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Unruly Excess: Labor, Race, and *The Pajama Game*

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes *The Pajama Game* (George Abbott and Stanley Donen, 1957), a film musical that superficially adheres to the political, ideological, and stylistic conservatism of the early Cold War era. I argue that moments of excess, or instances that serve no narrative or character-related function, appear through the presence of the Pepsi-Cola brand and the musical number "Steam Heat." I suggest that these extraneous elements had radical histories, with ties to the communist and activist movements of the 1930s. As a result, they transform this all-white, McCarthy-era text into one that resonated with both mainstream and marginalized audiences.

INTRODUCTION

Given its less than auspicious beginnings, one might wonder how *The Pajama Game* (George Abbott and Stanley Donen, 1957) ever made it to the big screen. Debuting during a moment when public interest in movie musicals began to wane, *The Pajama Game* was a risk for Warner Bros.—a risk that the studio tried hard to minimize through strategic penny pinching: adapting an already popular Broadway hit rather than investing in an original script, forgoing stereophonic sound in order to save on production costs, and filming as quickly as possible. As director Stanley Donen claimed, "The picture was made in something like just under six weeks, because the studio didn't care if it was made or not."[1] More damning than the genre or the budget, however, was the film's seemingly left-leaning subject matter during a staunchly conservative era. Dryly dubbed "Romeo and Juliet in a pajama factory," the

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1   Stephen M. Silverman, *Dancing on the Ceiling: Stanley Donen and His Movies* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 248.

film's central conflict arises when unmet demands for a seven-and-a-half-cent raise by workers at the Sleeptite Pajama Factory strain the budding romance between union leader Babe (Doris Day) and the new superintendent Sid (John Raitt).[2] Like most movie musicals, a series of song-and-dance routines—in this instance about love, labor, and wages—guide us predictably toward the marriage both of the two protagonists and of their opposing ends of the labor dispute.[3] Throughout, *The Pajama Game* designates the union members and their shop steward heroine as lovably antiauthoritarian characters, whose feisty resilience (not to mention catchy songs) makes them endearing protagonists. The film's sympathetic representation of labor activism seemed destined to alienate audiences and critics in the postwar period—a notoriously pro-business era in which the US government vilified collective action as communist and undercut unions through legislation such as the Taft-Hartley Act (1947).[4]

Yet when *The Pajama Game* debuted just before Labor Day in 1957, reviewers barely noted its politics. Even the usually cantankerous *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther wrote, "[I]s [it] good? The answer is simple: It's as good as it was on the stage, which was quite good enough for many thousand happy customers."[5] Given its early Cold War context, how did this labor-centric film receive such benign reviews? The answer is twofold. First, and most obvious, is that the film pays lip service to the union members' dignity while ultimately reinforcing the political conventions already in place. A spectator might identify with the union's plight, but it is the management that benefits most from the film's final resolution, which grants workers the seven-and-a-half-cent raise as long as they do not seek retroactive pay. Amid the celebratory cheers of "We've won!" by Babe and her peers, it is easy to forget the plot machinations that led to this moment: namely, Sid's discovery that the factory owner, Myron Hasler (Ralph Dunn), had accounted for the workers' raise in the ledgers months ago and had been swindling the extra money. In the end, Hasler escapes punishment, keeps the stolen wages, and remains in his position of power, while the union remains ignorant of his crime. *The Pajama Game*'s triumphant ending therefore upholds capitalist individualism under the guise of collective gain.

2   Hal Prince, interview by Theodore S. Chapin, May 10, 2017, NCOW418, Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

3   As Rick Altman famously argued, the musical genre maps broader binaries—such as labor and management—onto the main couple, such that their marriage at the end of the film signals the resolution of these previously unresolved social issues. Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 16–58.

4   See Lisa Phillips, *A Renegade Union: Interracial Organizing and Labor Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 102–106.

