook me for a member, waving me inside without bothering to check my ID. Edgar and I were both in the habit of coming to the Castle on Tuesday evenings, one of the club’s least busy nights, and had quickly become good friends. “I’ll be doing a show here in a month or so—”

“Oh, congratulations.”

“They tricked me into it,” he said, glumly. “You know, I hate performing here. It’s not like the seventies, when you were mostly just showing off for other magicians. Now, you’re performing for a bunch of rich drunks. [...] But Jack [Goldfinger, the man in charge of booking the Castle’s

talent] convinced me to do it. Someone who was supposed to perform that week ended up dropping out, and they needed an extra body. So I said sure, why not.” He fidgeted with his drink, letting half-melted ice cubes tinkle against the sides of the glass, before finally taking a sip. “They just sent me the employment contract, and the funny thing is...well, since the last time I worked here, they’ve added this *clause*. A *decency* clause.”

I blinked. “Decency clause?”

Edgar nodded, face grim. “It’s a Me’Too thing. Trying to, you know, make sure nobody tells any jokes that might make a lady uncomfortable. And on the one hand, I get it. But also...I mean, it’s censorship, isn’t it? We’re supposed to, what, not tell certain jokes, do certain tricks, just because it might make someone uncomfortable? Comedy is *supposed* to be uncomfortable! If we just start cutting out everything offensive...” He trailed off, and his shoulders drooped. When he finally spoke again, his tone was quiet and despairing: “What’s going to happen to magic?”

While I understood why Edgar was so upset, I couldn’t quite sympathize. If—as magician and sociologist Peter Nardi (1988:764) once said—the global magic community is a “fraternity of magi” united by a shared masculine image, then the Magic Castle is a frat house. As previously discussed in Chapter 1, the Castle maintains a “boys’ club” atmosphere steeped in traditionalism: a gender balance that ensures that, on any given night, men will almost always outnumber women, both onstage and off; a rigid dress code that reinforces gendered expectations regarding appropriate feminine behavior and dress; lewd comments directed at the establishment’s waitresses, all of whom wear short skirts and revealing tops; men who sometimes manhandle or catcall female guests, and whose antics are excused as harmless, drunken fun. And it isn’t just the bar areas that help to reaffirm the Castle as a prototypically masculine space: the Castle’s magic shows also help to enact systems of gendered power, particularly with regards to the way that magicians interact with the (usually female) volunteers that they call upon to assist them during magical performance. Once, for



example, a magician asked an audience volunteer to place a card into his pocket. As soon as she did so, he let out a loud, orgasmic groan, bringing the audience's attention to the fact that the volunteer's hand was near the magician's crotch. When the volunteer tried to pull away, the magician grabbed her hand, then forcibly held it against his groin. "Not yet," he said, while the audience laughed. "I'm not quite finished."

When considering the mechanisms through which women are steered away from pursuing careers in magic, various scholars (e.g. Nardi 1988, Coppa 2008, Bruns and Zompetti 2014) have acknowledged the key role that traditional gatekeeping processes play in preserving the magic community as a predominantly masculine space. Magic books, for example, are typically written with the male reader in mind—not just with the liberal use of masculine pronouns (see Bruns and Zompetti 2014), but also with instructions that assume that the magician will be wearing masculine dress: "They always think we have *pockets*," one magician told me with a sigh. "How many girls do *you* know that have pockets big enough to stash a whole deck of cards?" Another example would be professional magicians' organizations, access to which is often granted through personal references and contacts (Nardi 1988:764; see also Jones 2011), privileging the select few who are able to penetrate a social network overwhelmingly dominated by men. This—as magician Teller (of popular duo Penn and Teller) explains (Gardetta 2006)—is "why [there are] so few women in magic. They can't stand the social nightmare they have to go through just to be accepted." In this way, magic—just like the pre-coeducation Ivy League, modern institutions of fine art, the geek community, and countless other social spaces—is founded upon a system of exclusionary mechanisms that make it clear to female magicians that they will never truly belong.

## **A Woman's Worth**

“When I first got into magic, I was on my own,” said Allison, a magician I first met through the WMA. “Checked out books from the library, messed around with cards. Just figuring things out by myself, since I didn’t really have anybody to learn from.”

“Sounds lonely.”

She shrugged. “Not really. I mean, I had friends and everything. They just weren’t into magic.” She shrugged again, then tore off a piece of pastry and poked it into her mouth. “Anyway, when I was ten or eleven or so, I found out about this magic club for people under age 18. It was a few towns away—actually, it was in another state. But it was the closest club I could find. So I convince my dad to take me, and when I show up, I realize I’m the only girl.”

I nodded, unsurprised.

“I didn’t mind,” she said. “But this one kid...he turns to me, soon as I sit down, and he says, ‘You’re in the wrong room.’ I’m confused, obviously—like, what are you even talking about? And he looks me dead in the eye and says, ‘Magic isn’t for girls.’ I came all the way here from *a different state*, just for some kid to tell me to go away!”

Allison ate another bite of pastry, frowning and staring off into the distance while she chewed. “[So] I thought, ‘I have to show him. I have to show them all.’ Every week, I went to that club. Every single week. And I got so good, there was *no way* anybody could tell me I wasn’t supposed to be there.”

In an earlier section of this chapter, I discussed the ways in which gatekeeping processes are enabled by rhetorics of aesthetic value, allowing insiders to justify the exclusion of perceived outsiders on the basis of “merit.” In magic—just like in other cultures of expertise—these rhetorics of aesthetic value focus on assessing what skills, knowledges, and abilities constitute truly “good” magic; indeed, the fact that this assessment tends to privilege “masculine” forms of magical performance at the expense of “feminine” forms of the same can be easily rationalized as an

unavoidable byproduct of the meritocratic process. Consider, for example, the case of lyrical magicians, briefly discussed in an earlier chapter: these magicians perform routines that incorporate elements of musicality and choreography, building on the magician's (usually quite extensive) training as a singer, dancer, or acrobat (see Bruns and Zompetti 2014). But because these (prototypically feminine) technical skills are systemically devalued within the magic community (see Coppa 2008), lyrical magicians are often derided as prime examples of the archetypal "bad magician." And just as enjoying the "right" kind of geeky paraphernalia doesn't protect a female geek from the possibility of being labeled a "bad" geek, a female magician's enjoyment of the "right" kind of magic doesn't protect her from being labeled a "bad" magician. In order to be accepted, female magicians must avoid not just "bad" forms of feminine magic, but also "good" forms of magic that are deemed too aggressive, showy, or complex for female performers. Graham Jones (2011: 118-119) describes one telling encounter at the Illegal Magic Club in Paris, where he once watched a young female magician perform a prototypically "masculine" routine:

While she didn't quite manipulate with the effortless confidence of a seasoned magician, the young woman appeared well on her way to becoming a formidable cardician [a magician who specializes in cards.] She was already able to perform sleights far more difficult than anything I would ever dream of, and had a clear penchant for what magicians call "flourishes," ostentatious displays of virtuosic technique. I clapped encouragingly, but was surprised that the other [male] magicians I was with didn't seem as impressed. "Not bad," one said, "but that's a dude trick [*tour de mec*]."

"Yeah, that's dude magic [*magie de mec*]," the other concurred. "Can't you do something where you express yourself, something poetic?"

"But this is what I enjoy..." she said defensively, edging away from our table.

In this way, magic's meritocracy is founded upon a slippery definition of merit that makes it unfairly difficult for female performers to be categorized as truly "good" magicians. Even so, many

magicians I met over the course of my project recirculated rhetorics of aesthetic value that upheld merit as the primary reason for female exclusion. After mentioning that she had to work for years before her male magician friends would treat her as a peer, one magician told me: “The reason that [male magicians] don’t take female magicians seriously is that a lot of women just aren’t serious about magic. [...] I had to keep coming back, keep showing them, ‘Hey, I’m trying to get better. Hey, I’m trying to learn.’ I had to really show them I was serious. Other women just don’t bother.” The fact that female magicians have to do more to “prove” themselves than their male counterparts is accepted as a matter of course. In this way, rhetorics of aesthetic value allow the lack of women in magic to be reimagined as a problem of skill, allowing magicians to deemphasize the gatekeeping processes that make female performers feel unwelcome in magical spaces.

### **Part III: The Woman Problem**

“There exists a question that everyone likes to ask,” Karl said to me, in his usual slow, measured way. “Reporters, especially. You haven’t asked it, though, so I have no idea if it’s relevant to your research.”

I glanced down at my field journal, the current page of which was filled with a messy, half-illegible list of questions, so thickly layered with ink that the paper was beginning to buckle. “I’m sure I was just getting around to it,” I said wryly. “I have a lot of questions.”

“Well, maybe.” He took a sip of tea, then set the mug aside, and folded his hands neatly upon the table. “The question is this: why are there so few female magicians?”

“Oh,” I said, without much enthusiasm. “That.”

It was a question that had appeared prominently in the research proposal I’d once presented to my dissertation committee, but I’d never actually asked it during an interview—partially because I’d become increasingly disenchanted with the question itself (more on that in a bit), but also

because every single magician that I interviewed brought up the subject on their own, without me having to ask the question at all<sup>31</sup>. And while magicians seemed to vary somewhat in terms of their affective relationship to the topic—ranging from weariness and vague disinterest, to wry amusement, to righteous indignation, to dismissiveness and outright hostility—they each presented similar narratives about the lack of women in magic, pointing to the existence of an overarching logic that the magic community uses to theorize, narrativize, and propose possible solutions for the “woman problem.”

The history of women in magic, I’m told, begins with witchcraft. During the early modern period, Europe was wracked by fierce waves of anti-witch hysteria: in a continent half-ruined by war, famine, and disease, the figure of the witch offered a convenient scapegoat, allowing accusers to externalize their fears, punish perceived wrongdoers, and thereby restore social order (see Quaife 2011). As magician Jeff McBride once said: “In the West, for a long time, you could be burned at the stake for practicing magic. That was an incentive to get *out* of magic during the Inquisition; anyone who had special powers would be put to death” (Fetters 2013). Women—thanks to their general lack of political power, their tendency to be poor and socially isolated, and, of course, their inherent susceptibility to Satanic wickedness (Willis 2018, Russell 1980)—were especially vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft, and any female magician who dared to perform magic tricks in public was liable to be taken for a witch<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Compare this to something like race, which (white) magicians almost never brought up on their own. One possible reason for this is the fact that magic’s gender disparity—much more so than its racial demographics—is explicitly encoded within the public consciousness.

<sup>32</sup> Consider, for example, the case of a young girl in 15th century Germany who performed a simple torn-and-restored handkerchief trick on the streets of Cologne, and was promptly tried for witchcraft (see Christopher 1996).

“And, you know, that fear of witches never really went away,” said Joey, one of many magicians who provided the “witchcraft” explanation for the lack of women in magic. “You wouldn’t believe the number of people I’ve had accusing me of being a witch.”

I laughed; Joey did not.

“I’m serious!” she said, clinking her glittery fingernails against her glass of wine. “This one time, I was at a cocktail party—some Hollywood bigwig’s birthday or anniversary or something, I don’t remember. And this woman found out I was a member here at the Castle, and kept pushing me to show her some magic. ‘Oh, show me a trick! Go on!’ Okay, fine. Whatever. So I get my cards out of my purse, and I do something quick and easy, just to get her out of my hair. Only this woman starts *screaming* at me: ‘You’re a witch! Oh my God, you’re really a witch!’ It was ridiculous.”

