

stick. Whut's the United States? It's jist a furrin country to me. And *you* supportin' it! Jist dirty ole furriners, ever last one of you!

VOICES (outside, grumbling, protesting).

Now, Aunt Eller, we hain't furriners.

My pappy and mammy was *both* borned in Indian Territory! Why, I'm jist plumb full of Indian blood myself.

Me, too! And I c'n prove it!

Her call here is not to a "court of insiders" (Most's description of the parallel scene in *Oklahoma!* [84]) but to a court of outsiders: their allegiance is not to the United States.

The early twentieth century was the age of assimilation in Indian country—and such fraternal acceptance of and assimilation with the white settlers is reflected not only in Riggs's writing but also in that of his contemporary the Cherokee novelist John Oskison (*Wild Harvest* [1925], *Black Jack Davy* [1926], and *Brothers Three* [1935]). Mixed-blood Cherokees during that era occupied a position similar to that of the Jews since both groups had ambiguous external markers of race, and thus it is not surprising that Rodgers and Hammerstein discovered in Riggs's play a fruitful impetus to their creative talents. But at a time when the question of cultural appropriation is often at issue, critics should beware of impressing the cultural production of one ethnicity into the service of another without giving credit where it is due.

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To the Editor:

Andrea Most charges in her abstract that *Oklahoma!* "exemplifies how ethnic outsiders [Hammerstein and Rodgers were of Jewish descent] demonized a racial other in an effort to be considered white and thus to be included in the utopian (theatrical) community of America." In her article she is more explicit: "Jewish desire to assimilate and escape discrimination is thus expressed in this musical at the expense of blacks." The validity of these charges turns on Most's understanding of Jud Fry, a white hired farmhand who in her view "embodies many of the characteristics and functions of the black man in racist thinking" (86). Certainly Jud is in many ways "other" than the norm celebrated in *Oklahoma!* Most rightly observes of Jud that "[t]his fiercely individualistic, primitively sexual, and lawless presence is an obstacle to the white utopian vision of love, marriage, and statehood that *Oklahoma!* promotes." The issue is whether Jud is depicted with "racial undertones" (83).

Most seeks to bring out the "submerged [. . .] racial motifs" connected to Jud by citing a number of similarities between him and "the stereotypical black man" (82). Jud's skin is dark, "bullet-colored"; his sexuality is threatening to Laurey, the heroine, who compares him to an animal; he lives in a smokehouse (recalling to Most "late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century derisive references to African Americans as *smokies*"); in the rafter of the smokehouse is a "good strong hook" (evoking for Most "images of black men lynched for supposedly assaulting white women" [83]). In context, however, no one of these similarities is specifically racial. For example, Curly, the cowpuncher, does not have lynching in mind when he refers to the hook in the rafter; he suggests that his rival for Laurey might hang himself from it. The only explicit connection of Jud with blacks comes in a stage direction for the duet "Pore Jud Is Daid." Invited by Curly to imagine his own funeral, Jud is so moved by Curly's (mock) eulogy that he chimes in with his own praise, "like a Negro at a revivalist meeting" (83). Surely the humor here depends on our awareness that Jud, in his self-pity, is temporarily out of character, the comparison to a fervent Negro serving to point a contrast rather than a genuine resemblance.

All the above instances except the last one derive from the musical's source, Lynn Riggs's 1931 play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, a fact that Most does not acknowledge. Rodgers and Hammerstein are of course accountable for what they chose to include from their source, but in weighing their intentions it is worth distinguishing what they borrowed, invented, and omitted. When Laurey expresses her revulsion for and fear of Jud, the musical omits her reference in the play to "[s]ump'n black a-pilin' up" in him (40). Also gone from the musical are the play's casual references to "niggers" (32, 53, 140).

In plot the chief difference between the musical and the play has to do with the informal trial and exoneration of Curly, after Jud falls fatally on his own knife while the two fight over Laurey. This violation of due process reminds Most "of the times in American history when a white man (or mob) could kill a black man with impunity" (84). Yet Curly is clearly innocent, and it seems unlikely Rodgers and Hammerstein would wish, even subliminally, to invoke the spirit of a lynch mob at this point in their finale, where, as Most observes, the atmosphere is lighthearted and celebratory.