5   Bosley Crowther, "Screen: 'Pajama Game' at Music Hall; Stage Hit Re-Created as Tuneful Film," *New York Times*, August 30, 1957, https://www.nytimes .com/1957/08/30/archives/screen-pajama-game-at-music-hall-stage-hit -recreated-as-tuneful.html. While the mainstream press did not register the film's pro-labor bent, publications such as *Racine Labor* praised it for its pro-union politics. See "At Last! A Decent Labor Movie," *Racine Labor*, August 9, 1957, box 2, folder 658A, *Pajama Game* files, Warner Bros. Archive, University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts (hereafter WBA).

But the other reason for *The Pajama Game*'s mainstream acceptance is how well it channels its most radical impulses into unexpected, nearly unde-tectable places. In what follows, I argue not that the film is devoid of polit-ical content, but rather that its most risky, pro-labor sentiments live within diegetic elements that mainstream audiences dismissed as excessive, tangen-tial, and distracting to the plot. *The Pajama Game* thus spoke to postwar spec-tators on two levels. For mainstream audiences, it offered a "good enough" all-white romantic romp.[6] But for other viewers—accustomed to their own erasure onscreen and used to reading popular texts against the grain—its excesses advanced an alternative message that forcefully challenged the film's surface-level meaning.

My argument rests on two case studies. The first explores the presence of Pepsi-Cola in the mise-en-scène and the brand's historical ties to African American and working-class consumers. The second focuses on the famous "Steam Heat" number, choreographed by then-newcomer Bob Fosse, and its pointed references to dance and labor history. At first, it may seem that the only similarity between a detail in the set design and an empty musical spectacle is their shared irrelevance to the narrative. However, in tracing these moments' lives outside of the film, we can begin to make sense of the role they both play in crafting *The Pajama Game*'s counternarrative, which highlights Black American experience, cross-racial alliances, and Depression-era labor politics.

THE MATTER OF EXCESS

As a dominant cultural system, classical Hollywood appears as a completely natural, and often the only logical, manner of screen representation. Con-tinuity editing, character-driven stories, and especially tightly constructed, causal narratives guarantee immediate legibility to indoctrinated viewers.[7] However, "outside these structures," as Kristin Thompson notes, "lie those aspects of the work which are not contained by its unifying forces—the 'excess.'"[8] As she argues, some shots and material details stubbornly escape full integration and therefore expose the "disturbing rough parts" of an otherwise seamless, homogenous text.[9] When not pressed into the service of narrative, such instances become, borrowing from Deborah Linderman's work, "sites of alterity"—a locus of many possible interpretations that can act as "countertextual, interruptive locutions," or spaces in which alternative, unsanctioned meaning can emerge.[10] In both of the case studies that follow, viewers are briefly removed from the narrative flow and forced to recognize

6   Crowther, "Screen: 'Pajama Game.'"
7   Kristin Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ide-ology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 131, 140; and Deborah Linderman, "Uncoded Images in the Heterogeneous Text," in Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, 142.
8   Thompson, "Concept of Cinematic Excess," 130.
9   Thompson, 133.
10 Linderman, "Uncoded Images," 144. Thompson also notes this when she argues that excess can provide the viewer with a "counternarrative." Thompson, "Concept of Cinematic Excess," 134.

the film's unjustified excesses—the glow of the Pepsi machine, the enigmatic movements of "Steam Heat"—as independent entities with the agency to complicate *The Pajama Game*'s primary storyline.[11]

Privileging excess challenges more than just the mechanisms of Hollywood storytelling; it also upends rigid ideologies that were born in tandem with classical conventions. As early filmmakers developed the language of genre, continuity, and narrative clarity, the industry coalesced around deeply exclusionary practices. Anxieties about Southern boycotts confined Black actors to bit roles or excluded them from the screen entirely; the Production Code set parameters for "appropriate" identities and behaviors, forbidding the screen representation of miscegenation and homosexuality; and institutionalized barriers for women and people of color meant that white men were the primary arbiters of what deserved to be represented and how.[12] Postwar Hollywood mobilized its vast ideological influence to uphold a hegemonic worldview, and the conventions of this same medium determined which cinematic elements "belonged" and which did not.