I squinted at Joey. “But...she was only joking, right?”

Joey shook her head, lips pressed thin. “That woman was *terrified*—like I was gonna turn her into a toad or something, right then and there. Can you imagine?” She rolled her eyes, then took a sip of wine, careful not to smudge her lipstick. “It wasn’t even that good of a trick.”

In some ways, the “witchcraft” explanation makes a lot of sense. The violence of the European witch-hunt served as a mechanism of social control, allowing upright citizens to punish any woman—especially any poor woman—who did not conform to societal expectations of appropriately feminine behavior. And although anti-Satanic hysteria might have waned since the torture, forced confessions, and mass executions of the witch-hunting era, Joey’s experience at the Hollywood party demonstrates that the modern figure of the female magician is still colored, at least somewhat, by fear—not just a fear of supernatural power, but also of the Otherness of the woman who wields it. Additionally, her experience exemplifies the fact that the public imagination still envisions a symbolic link between femininity and the occult (Schwartz 2008:203; see also Biddinger 2012, Timbers 2014, Owens 1989); this, perhaps, is why women who possess skills of deception,

sleight of hand, and cold reading<sup>33</sup> turn to careers as psychics and fortune tellers instead of as professional magicians, since the audience will much more readily accept that a woman's magical abilities are a product of supernatural affinity rather than of technical expertise (Goto-Jones 2016:14). However, I should point out that when magicians bring up the "witchcraft" explanation of magic's gender disparity, it's often couched in an exculpatory discourse of progress: in early modern Europe, these magicians tell me, a female magician might have ended up stoned to death, or drowned, or burned at the stake—aren't things so much better *now*? Furthermore, the "witchcraft" explanation provides somewhat of a distancing effect, allowing magicians to ground the "woman problem" in a collectively imagined European past, rather than recognize the ways in which magic's gender disparity might, in fact, be rooted in the social, political, and ideological realities of the American present.

Other explanations for the lack of gender parity in magic point not toward pre-industrial Europe's brutal regime of misogynist violence, but toward fundamental differences between men and women. This view—as described by one male magician in response to a sociological survey (Nardi 2010)—holds that, "Brains are wired differently for men and women. Most of contemporary magic is presented as an analytical challenge/puzzle. This is analogue to the left part of the brain, which is the 'male' part. Women are more right brain oriented and respond better to the emotional, lyrical and mythical. [...] This does not mean that women are inferior to men, just that they are different." One magician told me: "Men, you know, we have this lizard-brain need to dominate, to solve puzzles, to figure out how things work. Women don't have that." "Men and women don't think the same way," another magician explained, shrugging her shoulders. "We like different things;

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<sup>33</sup> The phrase "cold reading" refers to a set of techniques that mentalists, fortune-tellers, and other such folk use in order to analyze a person's characteristics (e.g. physical appearance, body language, manner of speech) in order to make a high-probability guess about that person's life. (For example, try saying to an American man over the age of 50, "I'm sensing you're having some trouble with your heart." Chances are, you're probably right.) In doing this, the mentalist is able to create the illusion of having psychic powers.

we do different things. It's just biology." And while the "gender difference" explanation is often grounded in the body, it can just as easily be couched in a more ephemeral (but still recognizably naturalistic) rhetoric that focuses less on the brain and more on "instinct" or "natural impulse." This view is perhaps most neatly encapsulated by a magazine profile of the magician Misty Lee (Sunderland 2015), whose thoughts about the gender disparity in magic is described thus:

She credits the lack of female magicians to several factors. Primarily, she believes magic's deceptiveness goes against women's instinct. At the start of her career, she suffered from "magician's guilt" more than her male peers. She says, "When I used to come out onstage and have to tell a bold faced lie, I would get so nervous, I'd turn into a kindergarten teacher." On the rare occasions where she's told kids how a magic trick works, she has seen similar differences between young girls' reactions and little boys' excitement. If you use a wand during a trick, girls expect the magic to come to the wand. When Lee has revealed the tricks behind her illusions, little girls have gotten angry because they believe in real magic. Boys, though, have gotten excited.

"Men communicate to get the job done, women communicate to protect, from a caveman perspective—their community," Lee says. "A long time ago [women would have been] trusted with the valuables and the vulnerable [items], and then men would be out doing the hunting unless there was a really good female hunter. If that's [women's] job, to establish community and provide safety for the precious, then lying goes against our very nature. It's completely counter-intuitive, and it's against our instinct."

The concept of hemispheric specialization—that is, the idea that the human brain exists in two independent halves, each corresponding with different abilities, ways of thinking, and gender identities—has persisted since the 19th century (see Harrington 1989), when the theory was used by scientists in order to reinforce the social prejudices of Victorian society. But although the idea of the "split brain" might be appealing to lay audiences because of its BuzzFeed-like simplicity, scientific literature on the subject neatly debunks the idea of left-brained vs. right-brained personality types (see Nielsen et al. 2013, Prokhovik 2012). Additionally, the construction of a dichotomy between the



“rational man” and the “emotional woman” is not a value-neutral act: as pointed out by feminist philosopher Moira Gatens, dichotomies like reason vs. emotion and masculinity vs. femininity “contain a set of implicit assumptions that assign [...] a dominant value to the term in the position of A at the expense of not-A” (Gatens 1991:93). In a rationalist, patriarchal society that privileges the mind over the body and the male over the female, the concept of the “emotional woman” is necessarily subordinated within a network of hierarchical power structures. Because of this, any magician who recirculates the interrelated myths of the “female brain” and the “feminine instinct” is in fact engaging in a rhetoric that necessarily positions women as inferior.

Another form of the “gender difference” explanation for the lack of women in magic takes a more socially oriented spin. In this view, the magic community fits neatly into a society that encourages the masculine pursuit of power and discourages the feminine pursuit of the same (see Plummer 2016, Witt 1997, Maltz and Borker 1982), training young boys how to assert their dominance using humor, storytelling, and deception (see Nardi 1988) whilst simultaneously encouraging young girls to be passive, non-competitive, and nurturing. As Karl told me, giving me the same spiel he usually reserved for reporters: “At its core, magic is about power. The magician has the power; the audience doesn’t. And when you’re a boy—a boy who has few friends, a boy who isn’t good at sports—then the practice of magic becomes very appealing. It’s a way of claiming the power that you never had. [...] Boys only recognize the power of domination, of proving that they know more than everyone else. Girls have other ways of reclaiming power—*better* ways, I think.” Similarly, Allison—the magician who was once told that girls didn’t belong in magic clubs—told me: “If boys do puzzles and act like know-it-alls or whatever, it’s just boys being boys, right? But when girls do it, it’s *girls* being boys. And nobody wants *that*.” The only reason she became interested in magic in the first place, Allison said, was because she had never been much of a “girly girl” to begin with, making the “boyishness” of magic all the more appealing. In this way, the general lack of

women in magic can be blamed on an incongruence both of interest and of skill: from a young age, women are socialized—often through discipline and other forms of social control—to favor cooperation and transparency, making them ill-suited for the rigors of magical performance. Any woman who *does* end up developing an interest in magic does so by embracing prototypically “masculine” behaviors, and is therefore understood to be the exception that proves the rule.

Because of this, the “gender difference” explanation for the lack of women in magic results in a form of aesthetic judgment: there aren’t many female magicians, the argument goes, because women just aren’t that good at magic. Thanks either to their “female brain” or their feminine socialization, women are naturally misaligned with the social politics of deception, making it so that women necessarily lack the social and technical skills needed in order to successfully perform a magic trick. Female magicians, then, are understood as something inherently abnormal, social rebels who counteract the natural inclinations of their gender and, in so doing, transform themselves into something symbolically “non-feminine.” There are two major problems with this way of thinking. For one thing, this interpretation of gender-role socialization tends to present an overly rigid and dichotomous understanding of gender; in truth, socialization does not create a reductive “man vs. woman” divide, but is instead fluid and multidimensional (see Egan and Perry 2001, Risman 2004, Leaper and Friedman 2007), producing “a diversity of gender typicality and gender conformity within each [and every] gender” (Lagaert et al. 2017:483). As such, this way of thinking unintentionally reinforces and naturalizes dichotomous gender divisions. Additionally, the “gender difference” explanation reinforces the myth of meritocracy, holding that any woman who fails to “make it” within the world of magic does so because of an incongruence of skills, an inherent lack of fit, rather than because of structural inequalities embedded within the modern magic scene.

The third explanation I’ve heard regarding magic’s gender disparity lays the blame squarely at the feet of modern audiences, who—the argument goes—just aren’t ready to see women assume the

traditionally masculine role of the professional magician. “Deception is the core of magic,” one magician explained. “The magician deceives the audience; the audience is deceived by the magician. [...] And the truth is that men don’t want to be tricked by a woman. It sucks, but it’s the way it is.” Another said: “I’ve seen friends—female friends—absolutely *bomb* onstage: not because they aren’t good, but because the audience doesn’t *want* them to be good. You know what I mean? I’ve had to deal with, you know, uncooperative volunteers before. I’ve been heckled, I’ve been made fun of—but *never* on the same scale as my female friends. *Never*. [Audience members] get *hostile*. Like, “This chick is trying to make a fool out of me! It’s insane.” As the magician and sociologist Peter Nardi (1988: 767-768) describes this view:

In general, both male and female audience members of magic performances, in order to be entertained, must allow themselves to be tricked, to be one-upped. They must relinquish control to the performer. This also may be related to gender differences in the performer. Perhaps audiences are not likely to do this with someone of perceived lower status. Women, blacks, and other minorities (with the exception of Asians whose image fits with a magical and mysterious one) rarely perform magic, and each is perceived to be of lower status in our society. To be one-upped or tricked by those less powerful or to have control coopted [*sic*] by them may make it difficult for audiences [...] to support minority performers of magic.

There’s certainly truth to this. As culture critic Francesca Coppa (2008: 89) points out, magic’s unequal distribution of knowledge produces a structured power relationship between the magician (who openly knows the secret), the assistants (who know the secret, but pretend, for the audience’s sake, that they do not), and the audience (who doesn’t know the secret, and likely never will.) Female magicians, then, pose a social threat to the male members of the audience, subordinating them within an asymmetrical power structure wherein the woman knows something that the man does not; wherein the woman is subject and the man is object; wherein the woman is powerful and the man is powerless.

Many of the women that I interviewed reported being belittled, sexually harassed, and heckled by men who felt “emasculated” by female magicians, and who therefore used various forms of aggression in order to disempower the female performer and thereby reestablish dominance. One magician, for example, told me about the time she was working as a paid entertainer in the fancy dining room of a cruise ship, going from table to table to show off her cups-and-balls routine. “And there’s this one guy who is just, like, *furious* that he can’t figure out how the trick works. He grabs my arm. ‘Do it again,’ he says to me. I tell him to let me go, and I go on to the next table. But he keeps following me.” When her shift finally ended, the man stopped her at the door to say, gloatingly, that he’d secretly filmed one of her tableside performances, and that he’d used the recording to figure out the secret behind the trick. When recalling this experience, the magician said, “It really felt, to me, like he was one of those guys that doesn’t like to be beaten by a girl. And until he could prove to himself that he was smarter than me, he just couldn’t let it go.” Another magician told me about the kind of men who tended to come up to “congratulate” her at the conclusion of her shows: “They always say something patronizing. ‘Did you come up with all those tricks yourself, sweetheart?’ [...] They don’t say that kind of stuff to men, you know?” Still another magician told me about the time a volunteer surreptitiously groped her while she was performing. “I thought it was an accident, at least at first,” she said. “But then it kept happening: his hand on my back, on my butt, on my—you know—my chest. And he looked me right in the eye while he did it: like, ‘what are you gonna do about it?’” This, she said, was why she’d recently reworked her routine so that she no longer needed to bring audience volunteers onstage with her: “I don’t want them close enough to touch me.”