From the evidence presented, I thus find that Most's claim that Jud is an "unassimilable, [. . .] racially defined 'dark' man" should be regarded as unproved (81). Yet isn't it to be expected that a "submerged" motif would be inexplicit, hinted at rather than spelled out? If so, Most's way of regarding Jud should not run counter to other,

more demonstrable aspects of his presentation. Yet Most herself has an excellent passage on how Jud “is associated not with ‘black’ entertainment forms in the play but with elite European performance genres” (86). Furthermore, I would dispute her view that Jud “will never be able to assimilate into the community” (83). As Curly tells him, he *could* change his ways and join the community if he would. His rejection is not the result of prejudice against him because of social circumstances outside his control but is due to his own willful and objectionable conduct. Jud is only one of the rugged individuals in the musical who at first resist subordinating their freedom to the general good—as Most well shows, the often joyous conversion of such characters is what the musical is about. But only Jud refuses to change.

The second part of Most’s charges against Rodgers and Hammerstein is that by demonizing Jud’s alleged blackness, they hope to win acceptance from their white audiences for themselves and other Jews and that Ali Hakim, the immigrant peddler, is their representative “assimilable white ethnic” (86). Ali does not seem a likely candidate for that assignment, however, since—very much the traveling salesman—he spends considerable time extricating himself from commitment to Ado Annie, and when he does join the community it is only because of a shotgun wedding to another farmer’s daughter, the insufferable Gertie, who has “decided he orta settle down in Bushyhead and run Papa’s store”; at his final entry, he is “dejected, sheepish, dispirited, a ghost of the man he was” (*Six Plays by Rodgers and Hammerstein* [New York: Random, 1955] 78). Is this the kind of assimilation Most thinks Rodgers and Hammerstein so much desire? Ali’s relationship with Jud is not more than a secondary consideration. Most exaggerates its importance, as when, without cited evidence, she claims that Ali fears that others will find in him the “dark qualities” embodied in Jud, who “reminds him of the possibility of exposure and exclusion” (86).

I conclude therefore that the racial and ethnic dynamic Most outlines is not “submerged” in *Oklahoma!* but nonexistent.

By the way, in the Hirschfeld cartoon Most reprints, she identifies the figure at the bottom as Jud, finding in his depiction “‘racial’ facial features” (87). The figure, however, does not much resemble Howard da Silva, the original Jud, who later starred as Ben Franklin in *1776*. Instead, the depicted costume looks like Curly’s dress—loose collar, flowing shirt, and distinctive dark hat with white edging—and the facial features, allowing for a caricaturist’s exaggeration, closely resemble those of Alfred Drake, who originated the role of Curly. In *OK!: The Story of Oklahoma!* (New York: Grove, 1993), Max Wilk

prints pictures of Drake’s Curly in profile that might have been models for the cartoon (214, 220).

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Reply:

I appreciate the attention Sandra K. Baringer and Robert Hapgood give to the play on which *Oklahoma!* was based, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, by Lynn Riggs. I thank Baringer for her observation that Riggs’s Cherokee background and the question of assimilation in Indian country offer a fascinating backdrop to the later version of the play by Rodgers and Hammerstein. The fact that Rodgers and Hammerstein changed the text to celebrate not Indian nationhood but American nationalism seems to support my argument that they chose to define a white American community in the musical.

Hapgood contends that nearly all the racial motifs relating to Jud that I describe in my article are derived from *Green Grow the Lilacs*, and hence he implies that they cannot necessarily be ascribed to Rodgers and Hammerstein. Yet in his examples, Hapgood overlooks the main thrust of my argument, which focuses on the musical numbers (clearly inserted by Rodgers and Hammerstein) and on the relation of the numbers to the realist text. As I maintain in my article, each character’s role within the stage community is determined in relation to the musical numbers. The ethnically defined characters, I argue, are the most comfortable with performance—song and dance—while the characters who are racially and essentially defined are unable to join in the communal celebration.

Hapgood furthermore states that the rejection of Jud in the play is the result not of prejudice but simply of Jud’s “objectionable conduct.” If Jud would just be nicer, Hapgood implies, the members of the community would willingly accept him the way they do Ado Annie. However, a close examination of *Oklahoma!* reveals that Jud does nothing objectionable throughout the first act of the play, yet he is hated on sight nonetheless. Immediately after learning that Jud has a crush on Laurey, Curly begins to slander him, calling him “that bullet-colored, growly man.” Aunt Eller leaps to Jud’s defense, chastising Curly: “Now don’t you go and say nuthin’ agin’ him! He’s the best hired hand I ever had. Jist about runs the farm by hisself” (17). Jud is a hard worker who has been ostracized by the community for reasons that are never made clear (and that I contend are the mark of prejudice against a racial outsider). In the first act, Laurey plays with his affections, letting him take her to the dance only