Exploring excess is, therefore, a political act.[13] What an exclusionary system positions as "excessive"—inessential, unjustifiable, and unadaptable—is, as Linderman claims, the "kind of stuff the text represses, i.e., cannot transform to its own final terms."[14] Like Pepsi and the choreography of "Steam Heat," such excess may take the "form of traces, incomplete and alien simulacra from *other* contexts, undelimited and not integratable by the narrative into the dominant textual matrix."[15] I argue that these excessive "traces . . . from *other* contexts" are the coded resurfacing of the identities and ideologies that the Hollywood system tried to repress or did not have the language to represent. Literary theorist Bill Brown roots this logic in materiality when he argues that the seemingly insignificant physical things at the very margins of the plot—clothing, newspapers, food, and domestic knick-knacks—embody a raw, unfiltered version of history that is "unrecognizable (if not unrepresentable) in our existing historiographic genres."[16] Within this model, excess is not just inessential fluff or extraneous detail, but rather evidence of Hollywood's nervous and incomplete assimilation of an unwieldy outside world.[17] In his study of set design, C. S. Tashiro notes that when an otherwise negligible prop in the background "establish[es] a point of reference far greater than the needs of the nar-

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11   See Roger Cardinal, "Pausing over Peripheral Detail," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 30–31 (1986): 122.

12   This is clear in the works of Manthia Diawara and Laura Mulvey, which demonstrate how the classical system's editing and narrative patterns privilege a white, male subject position. See Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 895; and Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 57–68.

13   Cardinal, "Pausing over Peripheral Detail," 114.

14   Linderman, "Uncoded Images," 145.

15   Linderman, 144.

16   Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economics of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 4.

17   Linderman, "Uncoded Images," 144; and Thompson, "Concept of Cinematic Excess," 131.

rative, it can help to fill the vacant space of the story."[18] For Black, radical feminist, queer, and many other audiences, many vacant spaces are left by the repression of everything that cannot conform to classical Hollywood's restrictive system. Excess fills these voids by restoring the repressed parts of the outside world and serves as a rare point of identification for marginalized viewers. Like queer camp readings, which amplify queer details in otherwise heteronormative films, this tactic of privileging marginalia over the main narrative focus is an active way of writing oneself into an exclusionary text.[19] Excavating and analyzing excess thus has the power to recuperate the people, histories, and narratives that appear only as moments of superfluousness within the film.

This study traces the extra-narrative histories of both Pepsi and "Steam Heat" in an effort to grasp how the outside world shaped *The Pajama Game*'s excesses and how such excess came to bear—at least for some viewers—on the film's accepted, mainstream reading. This approach draws heavily from the work of cultural anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, whose theories on the "social lives" of commodities uncover how an object's status, use, and symbolism may change as it cycles through different communities over time.[20] This method enables us to view excess as we would humans, whose lives are shaped by the political, cultural, and social forces they encounter and whose biographies affect their engagement with every new context.[21]

Throughout its history, many people were quick to pinpoint unnecessary excesses in *The Pajama Game*. Reviews of the film bemoaned the appearance of Pepsi as a cheap plug, while the director of the original Broadway production threatened to cut "Steam Heat" entirely because of its impertinence to the story.[22] Yet both remain in the final film version, dazzling and distracting viewers from the primary action. In drawing together concepts from anthropology, literary criticism, and film theory, I aim to construct a foundation from which to analyze *The Pajama Game*'s excesses, their complex and winding social lives, and the radical meanings they introduced.

18 C. S. Tashiro, *Pretty Pictures: Production Design and the History of Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 8.

19 For an example of a queer reading, see Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, "Pre-Text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 77–85. Similarly, feminists and viewers of color employ strategies for challenging the (often white and male) dominant gaze of Hollywood cinema in order to find pleasure in a system that excludes and misrepresents them. See, for example, bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115–131.

20 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," and Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," both in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5, 64–68.

21 As Petra Lange-Berndt notes, "Clearly materials have agency, they can move as well as act and have a life of their own," in introduction to *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), 16. See also Bill Brown's "Thing Theory," in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 10.