But while it’s certainly true that hostile audience members help to produce a toxic performing environment for female magicians, the “audience” explanation doesn’t quite provide a comprehensive account of magic’s gender disparity. After all, it’s not just audiences who are uncomfortable with women occupying the role of “magician”; it’s also the magic community itself.

As Peter Nardi (1988:764) writes: “Like any secret society, magic clubs work to preserve their identity, in this case their male identity, by controlling access to it. [...] Although magic clubs are open to women, the message conveyed by the brochures, books, magazines, and magic kits is that this is really an activity for males. The magic world is dominated by male leaders, masculine imagery (such as swords, top hats, and wands), positive male role models (such as Houdini, Blackstone, and Henning), and male-oriented language (such as the International Brotherhood of Magicians).”

And it isn’t just imagery, identity, and discourse that help to construct the modern magic scene as a strictly masculine space. It’s also the social dynamics of the magician-assistant relationship, which has historically placed the (white male) magician at the top of a structured performance hierarchy, thereby allowing him to demonstrate his superiority over his female or “Oriental” assistants (Coppa 2008:86); gendered expectations regarding appropriate performance styles, which delegitimize any female magician who doesn’t embrace a form of magic that is poetic, sentimental, non-technical, or otherwise suitably “feminine” (Jones 2011:120); prejudice, social protectionism, and geeky clannishness that makes it difficult for perceived outsiders to be allowed access into the community (see Nardi 1988:764); and an established regime of erasure that has helped to invisibilize the labor, knowledge, and bodies of female performers within the magic community (Beckman and Redrobe 2003, Coppa 2008).

The “audience” explanation for magic’s disparity is, frankly, a cop-out. By full-heartedly blaming non-magicians for the lack of women in magic, male magicians are able to avoid thinking critically about the masculine-centric ideologies and social structures that undergird the magic community; instead, these magicians can rationalize, fortify, and actively engage in the self-same social mechanisms that discourage the participation of female magicians. By shifting focus to the role that a hostile, misogynistic audience plays in making magic inhospitable to women, male magicians absolve themselves of any personal responsibility for female exclusion. So while all of the

different explanations that magicians—especially male magicians—use to theorize magic’s “woman problem” sometimes compete with and contradict each other, they overlap in that they each tend to minimize (or even wholly discount) the role that internal gatekeeping processes might play in discouraging the participation of female magicians. That isn’t to say that these common explanations for the lack of women in magic don’t have at least some truth to them: all of the explanations discussed so far—with the notable exception of the biological explanation, which is both silly and unscientific—reveal important structural processes that discourage women from becoming professional magicians. However, the general lack of discussion about gender-based exclusion in the world of magic occludes the myriad of ways in which key nodes of access are systemically denied to any aspiring magician who does not fit the white masculine default.

This, I think, brings me back to the million-dollar question: “Why are there so few female magicians?” There are a few major reasons why I have become so disenchanted with the way this question is framed. For one thing, it generates and reaffirms a discourse of lack: by focusing solely on absence, we contribute to the erasure and systemic invisibilization of women in the magic community. For another, it is usually accompanied by a rigid definition of “magician” that excludes the magical labor of the (prototypically female) magician’s assistant, who often has the same knowledge and technical skill of the magician, but who is necessarily denied a proportionate share of the credit (see Coppa 2008). For a third, this question—along with its less passively worded counterpart, “Why don’t more women do magic?”—produces an epistemological framework wherein women are nothing but a problem to be solved, and wherein women themselves can be understood as the ultimate cause of their own exclusion. As Linda Nochlin (1971) once wrote when grappling with the art world’s own “woman problem,” questions of this kind come bound with nested layers of elitism, chauvinism, and intellectual obfuscation:

... one begins to realize to what extent our consciousness of how things are in the world has been conditioned—and often falsified—by the way the most important questions are posed. We tend to take it for granted that there really is an East Asian Problem, a Poverty Problem, a Black Problem—and a Woman Problem. But first we must ask ourselves who is formulating these “questions,” and then, what purposes such formulations may serve. [...] Indeed, in our time of instant communication, “problems” are rapidly formulated to rationalize the bad conscience of those with power: thus the problem posed by Americans in Vietnam and Cambodia is referred to by Americans as “the East Asian Problem,” whereas East Asians may view it, more realistically, as “the American Problem”; the so-called Poverty Problem might more directly be viewed as the “Wealth Problem” by denizens of urban ghettos or rural wastelands; the same irony twists the White Problem into its opposite: a Black Problem; and the same inverse logic turns up in the formulation of our own present state of affairs as the “Woman Problem.”

Now the “Woman Problem,” like all human problems, [...] is not amenable to “solution” at all, since what human problems involve is re-interpretation of the nature of the situation, or a radical alteration of stance or program *on the part of the “problems” themselves*.

A more honest understanding of gender disparity—not just in magic, but also in other, equally male-dominated fields: engineering and architecture, computer science and comedy and the culinary arts—would require us to recognize that the lack of gender parity is not a “woman problem” but a structural one. The magic community is one built upon a system of social and political mechanisms that regulate nodes of access in order to prevent women from participating in the magic community. As such, a fix for magic’s gender disparity would not come from the efforts of female magicians, who often internalize meritocratic value systems that uphold a lack of aesthetic “goodness” as the fundamental cause of female exclusion. Instead, truly addressing the gendered imbalances that plague the magic community would require us to first recognize the gatekeeping processes that have been explicitly designed to keep the damned women out.

## Conclusion

Nestled within a tucked-in enclave above the main barroom lies the Owl Bar—so named after Archimedes, the stuffed, mechanical owl that perches above the beer taps. When alive, this owl had played a key role in the famed magician Harry Kellar’s stage act, sometime during the early 1900s. Now, Archimedes has found new work as a prognosticator: address him by name and ask a yes-or-no question (“Will I finally get that promotion?”), and he’ll answer you with a twitch of his animatronic head. Of all the Magic Castle’s bars, this one was my favorite: there were only six seats, meaning the area was never too crowded, and the lights were bright enough for me to look over my field notes without squinting. Because of this, I’d usually head to the Owl Bar after every WMA meeting, sit at the chair closest to the far wall, and then quickly jot down my thoughts about the night’s events.

During one note-taking session, a man ignored the bar’s four other empty seats in order to take the stool next to mine. I recognized him: he was one of the Castle’s regulars, made all the more memorable by the fact that he wore the same slicked-back hair and boxy, 1980s-style suit every single time he came for a visit. During shows, he liked to heckle female volunteers: rating their physical attractiveness, making lewd comments about their state of dress, mocking them whenever they fumbled a deck of cards. When I first started coming to the Castle regularly, this magician was someone that many of my new acquaintances—male and female alike—had warned me to avoid.

“You see any good magic tonight?” he asked me. He casually twirled the stool until he was facing away from the bar, then stretched out his legs, and I realized that I was effectively blocked in, unable to leave the bar area without squeezing past him.

“I haven’t seen any magic,” I said politely. “I was here for a meeting—”

“No magic!” he said, shaking his head with exaggerated disbelief. “You came all the way here and you didn’t get to see any magic?”



“I’ve been here plenty of times before,” I said, but he wasn’t listening.

“You can’t go home without seeing some magic,” he said, pulling a deck of cards from his pocket. “Let’s fix that right now, hmm?”

While I tried to think of a polite way to explain to him that all I really wanted to do was finish writing up my field notes, someone familiar poked her head into the bar area: Joey, the magician who was once accused of being a witch.

Joey surveyed the situation, then swiftly launched into a cheery, enthusiastic monologue about how glad she was to see me again—a particularly impressive bit of thespianism, considering the fact that we’d just spent the last couple of hours together. She wedged her way past the blockade the male magician had made with his body, and when she was finally close enough to lean down and whisper in my ear, all signs of good humor vanished from her voice: “Be careful with this one, okay?”

When I nodded my understanding, she patted me on the shoulder, and then turned to leave.

The male magician grabbed her arm. “Hey, what did you say to her?”

“Just girl talk,” said Joey, smile still firmly in place. She tried to tug her arm out of his grip; his fingers tightened around her wrist. “Let go of me.”

His hand didn’t budge. “Do I know you?”

“Nope.”

“I think we *do* know each other,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“You don’t need to know my name,” said Joey, with studied calm. “Let go of my arm.”

After a few more rounds of aggressive flirting (on the man’s part) and quiet refusal (on Joey’s), the man finally released her. Joey rubbed her wrist, where the man’s grip had left reddened marks on her skin. After shooting me one last, warning look, she hightailed it out of the bar.

The man watched her go, then turned back to me and shrugged. “What was *her* problem?”

I tell this story—about a male magician who manhandles a female magician, and then, when she refuses to socially engage with him, willfully recasts this woman as the ultimate cause of the problem—because I think it rather neatly encompasses the pernicious logical frameworks that undergird how contemporary magicians think about the magic community’s gender disparity. In order to maintain the myth of magic’s meritocracy, magicians have to strategically ignore the gatekeeping processes that make women feel unwelcome in the male-dominated world of magic. As a result, magicians end up reaffirming an aesthetic value system that holds that the lack of female magicians is ultimately due to a lack of cultural fit or technical skill. The problem, then, isn’t the men who engage in aggressive, predatory, or patronizing behaviors, or the social institutions that allow said behaviors to take place; rather, the fault lies with the women who just can’t hack it.

## Chapter 5: The Real Work

In the summer of 2017, I met Timothy at a small cafe in the San Fernando Valley, well within walking distance of the neat, well-manicured home he was living in at the time. Like many young magicians I'd known during my time in Los Angeles, he was smartly dressed: limited edition sneakers, artfully mussed hair, perfectly white teeth—the uniform of the Hollywood showman. Everything about him was polished and glossy, and I privately guessed that he would be much like the other polished, glossy people I'd interviewed over the course of my project, the kind of people whose substantial PR training had left them more cagey than candid. For the most part, my prediction proved accurate: Timothy responded to many of my questions with bland platitudes and pithy soundbites, and did a rather impressive job of always steering the conversation back toward upcoming performances of his that I really must buy a ticket to see.

The only time his facade slipped was about midway through the interview, when I asked a question I thought was suitably bland and inoffensive: “What’s it like to do magic for the living?”

“Well, I always wanted to be a magician,” he said with an easy smile. “Ever since I was a little boy. It seemed like the perfect job. ‘You mean I can get *paid* to do magic?’ It was like finding out I could get paid to sit around and eat ice cream all day. I couldn’t believe it!”

I started scribbling notes in my journal, then paused. “Seemed?”

“Hmm?”

“You said it *seemed* like the perfect job.”

“Oh.” Timothy shifted in his seat, then took a quick, fortifying sip of coffee. “I mean, it *is* great. I can spend hours a day working on a new trick, learning something new, sharing ideas with friends. A lot of the time, I can just *do* magic, without having to think about anything else.”

“And the rest of the time?”

His shoulders bobbed up and down. “There’s a lot of things about magic I didn’t know when I was a kid. It wasn’t a job to me back then. Now it is.”

“What do you mean by that?” When he didn’t answer, I changed the question: “What would you say a magician’s job entails?”

“Well...” He hesitated, then leaned forward in his chair, folding his arms on the table. “When I was a kid, I’d have told you a magician’s job is to do magic, but that’s only part of it—a small part. Mostly, you’re looking for work. You’re going on auditions, passing out business cards, following up on leads. You hear that a friend of a friend is getting married, and you ask if they’re looking for someone to perform at the reception. You play nice with booking managers, make sure that you’re the first person to come to mind whenever a spot opens up. Social media is big now, too: you do Twitter and Facebook and Instagram, try to generate buzz, try to build the brand. You...well, you sell yourself, for lack of a better word. You *have* to.” He shrugged again, his eyes taking on a sarcastic glint. “That’s showbusiness!”

I nodded, studying him closely. “And you don’t like those parts of the job?”

“Not knowing where I’m going to get the money for next month’s rent? Always having to be on the hunt for the next big job? Getting passed over in favor of somebody else—not because I’m the worse magician, because I don’t know the right people? Never really sure if this is the year I go bust? No, I don’t like it. Of course I don’t. That’s not why I got into magic. Sometimes, I—” He stopped, abruptly, as if he’d just remembered who he was talking to. “Never mind.”

“Sometimes you what?”

“It’s nothing,” said Timothy, his smile now firmly back in place. “I just remember, sometimes, how much fun magic used to be, back when it was just a hobby. Back when it wasn’t my primary source of income.”

“Do you ever think about quitting?”

His smile flickered. “What else would I do? Magic is what I love.”

The professional magicians I met over the course of my research project often seemed to be torn between the two Janus faces of their profession. On one hand was the part of the job they loved, the magical labor that had attracted them to this profession in the first place: developing technical skills and acquiring secret knowledge; crafting and perfecting magical performances, which many magicians see as a form of creative self-expression; presenting their work to astonished audiences and experiencing the visceral thrill of deception. But then there were the less glamorous aspects of the job: the drudgery of entrepreneurial self-exploitation, the endless hustle and grind that transformed magic from a labor of love into a Sisyphean chore. And while magicians like Timothy often told me, straight-faced, that they loved magic, there was a general sense that “magic” was not as big a part of a magician’s work as they might have liked.

Precariousness has always been a fundamental part of show business. However, lay understandings of a magician’s work tend to downplay the “business” aspects of the job in favor of the esoteric and the mysterious. By recontextualizing magic as a form of creative labor, this chapter will explore the non-magical aspects of the magician’s trade, recognizing the ways in which magical labor has been subsumed by the logics and ideologies of flexible labor formations. Much like other creative workers, contemporary magicians find themselves firmly ensconced within a web of precarity, habituating themselves to a cultural system that valorizes the risk, instability, and uncertainty of creative labor. Indeed, the precarious labor that powers the magic industry is generally invisibilized, hidden by an idea of magical labor that bolsters magic’s seductively mysterious image. But although creative workers in other industries have increasingly campaigned against the precarious aspects of artistic work—as evidenced by the anti-precarity protests that sparked throughout Europe in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis—discourses of anti-precarity are largely absent from the Los Angeles magic community. By interrogating the alienation and dispossession

that accompanies the precarious labor of “doing what you love,” I point to the ways in which anti-precarity rhetorics can serve as tools of stabilization, visibilization, and empowerment.

## **Part I: Creative Capitalism**

### **Inventing the Creative Class**

In 2002, economist Richard Florida published *The Rise of the Creative Class*, a trim, unassuming public policy book that became a surprise international hit (see Florida 2014). Like many before him (e.g. Landry and Bianchini 1995, Lazzarato 1996, Cox 1999, Thrift 2001, Gadfrey 2002), Florida noted a cultural shift within the modern workplace: in recent years, the corporate world had increasingly moved away from the “organizational” era that once dominated mid-century America, during which the archetypal model of a successful business was one that favored hierarchicalism, homogeneity, and company loyalty. Instead, we have entered a post-Fordist age of creativity, wherein innovation has become increasingly central to capitalist development. This “new economy” discourse formed the prevailing logic of Big Business during the 1990s, when corporations worked to develop new managerial orthodoxies, ontological frameworks, and organizational structures in order to construct—and, of course, effectively discipline—a suitably “creative” workplace (Peck 2005: 742). But rather than solely discussing the strategies that companies could use to attract creative workers and harness their talents, Florida expanded upon the established “new economy” discourse by focusing on the key role that cities play in generating a “people climate” that appeals to the new creative class. In his view, creative cities like San Francisco and Austin—that is, cities with vibrant nightlife, a bohemian aesthetic, and a hip cultural scene—are much better able to sustain economic growth in the “new economy” of the information age. As such, any city that fails to develop an appropriately “creative” cultural landscape is doomed to a strictly parochial future.

When Florida's book skyrocketed to the top of international bestseller lists, the "creative city" model of urban development quickly became the cause *du jour* of the urban elite, with city boosters—perhaps most especially in cities that have experienced severe industrial decline—trumpeting creativity as the key to urban revitalization (Evans 2009, Krätke 2012, Grodach 2012). But while creative labor is certainly important to the development of modern urban economies—particularly with regards to the role that cultural production plays in shaping the social structures and infrastructures of the city, as previously discussed in Chapter 1—many academics have questioned and critiqued the usefulness of the "creative city" concept. For one thing, the discourse of the "creative city" implies that flexible labor formations are a relatively new invention; in truth, creative work—perhaps especially in film and television—has *always* been flexibilized. Secondly, the term "creative city" implies a level of totality and immutability reminiscent of the "industrial city" of the nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries; in truth, however, the rise of the creative economy has produced "a complex sublation of trajectories and tendencies" that generates increasingly varied labor formations, class structures, and social imaginaries, and can therefore not be easily collapsed within a singular "creative city" archetype (Hutton 2017:147). Thirdly, the rhetoric of the "creative city" has been used to rationalize the logics and practices of the established neoliberal regime, with the push for creativity-focused regeneration projects expediting the gentrification, dislocation, and social displacement of vulnerable, low-income communities (Shaw 2005, Peck and Theodore 2015, Culver 2017). In inspiring municipal leaders to compete for creative labor and resources, the "creative city" paradigm has steepened housing prices, reproduced mechanisms of social segregation, and widened the income gap between the rich and the poor. Finally—and perhaps most damningly—the discourse of the "creative city" valorizes and lionizes members of what Florida calls the "creative class" (Florida 2014: 8-9):

I define the core of the Creative Class to include people in science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music, and

entertainment whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and new creative content. Around this core, the creative class also includes a broader group of *creative professionals* in business and finance, law, health care, and related fields. These people engage in complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgment and requires high levels of education or human capital. In addition, all members of the Creative Class—whether they are artists or engineers, musicians or computer scientists, writers or entrepreneurs—share a common ethos that values creativity, individuality, difference, and merit.

It's definitely true that the rise of the knowledge-based, "cognitive-cultural" economy (Scott 2007) has popularized a new "model worker" archetype, one that idealizes workers who are "habituated to self-reliance; accepting a high level of risk; [deriving] monetary value from knowledge, symbols, or otherwise intangible resources; [...] vigorously managing social networks within highly informal labour markets; performing work without a guarantee of compensation; assuming responsibility for maintaining a steady flow of paid work and, hence, on a job search without end; and willingness to put the passion for the work ahead of the size of the pay" (De Peuter 2014: 264). Indeed, the valorizing rhetorics of creative capitalism are not just circulated by employers in search of cheap, self-motivated, and uncomplaining workers; they are also internalized by some of the workers themselves, who idealize "creativity" as a key source of meaning-making in their professional lives. Consider, for example, the comic book writers and video game designers who do difficult, precarious work for little to no pay—not because their work has no economic value, but because of a "do what you love" orientation that holds that passion for the work is supposed to be enough.

But as economist Ann Markusen (2006) points out, there's an uncomfortable level of fuzziness to Florida's use of the "creative class" concept: the fact that he conflates creativity with high levels of education, for example, or the fact that his typology produces an invisible underclass of creative workers (e.g. tailors) that are not sufficiently "creative" enough to be considered part of the creative class (see Morgan and Ren 2012). Additionally, his central thesis relies on a series of



causal linkages—creativity generates growth; growth requires creative workers; creative workers value cultural openness; cities that cultivate cultural openness will attract creative workers, and therefore generate growth—whose efficacy is never fully explained or proven (see Marcuse 2003). And while Florida acknowledges some of the creative economy’s negative side effects—for example, the fact that the liberties and lifestyles of the “creative class” depends on the exploitation of low-paid service workers—his tone is ultimately exculpatory. As political economist Jamie Peck (2005) writes, Florida “revel[s] in the juvenile freedoms of the idealized no-collar workplaces in this flexibilizing economy, while paying practically no attention to the divisions of labor within which such employment practices are embedded. There is little regard for those who are on the thin end of Florida’s ‘thick labor markets,’ beyond the forlorn hope that, one day, they too might be lifted — presumably acts of sheer creative will — into the new overclass.”

Still, the “creative economy” model remains popular amongst developers, investors, and city planners—owing, at least in part, to how neatly this model fits into the well-entrenched ideologies of the neoliberal regime. Consider, for example, the valorization of “flexible” work formations: in order to cut labor costs, companies have increasingly outsourced work to a growing pool of risk-bearing, project-based workers—freelancers, temp workers, contractors, part-timers—whose job experience is marked by financial uncertainty, low job security, and decreased access to employer-sponsored safety nets like health insurance and retirement plans<sup>34</sup> (see Vivant 2013). But by circulating a discourse that valorizes this flexible labor structure for its creative, entrepreneurial spirit (see De Peuter 2014), key proponents of late capitalism can reframe risk and uncertainty as virtues. Indeed, these valorizing rhetorics are often internalized by the workers themselves, who not only accept

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<sup>34</sup> Indeed, in some cases, full-time employees have been laid off and then immediately rehired as contractors—doing the same work they’d done as full-time employees, only without the same pay or benefits—purely so that their employers can offset labor costs (Greenhouse 2008).

risky labor as the price of “doing what they love,” but also celebrate flexibilization as the highest form of entrepreneurial, individualistic self-empowerment.

In this way, the valorization of creativity serves to hide the ways in which creative labor can be just as exploitative as other, more traditional forms of work. Indeed, the “creative” model of exploitation is perhaps even more insidious and dangerous than its less creative counterparts: not just because creative labor exposes workers to more risk and instability than they would experience otherwise, but also because creative systems of exploitation are hidden beneath layers of valorizing rhetoric (see McRobbie 2002, Ross 2003). As such, the new “creative economy”—wherein government officials, think tanks, policymakers, and other agents of the neoliberal regime instrumentalize the rhetoric of the “creative class” in order to institute new forms of labor exploitation (see Leslie and Catungal 2012, Parker 2008, Peck 2005)—is not so much a sequel to the “old economy” as it is a reboot, rebranding established systems of disempowerment and alienation in order to make them more appropriate to the modern socio-political climate.

### **Working It: Precarious Labor in a Neoliberal World**

While the valorizing rhetoric of the “creative class” is favored by Florida—along with his like-minded comrades in government, academia, and industry—various scholars have put forth far more critical counternarratives about the economy’s increased emphasis on creative labor. Consider, for example, the radical Marxists of the autonomist school—e.g. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001), Maurizio Lazzarato (1996), Paolo Virno (1996)—whose understandings of contemporary labor formations have its roots in the Italian workerist movement. Like Florida, the autonomists<sup>35</sup> acknowledge that the past few decades have been marked by a dramatic restructuring of production,

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<sup>35</sup> In using this term, I’m taking my cues from cultural theorist Sarah Brouillette (2009), who points out that whatever the phrase “autonomist” lacks in elegance or complexity, it makes up for in convenience.

wherein the industrial labor of the Fordist era has been replaced by post-industrial “immaterial labor,” so called because it produces intangible objects like knowledge, ideas, and states of being. But while both Florida and the autonomists glorify the transformative power of creative expression, the autonomists argue that the cultural products generated within the capitalist regime is not creativity so much as it is commodity. In a world wherein “creative” expression has been subsumed and disciplined by capitalist labor formations, the “universal inclination toward creative play becomes the laboratory from which new products emerge” (Brouillette 2009: 143). In this way, the unholy marriage between capitalism and creative expression has produced a new system of labor exploitation, one that wholly incorporates creative workers within the cycle of production and consumption. At its most extreme, this argument can take on a hopeless, despairing air: as the autonomist Bifo Berardi once argued during a panel discussion, “The precarity of labor means life [itself] is pathologized; [...] art and life have fused and it’s a disaster; any new wave of radical subjectification is inconceivable now. If there was hope, it is only for some great catastrophe, after which possibly, maybe, everything might change” (see Graeber 2008).

There are, of course, some critical limitations to immaterial labor theory. For one thing, the autonomists—much like Florida and other “new economy” theorists—take as read the idea that the world economy is stolidly post-industrial: an odd claim to make, considering the existence of armed work farms, of prison labor, of a globalized system of manual work that is fed by state-sanctioned “illegal” immigration and slave labor (Brennan 2003: 344). To imagine the “new economy” as one built wholly on immaterial labor is to blithely invisibilize the industrial work that supports “post-industrial” modes of production. (On a similar note, the “secure Fordist worker vs. precarious post-Fordist worker” model necessarily assumes that security was universal under Fordist labor formations, which is demonstrably not the case [see Brophy and De Peuter 2007].) There’s also the problem of “affective labor” (e.g. the emotional work of caregivers), which the autonomists identify

as a subset of immaterial labor: by categorizing affective labor as a function of the “new economy,” the autonomists ignore decades’ worth of feminist critique that has demonstrated how the hyper-exploitation of women’s emotional work has *always* been a fundamental aspect of the capitalist project (see Federici 2008, Weeks 2007, Fantone 2007). And in conceptualizing a dichotomy between material and immaterial forms of labor, the autonomists inadvertently reproduce systems of inequality that privilege the abstract over the concrete. As anthropologist David Graeber (2008: 7-8) explains:

What all such conceptions ignore what is to my mind probably the single most powerful, and enduring insight of Marxist theory: that the world does not really consist (as capitalists would encourage us to believe) of a collection of discrete objects, that can then be bought and sold, but of actions and processes. This is what makes it possible for rich and powerful people to insist that what they do is somehow more abstract, more ethereal, higher and more spiritual, than everybody else. They do so by pointing at the products—poems, prayers, statutes, essays, or pure abstractions like style and taste—rather than the process of making such things, which is always much messier and dirtier than the products themselves. So do such people claim to float above the muck and mire of ordinary profane existence. One would think that the first aim of a materialist approach would be to explode such pretensions—to point out, for instance, that just as the production of socks and silverware involves a great deal of thinking and imagining, so is the production of laws, poems and prayers an eminently material process.

Another common neo-Marxist critique of precarious labor under neoliberal capitalism follows not from the autonomists, but from Bourdieu. In 1998, Bourdieu coined the term *precarariat*—a portmanteau of “precarious” and “proletariat”—in order to describe an emerging class of people trapped within a web of risk, uncertainty, and insecurity that limits their ability to sketch out future projects, and, therefore, prevents these workers from becoming politically mobilized. This concept was subsequently popularized within the English-speaking world by the economist Guy Standing, whose popular book *The Precariat* (Standing 2011, Standing 2014) contextualizes precarious labor within the neoliberal push for globalized circuits of production, trade, and investment. The resultant

de-territorialization of production has systematically dismantled Fordist notions of long-term, fixed-hour employment, with stable jobs being replaced by offshoring, contract-based labor, and peripheral and informal economies. In acknowledging this, Standing critiques political ideologues who argue that the ideal fix for precarity would be “a return to the ‘labourist’ model they had been so instrumental in cementing in the mid-twentieth century—more stable jobs with long-term employment security and the benefit trappings that went with that” (Standing 2011:1). As archaeologist Geoff Bailey (2012) explains when discussing Standing’s work, it is difficult to argue that “we can simply return to the labor-capital partnerships that dominated the industrialized economies during the long boom. [...] The unions and Social-Democratic parties that remain wedded to them with increasingly little to show for it both disarm their membership in their ability to fight and offer little in the way of hope to young workers who have little interest in being partners in the global capitalist system.” As such, the rise of precarious labor is dangerous not just because it fills workers’ lives with risk, but because it enables systems of continuous disempowerment that prevent workers from liberating themselves from the yoke of capitalism.

Over the past decade, scholars and activists alike have increasingly taken up the discourse of precarity (see De Peuter 2014, Allison 2014) in order to describe how labor insecurity affects every aspect of our everyday lives. Of course, the concept of precarity is vulnerable to many of the same critiques as immaterial labor theory: for example, the idea that precarity represents a “new,” post-Fordist condition of work (see Munck 2013). As cultural theorist Susan Banki (2014) writes: “...many people around the world have, after all, been subject to unreliable, unprotected and poorly paid work conditions for centuries; the contemporary ‘naming’ of the precariat arguably comes about through the cultural capital of the middle classes enabling them to name their conditions as their standards of living decompose and they become exposed to the risks that are routine for so many other workers.” Additionally, the slipperiness of the term “precariat” allows it to be broadly applied,

which not only dilutes its impact—how precarious is the life of, say, the privileged American grad student when compared to that of the refugee, the prisoner, or the migrant worker?—but also tends to centralize the needs and experiences of whatever precarious workers have the most cultural power (see Banki 2014, Mitropoulos 2005). And the invention of the “precariat” concept does not, in fact, provide an answer to either Standing’s or Bourdieu’s original call for political mobilization, as the sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2007:73) points out:

[The precariat] remains in the state of a simple composite conglomerate, *collectio personarum plurium*, made up of heterogeneous individuals and categories and negatively defined by social privation, material need, and symbolic deficit. Only an immense, specifically political work of aggregation and re-presentation [...] can hope to enable this conglomerate to accede to collective existence and thus to collective action. But this work stumbles over an unavoidable and insuperable contradiction, springing as it does from the fissiparous tendencies that are constitutive of it: the precaria is a sort of still-born group, whose gestation is necessarily unfinished since one can work to consolidate it only to help its members flee from it, either by finding a haven in stable wage labour or by escaping from the world of work altogether (through social redistribution and state protection). Contrary to the proletariat in the Marxist vision of history, which is called upon to abolish itself in the long term by uniting and universalizing itself, the precariat can only make itself to immediately unmake itself.

But while the autonomists’ “immaterial labor” concept and the Bourdieuan “precariat” concept both have their theoretical weaknesses, I still find them useful for understanding the role of precarity in contemporary capitalism. Precarious labor isn’t new: precarity, after all, has always been a fundamental aspect of the capitalist project. (This can perhaps be seen most obviously in show business, an industry that has always required workers to be insecure, risk-bearing, and self-commodifying.) What *is* new is how mechanisms of neoliberal policy have shifted our affective relationship to precarity, making it so that we collectively *feel* more insecure, unmoored, and endangered than we ever did during previous stages of capitalism. What *is* new is the way this precarity has become increasingly valorized outside of the creative industries, with the increased

circulation of post-Fordist ideals reimagining instability as freedom, risk as passion, and self-commoditization as empowerment. The emergent scholarly discourse of precarity, then, works not so much as a method of neat, empirical categorization, but as an encapsulation of a feeling, and by situating my own research within this discourse, I'm recognizing the ways in which risk and instability have become increasingly central to how we as a global society think about work.

## Part II: Invisible Hands

"Magic is meant to be unseen," Karl told me, while we sat together at a tea shop in Hollywood. "Yes, the audience *thinks* they see something: the rabbit out of the hat, the girl sawed in half, the coin pulled from behind a little boy's ear." Here, he mimed plucking a coin from the air, his fingers moving so deftly that, just for a moment, I imagined that I could see a glimmer of silver between his fingertips. "But what they think they see is nothing but an illusion. The reality of the trick—that is, the hours' worth of work that went into building the effect, perfecting the routine, learning how to tell the truth with one hand and lie with the other—that's something the audience can never see, or else there can be no magic.

"And therein lies the tragedy," he continued with a faint, sad smile. "The magic goes unseen, and so the magician himself goes unseen. [...] No one who is not a magician knows how much work *really* goes into producing a magical effect. Not even you," he added after a moment's hesitation. "No offense."

I nodded, unoffended. "How much work do you think it takes?"

"Malcolm Gladwell would say it takes ten thousand hours to become an expert at something. For magic, I'd double that, perhaps even triple it." He shook his head, his gaze taking on a wistful cast. "So much work! So much work, and it all goes unseen."

Karl took a sip of tea, then grimaced: while we were talking, his tea had gone cold. He set the mug aside. “This is why no one appreciates magic,” he said at last, “why no one thinks of magic as an artform: because they don’t know how much work it takes.”

“And if they did know, there wouldn’t be any magic,” I said, tentatively. “So they wouldn’t value it anyway.”

He beamed at me. “Precisely!”

As previously discussed in Chapter 2, many magicians argue that magic’s devaluation amongst lay audiences is largely due to the ways in which magical labor—that is, the effort and expertise required in order to successfully perform a magic trick—is necessarily invisibilized. If we understand “invisible labor” as any form of work that remains hidden from view, then the argument fits. However, a more useful definition of invisible labor would encompass work that is not only out of sight, but also out of mind (Cherry 2016, Otis and Zhao 2016, Anteby and Chan 2013, Hatton 2017): work that is “overlooked, ignored, and/or devalued by employers, consumers, workers, and ultimately the legal system itself” (Crain et al 2016: 6). As Karen Dearborn (2008) points out, magic relies on the conspicuous performance of effort, wherein the magician enacts the role of the doer, the go-getter, the man of action: someone capable of using superhuman cleverness and technical skill to overcome impossible odds. Even if the audience remains blissfully unaware of the exact mechanisms that power a given trick, they’re still able to assume (sometimes wrongly) that the magician did *something* to make the effect work. In this way, a variety of key indicators— “strained muscles, finished artifacts, a changed state of affairs” (Star and Strauss 1999)—renders a magician’s magical labor visible to the audience.

Indeed, the only form of magical labor that truly counts as invisible would be the work of the (usually female) magician’s assistant: while magicians inhabit a role that reaffirms them as agentive wielders of secret knowledge, assistants are depicted as the hired help, ignorant and



unskilled, as much of a prop as the rabbit in the hat (see Coppa 2008). But while the audience sees the assistant as doing nothing more strenuous than flashing a pretty smile, it's actually the assistant's labor—her strength, her flexibility, her technical skill—that allows the trick to work. Even so, it is the magician alone who gets the credit. As Francesca Coppa (ibid 86) writes: “The strengthening of magic's association with the figure of the Western capitalist happened simultaneously with the widespread addition of assistants to the magic act. After all, what's a capitalist without a labor force? And in stage magic, as in industry, it's often the assistant who actually does the work...”

Another hint that the assistant's labor is “invisible” in a way that the magician's labor is not is the myriad of mechanisms through which the assistant is systematically overlooked: not just by the audience, but the magicians themselves. The current and former magician's assistants I spoke to reported being sexually harassed, ignored, and “treat[ed] as less than human” by their magician employers. Tricks would often be designed without the assistant's comfort in mind, exposing the assistant to greater risk of injury. “[He] didn't think of me as a person,” one assistant told me about the last magician she'd worked with. “I was just this *thing*, just another part of the trick. [...] Of course he didn't care about my feelings, or about whether I got hurt. Why would he? I was just part of the scenery.” If an assistant made a recommendation or pointed out a flaw, her opinion would often be discounted out of hand, regardless of her expertise and technical mastery. At conventions, assistants would often be leered at and objectified, or otherwise just plain ignored: “People would look right past me,” one assistant told me, frowning down at her hands. “Like I wasn't even there.” This invisibility often had disastrous effects: an assistant who was badly injured after her employer ignored her warnings about a faulty device; an assistant who was accidentally left in a locked box on stage, forced to stay put until her employer figured out she was missing and let her out. As sociologist Judith Rollins (1985) once wrote about her time as a domestic worker in wealthy white households, these gestures of ignoring an employee's presence are not so much insults as they are

“expressions of the employers' ability to annihilate the humanness and even, at times, the very existence” of the subordinate (209). It was this invisibility, more so than any other act of degradation Rollins experienced during her time in domestic service, that posed the strongest threat to her dignity as a human being. In trying to describe the desolation of this experience, she borrows the words of Franz Fanon (1967:139): “A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence.”

When comparing the magical labor of magicians and their assistants, it becomes fairly clear that the typical work of the magician—building technical skills and embodied knowledge, scripting magical performances, inventing and/or constructing magical effects—doesn't really count as “invisible labor” in the strongest sense of the term. Rather, the hiddenness of this behind-the-scenes work seems to mirror the similarly unseen activities that can be found in other creative fields: the architect bent low over her drafts table; the ballet dancer gritting her teeth through flexibility training; the opera singer drilling scales and arpeggios late into the night. While lay audiences often don't think unprompted about the hours' worth of practice that goes into being a professional artist—indeed, many such creative activities are sometimes misunderstood as the product of “natural talent” rather than painstaking effort—this hiddenness does not, in turn, result in the invisibilization of creative work or creative workers. So while a magician's expertise is certainly *hidden*, said hiddenness is not as unique to magical labor as magicians like to think, nor is it synonymous with systemic invisibility in the same vein as the stark dehumanization experienced by domestic workers and magician's assistants.

Still, I think magicians like Karl might be onto something when they engage in discourses of invisibility when trying to describe their profession—even if what they call “invisibility” is not quite on par with the true invisibility experienced by other workers. As Graham Jones (2011: 163) writes: “Over the course of the twentieth century, the cultural landscape of popular entertainment has shifted dramatically. [...] Unlike members of some professions, magicians have no stable institutions

to guarantee their livelihoods...” Like many other workers within the creative industries, professional magicians are freelancers, stringing together a variety of different paid gigs in order to make a living: performing at parties and corporate events, teaching magic classes, selling magic tricks online. And while many (though, to be clear, not most) of the magicians I interviewed were quite wealthy<sup>36</sup>, their reliance on irregular, contract-based job opportunities left them vulnerable to much the same risk and uncertainty that plagues other “flexibilized” workers. I would argue that although the work of creating, learning, and perfecting might not constitute a form of invisible labor, the other, unmentionable parts of a magician’s job—constantly hunting for work in order to maintain a steady income; juggling multiple short-term gigs; doing the emotional labor of networking, self-exploiting, and habituating oneself to the unrelenting stress of precarity (see De Peuter 2014)—has been thoroughly invisibilized. To paraphrase Theresa Anderson’s work on the unglamorous, behind-the-scenes labor that powers public “eureka moments” in the sciences (2011): because the “hidden” work of creating and distributing secrets is such a conspicuous part of a magician’s job, it becomes a kind of public performance, kept vivid within the imaginations of lay audiences. What remains *truly* unseen is the precarious work of the freelancer.

Perhaps nowhere is the centrality of precarious labor more immediately obvious than in *Magicians: Life in the Impossible* (2016), the documentary previously discussed in Chapter 2. Unlike other popular documentaries about the magic community, *Magicians* spends little time demonstrating the aesthetic value of magic as an artform (e.g. *Our Magic* [2014]), revealing the secrets behind magical effects (e.g. television programs like *Mysteries of Magic* and BBC’s *History of Magic*), or crafting almost hagiographic narratives about the cleverness and ingenuity of important magicians in history (e.g. *An Honest Liar* [2014], *Deceptive Practice* [2012].) Instead, *Magicians* deemphasizes magical labor in

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<sup>36</sup> In this way, many (though, again, not most) of the magicians in my study neatly fit the “creative class” model so lovingly described by Richard Florida, wherein the workers have more in common with the privileged, wealthy professional class than with the unseen, undervalued, and underpaid precariat.

favor of exploring aspects of magical performance that seem far less glamorous: a once-wealthy magician who loses his house in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis; a party magician in search of his big break, growing increasingly disenchanted as he performs in front of groups of drunken, uninterested partygoers; a traveling magician—often depicted wandering forlornly from one motel to the next—whose marriage collapses under the strain of his travel-heavy schedule. The end result is a narrative that elicits not a feeling of enchantment but of hopelessness, and, despite its flaws, this film most closely parallels what I observed while tagging along with various Los Angeles-based magicians as they hustled from gig to gig, performed in front apathetic audiences, and strung together disparate sources of income in the hope of making that month’s rent. With a few notable exceptions—for example, the multimillionaire magicians that populate the Las Vegas strip—the business of making magic is one indelibly marked by uncertainty. Despite this, popular understandings of the magic business tend to focus less on the precarious aspects of a magician’s work and more on the seductive mysteries of magical labor.

There are a few possible reasons why Los Angeles magicians do not associate magic with precarity. For one thing, many of the magicians I met as part of this research project simply weren’t exposed to the same level of risk as precarious workers with less income, protected from financial disaster by virtue of their relative privilege and wealth. On top of this, the figure of the magician has in recent years become symbolically linked with the social imaginary of credit culture. If we are currently ensconced within an era of “magical capitalism” wherein the uncertainty, drama, and transformative power of modern capital flows represents a new form of enchantment (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, Moeran and de Wall Malefyt 2018), then anyone who (seemingly) manages the impossible feat of wielding control over said capital is understood within the popular imagination as a kind of “financial wizard.” Indeed, many magical entertainers enact the role of the “financial

wizard” in their public presentations of self (see Peck 2008) in order to showcase their ability to transcend the financial “anxieties characteristic of capitalist life” (ibid 109).

Perhaps because of this, many magicians—particularly the ones who were the most financially successful—valorized the precarity of both the magic business in particular and the entertainment industry as a whole. One magician said, regarding the uncertainty of his work: “Oh, I love the hustle! I love looking at my accounts for the month and realizing, ‘Oh, hey, I’m not bringing in as much money as I’d like.’ So I *have* to go out and hunt for some gigs if I want to stay afloat. It’s invigorating! Like I’m a shark, you know? Always gotta keep moving, can’t just sit around and wait for the money to roll in.” Another described the market system as the most effective way of weeding out “bad magicians,” arguing that, “I hate to say it, but the ones who don’t make it are the ones who don’t *deserve* to make it. Survival of the fittest!” But for other magicians—particularly magicians who did not have a cushion of wealth to support them—magic’s fundamental lack of stability is less a cause for celebration than it is a wellspring of stress and anxiety. Indeed, these negative emotions are only compounded by 1) the prevailing rhetorics of late capitalism, which, in valorizing the “entrepreneurial spirit” of flexibilized work, implicitly critiques anyone who feels more beleaguered than liberated; and 2) the hiddenness of the magician’s precarious labor, which deepens the alienation experienced by the worker. So while I would never go so far as to equate the middle-class anxieties of the creative precariat with the problems experienced by other, less privileged workers, it’s difficult not to see the contemporary magic industry as one founded upon the invisible self-exploitation of creative workers.

### **Part III: Now You See It**

Since the early 2000s—and *especially* since the global financial crisis of 2008—artists and other creative workers have increasingly protested the exploitative labor formations of the neoliberal

era. In the United States, the Occupy Wall Street movement spawned the Arts & Labor working group, which highlighted the invisible, precarious labor that sustains the contemporary art scene (see Kasper 2011); protested art organizations who hired underpaid, non-union labor; and circulated radical rhetorics of labor activism that focused less on “wealth creation” and more on abandoning existing structures of wealth altogether (see Bryan-Wilson 2012). In Spain, activist research groups—for example, the feminist collective *Precarias a la Deriva* (2004), loosely translated as “Adrift in Precarity”—highlighted the inherent precariousness of women’s work and, in so doing, helped to shape public discourse on the subject of precarity (see Lee and Kofman 2012). In Italy, cultural workers committed acts of “creative activism” (De Sario 2007), such as by carrying effigies of San Precario, the invented patron saint of precarious workers, through major urban centers, as well as by staging “precarity ping-pong” tournaments that satirized the inconsistent back-and-forth of precarious labor (see Vanni and Tari 2005, Lee and Kofman 2012). In this way, anti-precarity activists all over the world have taken up radical discourses in order to contest not just the risk and instability of precarious labor formations, but also the lack of affordable housing and livable wages in urban centers, the disappearance of middle-income jobs, the decay of public infrastructures like libraries and subways, and the criminalization of migrants and refugees (Lee and Kofman 2012, Kalleberg 2011). As Grieg de Peuter (2014: 277) writes: “...the nonstandard worker in the celebrated creative economy defies its reputation for being a role model in contemporary capitalism – by, for example, exploring strategies for combating workforce fragmentation, mutually confronting rather than privately managing precarity, and turning capacities susceptible to flexible labour control against it.”

Magicians certainly weren’t immune to this revolutionary spirit. Consider France, for example: in the early 2000s, when the French government considered cutting subsidies that allocated welfare benefits to creative workers, freelancers in the film and television industries incited a series

of strikes that paralyzed creative production throughout the country (see Bodnar 2006, Sinigaglia 2009). And while few magicians opted to participate in the strikes, they still publicly protested the budget cuts: not only because they saw qualifying for a subsidy as “a token of cultural legitimacy, placing magicians in the same professional category as symphonic musicians, ballet dancers, and opera singers” (Jones 2011:224), but also because these subsidies helped to compensate professional magicians for the invisible aspects of creative labor. As various French magicians explained to anthropologist Graham Jones, “Culture depends on a decent standard of living for artists” (ibid 224), and without social programs that help to keep magicians afloat when they’re in between paying gigs, artistic workers would succumb to the pressure of the market, disincentivizing artists from trying to weather the inherent risk of creative expression. In this way, the magicians in Jones’s study argued in favor of a support system that stabilizes a magician’s gig-based income and thereby minimizes the inherent precarity of creative work. And according to several of the more globally-oriented magicians I spoke to over the course of my research project, similar calls to action (with varying levels of vehemence) can be found in magic communities worldwide, most notably in anti-precarity strongholds like Italy and Spain. Because of this, we can see that professional magicians—just like other creative workers—have become increasingly resistant to the neoliberal economic structures that promote precarity.

However, this vocal push against precarity has been strangely absent from the Los Angeles branch of the magic community. There are a few possible reasons for this. For one thing, the United States—unlike France—generally does not approach the issue of cultural production with the idea that “certain kinds of work are fraught with unique difficulties, which should be mitigated through the support of the welfare state” (Jones 2011:222). Because of this, the American government currently offers no real social safety net to creative workers, meaning that the threat of budget cuts would hardly serve as an effective catalyst for protest: after all, American magicians can’t exactly be

expected to storm the barricades over subsidies that never actually existed. Additionally, there's the Los Angeles magic community's long entanglement with the Hollywood entertainment complex, the very same labor market that—thanks to its casual employment structure, its mix of vertical and horizontal differentiation, a market value system built around the valorization of “originality,” and the inherent uncertainty of the filmmaking process—has served as patient zero for the rapid spread of flexible work formations in the creative industries (Menger 1999, Storper 1989). Accustomed to working in an entertainment scene that has normalized the precariousness of creative labor, Los Angeles magicians—much like other creative workers in this city—are inclined to accept precarity as the price of being an artist. Because of this, it seems that the general lack of anti-precarity protests within the Los Angeles magic community is indicative of a broader cultural system that has long-since habituated the risk and uncertainty of flexible labor formations.

And then there's the issue of meritocracy. As previously discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the contemporary magic scene thrives on the idea of merit, holding that magicians rise to the upper echelons of the community based largely on talent and expertise. Of course, magic isn't unique in this regard. The increased importance of merit as an ontological category is a key aspect of the “post-industrial” age: in a labor economy that has become increasingly weighted toward high-paid service jobs—that is, jobs that largely depend on creative, immaterial modes of production—social status is directly tied to technical skill and higher education, with those without the appropriate qualifications being barred access to the most coveted positions (see Young 2017). As Richard Florida (2014) points out when describing the meritocratic values of the so-called “creative class,” this increased emphasis on meritocracy has negative consequences: “Qualities that confer merit, such as technical knowledge and mental discipline, are socially acquired and cultivated. Yet those who have these qualities may easily begin to believe that they were born with them, or acquired them all on their own, or that others just ‘don't have it.’ By papering over the causes of cultural and



educational advantage, meritocracy may subtly perpetuate the very prejudices it claims to renounce.” And although various scholars have neatly debunked Richard Florida’s implication that creative workers are any more enamored with the concept of meritocracy than their non-creative counterparts (see Taylor and O’Brien 2017), Florida is correct in pointing out how firmly embedded rhetorics of “merit” are when it comes to how we think about creative labor.

What is it that makes meritocracy so appealing? For one thing, the social mobility it promises helps to bolster the cool, “no-collar” aesthetic of the creative workplace, presenting an “image of carefree enjoyability that anyone talented and purposeful enough can access” whilst simultaneously obscuring the ways in which nodes of access are systematically closed to those “who are not rich, white, male, or well-connected enough” (Littler 2017:50). (Consider, for example, the fact that people from low-income families are generally underrepresented within the creative industries [O’Brien et al. 2016, Banks and Oakley 2016].) By ignoring the numerous ways in which creative work is thoroughly unmeritocratic, workers within the creative industries are able to maintain their “cool, creative and egalitarian” self-image (Gill 2002) without questioning the “hegemonic whiteness” of cultural production (Littler 2017:161). Furthermore, discourses of meritocracy allow employers and other gatekeepers to rationalize nepotism, self-selection, and homophily: in a labor market organized around “informal networks of friends who supply each other with tips and introductions and hire people they have worked well with before” (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013: 192), emphasis on “merit” allows those in the in-group—employers and employees alike—to justify the “unmanageable inequalities” (Jones and Pringle 2015) of exclusionary hiring practices. Additionally, the myth of meritocracy allows workers to reimagine the structural inequalities embedded within the creative labor market as an individual-level problem: that is, a problem that can be solved with self-improvement. In academia, for example, the pernicious lack of tenure track jobs might be solved via forms of organized resistance, such as collective bargaining and faculty

unionization (see Zheng 2018); instead, meritocratic rhetorics encourage academics to internalize higher and higher standards for getting hired and earning tenure (see Schell 1998), thereby transforming a *structural* problem into an *individual* one—something to be solved not with organized resistance, but with resume building, mock interviews, and professionalization workshops. As Robin Zheng (2018) writes: “By getting caught up in ideologies that focus on individual-level strategies at the expense of collective action, we ourselves are rendered complicit in the problem of precarity.”

So there are a variety of reasons why Los Angeles magicians shy away from anti-precarity discourse and practice: the American government’s “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” approach to creative labor markets, the Los Angeles entertainment industry’s normalization of insecure modes of labor production, and rhetorics of meritocracy that allow creative workers to reimagine structural imbalances as personal failings. Taken together, all of these social phenomena contribute to the valorization of creative labor formations, disguising the hardships and inequities of flexibilized work beneath a thin veneer of neoliberal glamor, and thereby habituating artistic workers to the precariousness of creative labor markets. Indeed, I would argue that the reason these processes are so successful at making creative labor more palatable to contemporary workers is because of the unique role that valorization plays in counteracting the *devalorization* of invisible work. As discussed in an earlier section of this chapter, the invisible aspects of precarious labor—the endless, thankless hustle involved in hunting for gigs, for example, or the emotional work of managing an informal network of professional contacts—alienates creative workers from their artistic products, subsuming the pleasure of creative expression within the twin logics of entrepreneurship and capital accumulation. By wholly buying into the valorizing rhetorics of “creative capitalism,” creative workers can strategically ignore the alienating, depersonalizing side effects of flexibilized labor production.

In this way, anti-precarity discourse has a destabilizing effect, forcing creative workers to recognize and contend with the negative externalities embedded within creative labor. For many Los Angeles magicians, this kind of reframing just doesn't seem to be worth the effort. "Sure, I hate the boring, bureaucratic parts of the job," one magician told me. "I hate not knowing where my next paycheck is going to come from. I hate sometimes having to hound my friends for gigs. [...] But so what? *Nobody* likes their job—and, to be honest, I'd say I like my job a whole hell of a lot more than those people who have to work in an office all day. [...] If I have to do some soul-crushing stuff, if it means I get to do what I *love*? Then I'll do it." Another explained: "Some of the younger guys get fed up sometimes. 'Why do I have to do this? Why do I have to do that?' And I tell them, 'Look, suck it up. Life isn't easy—not in general, and *especially* not if you wanna work in show business.' If these younger guys wanna try to shake things up, be my guest, but I don't know how they're gonna get paid when they're too busy waiting for changes that aren't ever gonna come." For aspiring magicians at the beginning of their professional journey, engaging in anti-precarity rhetorics would force them to reckon with the possibility that their future success might depend less on their technical expertise and more on their ability to network and glad-hand; for established magicians at the top of their game, anti-precarity discourse threatens the very social system that allowed these magicians to generate wealth in the first place. And even amongst the few magicians I met who did full-heartedly embrace anti-precarity rhetorics, there was considerable disagreement about whether the (notoriously traditional) magic industry might be open to structural change, as well as what these changes ought to look like. Do we break up the informal (and generally inaccessible) social networks through which many professional magicians find gigs, even if doing so disrupts a community built on club-like camaraderie? Do we publicize the invisible, entrepreneurial labor that powers magical performance, even if doing so demystifies and pulls focus from the magical labor that attracts magicians—and audiences—to the profession in the first place? For many magicians, reimagining

the magic industry through the lens of precarity is a hopelessly dispiriting exercise that holds little practical benefit.

However, I would argue that the discourse of anti-precarity could be useful to the contemporary magic community: not just in that it might encourage those in the magic industry to establish stabilizing mechanisms that would minimize the risk and uncertainty that plagues their profession, but also because explicitly recognizing the magician's trade as a form of precarious labor helps to visibilize hidden forms of work that have long-since gone unseen. (Indeed, I'd argue that this is especially important for magicians' assistants, who are the ones within the magic industry who are the most socially, politically, and financially disempowered by the invisibilization of their work.) In embracing the discourse of anti-precarity, professional magicians can expose the insidious systems of exploitation and self-exploitation that have long-since remained hidden beneath layers of valorizing rhetoric. More than this, it allows magicians to publicly align themselves with other artists, thereby injecting new value into a profession that many non-magicians write off as effortless, inartistic, and unimportant. By positioning themselves as members of the creative precariat, magicians can take ownership of the unacknowledged labor that goes into their work, and, in so doing, reposition themselves within an aesthetic value system that routinely denigrates magical labor.

### **Conclusion**

Toward the end of my interview with Timothy, he brought back up our earlier discussion of the unsavory aspects of the magician's trade, trying to downplay his previous complaints. "I mean, I wouldn't want you to think I hate my job," he told me, his tone artificially casual. "It's the best job in the world. The absolute *best*. I know that." It was an unsubtle—but not unexpected—attempt to backtrack: I'd often noticed that whenever a magician vocalized grave complaints about the precariousness of their profession, they'd quickly walk their statements back, insisting that the things

they'd just been griping about were actually, on second thought, not all that bad. For many of these magicians—especially the wealthier ones—this reversal seemed to come down to a sense of guilt: how dare they complain about the nature of their work when said work funds such a cushy lifestyle? Additionally, the valorizing rhetorics of creative capitalism encourage artistic workers to be ashamed of any negative feelings they have about the “creative” mode of labor production: because creative work is supposed to be cooler, more glamorous, and more emotionally fulfilling than its non-creative counterparts, an inability to fully appreciate the “coolness” of creative work is understood to be a personal failing on the part of the worker. But while I'm sensitive to those creative workers who seek to bury their misgivings in an attempt to ascribe to the model “creative worker” archetype, I would argue that ignoring the unpleasant precarities of the magic industry only serves to compound the alienation of the precarious worker.

Amongst English-speaking magicians, the slang term *work*—generally prefaced by a definite article, as in “Wow, you really put *the work* into that card”—refers to the hidden, behind-the-scenes effort that allows a magician to achieve a specific magical effect: crimping the corner of a card to make said card easier to locate, for example, or sanding down the edges of a particular coin so that you can identify it using touch alone. But while magicians exclusively use this term in order to refer to magical labor, I would argue that it's also a rather perfect description for the non-magical labor that laymen normally don't associate with the magician's craft—that is, the unseen labor of the creative worker: networking, auditioning, hunting for gigs, habituating oneself to uncertainty. And just as obscuring *the work* of magical labor helps to preserve the illusion of supernatural power, so too does obscuring *the work* of a magician's non-magical labor bolster the cool, glamorous image of late capitalist modes of labor production. Indeed, I would argue that acknowledging *the work* that undergirds the magician's trade would be the first step to ushering in a new aesthetic value system that recognizes the true, precarious reality of creative labor.

## Conclusion

On February 24, 2017, a magician was found dead in the Magic Castle. Although Daryl Easton—born Daryl Martinez, and known professionally by the mononym Daryl—never quite achieved the same mainstream brand recognition as Criss Angel or Penn and Teller, he was a superstar within the world of magic: a gold medal from the Fédération Internationale des Sociétés Magiques, several Academy Awards from the Academy of Magical Arts, a lucrative stint as a headliner at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, a storied gig performing magic at the inauguration of George W. Bush. In more recent years, he'd committed himself to the lecture circuit, touring the world in order to teach audiences of eager magicians his theories and techniques. Indeed, whenever I asked magicians to suggest new texts for me to read, Daryl's lecture notes often hovered somewhere near the top of the list, just under Ricky Jay's historical essays and Jamy Ian Swiss's book reviews. By the time Daryl was hired to perform at the Castle that fateful week in February—doing a whopping six shows a night, even though Castle magicians usually do only three or four—Daryl had made a name for himself as a true “magician's magician,” revered within the community not just for his technical expertise, but for his value as a teacher and mentor.

In death, however, Daryl was transformed from a person into a talking point: at best, a source of salacious gossip; at worst, a punchline. For several weeks after Daryl's death, any mention of magic would inevitably cause my conversation partner to bring up “that dead magician” at the Castle—sometimes out of genuine concern for his well-being, but more often with a buzzy, faintly conspiratory air, as if trying to probe me for secrets. They wondered, giddily, if he was found in a secret passageway, hidden behind a novelty bookcase or trick mirror. (He was not: his body was found in the backstage area of the Parlor of Prestidigitation, the theater where he was scheduled to perform that night.) They asked me if his death might have been an accident, courtesy of a trick gone awry. (It was not: Daryl specialized in close-up sleight of hand, not death-defying stage

illusions. While he occasionally used ropes as part of his routines, an accidental death via rope trick would be just as likely as someone dying while playing cat's cradle.) Once, after I tentatively mentioned that Daryl's death had been ruled a suicide, someone joked that Daryl must have hanged himself with "one of those never-ending handkerchiefs," referring to the simple, somewhat corny gag that has long been a staple of birthday party clowns and Chuck Jones cartoons. Another said, laughingly, that it wasn't surprising that a magician had killed himself: Daryl must have been a "mother's basement" type of guy, geeking his way through a sad, lonely life of eternal bachelordom. "He had a wife and two children," I told him, tone flat, before someone else jumped in and quickly changed the subject.

In some ways, this kind of talk isn't surprising: you'd expect a certain air of gossip and scandal to cling to any news item, particularly news regarding a dead celebrity—even if said celebrity is someone that few non-magicians have ever actually heard of. It also isn't unexpected for stories about death to provoke bouts of black humor, especially if the interlocutors don't have a close, personal relationship with the recently deceased. However, there was something tellingly wry about the way people talked about "that dead magician" at the Magic Castle, with people drawing humor not so much from the macabre details of the death itself, nor from the Hollywood salaciousness of a late celebrity's life, but from the fact that the dead man once did magic for a living. As one colleague at UCLA explained it, after I complained to her about the sly, bantering way in which many non-magicians talked about Daryl's suicide: "It's easy for them to laugh because magicians are already easy to laugh at."

As recently as a century ago, magicians would not have made such easy targets for mockery. During the Golden Age of magic, magicians strategically eschewed the clownish costumes and occultish accoutrement that had long been staples of their profession, instead choosing to adopt the tools and iconography of the gentleman class: tuxedos and top hats, rather than a wizard's robes;

scientific rhetoric, rather than cabalistic mysticism. In doing this, magicians in the Western world managed to rebrand magic as a respectable artform, with magicians themselves becoming some of the most well-respected—and, of course, highly paid—entertainers of the day. Since then, however, magic’s respectability has steadily waned, driven, at least in part, by the continuous decline of live entertainment as well as by the rising cultural power of film and television. In the new social hierarchy of the modern entertainment landscape, magic has become something of a black sheep: too geeky to attract much mainstream attention, too kitschy and esoteric to rightfully be considered a valuable artform.

Within the Los Angeles magic community, magicians have adopted a variety of strategies in order to resist this devaluation, including the symbolic reenactment of bourgeois aesthetics and the careful construction of a value system that denigrates “bad magicians” for not adopting socially approved behaviors and styles. The first strategy has been only somewhat effective. Consider, for example, the Magic Castle: while the Castle has done its best to instrumentalize exclusivity and Hollywood glamor in order to bolster magic’s appeal, the dismissive attitudes of the Castle’s wealthy, well-connected clientele seems to indicate that the Castle has done little to elevate the art of magic in the eyes of the city’s bourgeoisie. The second strategy has had the (perhaps unintended) side effect of reinforcing a value system that aligns “good” magic with the white, heteromasculine subject. Recall the general disdain that mainstream magicians have for lyrical magicians, who incorporate elements of song or dance (or both) into their heavily choreographed routines. While many magicians might insist that the denigration of lyrical magic is based entirely on merit, it seems uncoincidental that almost all lyrical magicians are female, as well as that musicality and emotionality—both of which are key aspects of lyrical performance—are prototypically feminine. As such, it’s easy to see that magic’s “merit-based” value system (much like similarly “meritocratic” fields like software engineering and finance) does little to raise magic’s social status amongst laymen,



and instead only reinforces gatekeeping mechanisms that have been designed to protect the magic community from perceived outsiders. So although many magicians might argue that the best way to uplift the magician's craft in the eyes of mainstream society would be to bolster exclusionary mechanisms that strategically demarcate what counts "good" magic, I would suggest that strategy only succeeds in winnowing away female magicians, magicians of color, and other minority performers who might inject their own innovations and creative inspirations into the (notoriously traditional) global magic scene.

A more effective (and less exclusionary) way to bolster magic's aesthetic value amongst non-magicians would be through generating a popular discourse that fully and directly acknowledges professional magicians as creative workers. With the rise of late capitalism, "creativity"—a word that, in this context, has less to do with artistry than with flexibilized work formations, immaterial modes of labor production, and precarious living conditions—has been increasingly valorized as a virtue. Creative professions—not just in the culture industries, but also the increasingly flexibilized work that can be found in fields like tech—have become linked within the public imagination with glamor, coolness, and social prestige. Of course, this glamorizing discourse disguises the negative externalities associated with creative work, such as the uncertainty surrounding the source of the worker's next paycheck, or the expectation that workers should be open to providing free labor. So while embracing the "creative worker" image would effectively reinject a sense of prestige into magical entertainment—and, in so doing, reestablish magic within the public's mind as a legitimate artform—this strategy should be accompanied by a concerted effort to make magical work less risky and insecure. Otherwise, any boost in magic's social clout would only serve to further disguise the inherent riskiness of creative labor. And although magicians in anti-precarity strongholds like Italy and France have already begun the painstaking process of repositioning professional magicians as artistic workers whilst simultaneously protesting against the negative externalities of said artistic

work, it seems dubious that the American magic scene in general (and the Los Angeles magic scene in particular) would be willing or able to take these same steps.

This, at the face of it, seems like a rather silly thing to be concerned about. In a world seemingly gripped by the death throes of a looming apocalypse—escalating military conflicts over resources and geopolitical real estate; climate change and its murderer’s row of attendants, including famine, lack of access to clean water, and political instability; horrifying humanitarian crises in Syria and Myanmar, in Venezuela and the Sahel, at the border between the United States and Mexico—what does it matter, really, if American audiences see magic as foolish and the magicians themselves as fools? However, I would argue that it does matter, if only because *art* matters. Aesthetic value helps to shape the invisible structures that undergird our social environment, determining one’s social, political, and economic value within a given cultural space. As such, the creative products that a given society (or, more likely, the hegemonic tastemakers of a given society) chooses to value ultimately affects not just the cultural landscape of lived worlds, but also which artists are respected and which artists are discarded; which artists make money from their work and which artists starve; which artists rise to the upper echelons of society and which artists languish in obscurity. To deny a magician (or a spoken word poet, or an exotic dancer, or a rapper, or a clown) the title of “artist” is a political act, one designed to refuse these creative workers the social power of being an artist—that is, of being someone who practices a form of cultural production that has been sanctioned and legitimized by mainstream society. Indeed, those who seek legitimization often end up reproducing aesthetic value systems designed to exclude, as can be seen in the case of the “bad magician” rhetoric of the Los Angeles magic scene.

Just as the carefully colonialist frameworks of Golden Age magic (see Jones 2008) helped to align the model of the ideal magician with scientific innovation (in contrast to mystic primitivism) and whiteness (in contrast to the exotic Other), so too do contemporary “bad magician” rhetorics

seek to regain magic’s respectability by expunging those who do not conform to a specific aesthetic standard: the female magicians who incorporate dance into their performances, for example, or the young magicians of color who design routines meant to be viewed on social media platforms like Instagram. So if the quest to make magic “respectable” inevitably requires magicians to ascribe to the aesthetic tastes dictated by hegemonic ideology, perhaps “respectability” should not be the ultimate goal of magical performance. Magic’s salvation might instead come from fostering a culture that privileges openness over isolationism and homophily, allowing more easily for the spread of new ideas; that treats magic as a vehicle of true creative self-expression, rather than expecting magicians to conform to the aesthetic expectations of their fellows. I am not the first to say so: over twenty years ago—in June 1993, one month before I was born—the magician Jamy Ian Swiss (2002 [1993]) argued that the current structure of the magic scene was ultimately to blame for the lack of “good” magic:

Should we spend our lives as mimics, mindlessly recycling old saws and standard tricks without a moment's examination? Should we live awash in covetousness, as vicious thieves robbing the most precious creative fruits of those artists we envy? Should we devote ourselves to the containment of the paltry secrets of our art, as if the mechanics of a centuries-old card sleight were the moral equivalent of a state secret? Should we institutionalize mediocrity by way of our associations, avoiding honest evaluation and the pressure to achieve greatness, all in the name of good fellowship? Should we embroil ourselves in petty disputes, busily hacking at trees without a moment's glance toward the forest? Should we use our special skills as a bludgeon with which to beat down our victims, in order to compensate for our own personal inadequacies?

Not much has changed, I think, since Swiss first wrote these words. As a result, magic continues not to be recognized as an artform—at least, not by mainstream society—and magicians continue to struggle to fit themselves into a competitive labor market that routinely devalues their creative labor. While, admittedly, the privileged, well-to-do magicians who formed the core of my research sample cannot be said to experience true marginalization, the aesthetic devaluation of magic

has had a subtly harmful effect on the Los Angeles magic community: not just in terms of the wry, dismissive way in which magicians are treated by wide-eyed tourists and Hollywood heavyweights, but also in terms of the way in which the constant quest for acknowledgement has encouraged magicians to engage in “merit-based” exclusionary behaviors that reconfirm the magic scene as a white, heteromasculine space. There will, I think, come a time when magic might once again be seen as an art, and the magicians themselves as artists—and if the only magicians to count as “artists” are just as white, wealthy, and male as the magicians of the Golden Age, I will be disappointed, but not at all surprised.

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