22 "Plots Sneak in Advertising," *Variety*, August 7, 1957, 3; and Sam Wasson, *Fosse* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 96.

BEYOND PRODUCT PLACEMENT

In a memo dated November 26, 1956, Carl Milliken, head of the Warner Bros. Research Department, expressed concern over a particular scene in the script for *The Pajama Game*. He writes:

> In scene 36, page 16, the following dialogue takes place:
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> HASLER: "What right has the Union to run a Coca Cola machine with our electricity?"
>
> It is our general policy, about which Mr. J. L. Warner is quite particular, to avoid this sort of internal advertisement. In other words, we have a firm policy not to mention such a trade name as "Coca-Cola" in dialogue or to show it visually in the props that are used.[23]

For months leading up to this memo, Milliken and his staff had scoured local archives in order to ensure that *The Pajama Game* would be as realistic as possible. Typed notes indicating the style of kitchen cabinets that someone of the characters' social status might have, or whether commercial license plates had "6 numerals or are the first 2 letters," reveal a meticulous attention to realistic detail.[24] Yet the studio's legal parameters banned references to actual businesses or organizations, and Milliken and his research team took this charge seriously.[25] Office memos trace the painstaking process of brainstorming company names that were similar to known brands but different enough to avoid direct reference: "Since there is a Yellow Cab Company in Dubuque, Iowa, I would suggest that we change the name of the cab which has been rented. . . . The following name would be all right: CENTRAL CAB COMPANY."[26]

By the time *The Pajama Game* was released, all references to Coca-Cola had been deleted. Yet instead of replacing the world's most recognizable brand with a generic soda label, or omitting references to soft drinks entirely, Coca-Cola was replaced by its arch competitor, Pepsi-Cola. Great care was taken to reflect this shift: lines of dialogue were adjusted accordingly, and props were coordinated, such that Pepsi bottles litter the tables in the film's social gatherings, workers sip Pepsis during their lunch breaks, and Pepsi vending machines light up the corridors. During an era that valued narrative economy and was wary of "internal advertisement," the film takes every opportunity to highlight this narratively insignificant material detail.

The popular press dismissed the appearance of the name brand as product placement.[27] But this part of the film's production history is compli-

23 Carl Milliken to Frederick Brisson, November 26, 1956, box 1, folder 1016B, *Pajama Game* files, WBA.
24 "Research Record: *Pajama Game*," 1955–1957, 2, 4, box 1, folder 1016B, *Pajama Game* files, WBA.
25 Carl Milliken to Frederick Brisson, January 25, 1956, "Legal Censorship Memorandum," box 1, folder 1016B, *Pajama Game* files, WBA.
26 Carl Milliken to Mal Bert, January 3, 1957, box 1, folder 1016B, *Pajama Game* files, WBA.
27 See "Plots Sneak in Advertising," *Variety*, August 7, 1957, 3.

cated. *The Pajama Game* was released well before product placement became a formalized practice. Far from today's ironclad contracts that designate every aspect of the brand's visibility, product placement during the postwar era was often an ad hoc, informal agreement between company representatives, directors, and publicity managers.[28] As such, the practice was sparsely and often incompletely documented. Since the 1920s, the "tie-up" had been one of the most formal agreements between studios and companies, involving the placement of a brand onscreen and/or an offscreen pitch by the star of the film in exchange for money or free props.[29] There is evidence that this was an important factor in designing *The Pajama Game*'s visual world. Lubin-Weeker, manufacturers of Weldon Pajamas, supplied the sleepwear, fabrics, and factory equipment for the set, in addition to serving as "technical advisor" to the filmmakers.[30] The company then ran special tie-up campaigns using *The Pajama Game* and its stars to promote its products, which also provided extra publicity for the film (Lubin-Weeker even designed a Doris Day pajama in honor of the movie's release).[31] Yet aside from a mention in the opening credits, the Weldon brand name and logo are never touted in the film.[32] Such subtlety was typical in this period: brand names often remained partially or mostly obscured onscreen, which prompted companies to insist on more stringent agreements in future decades.[33] There is some evidence of a similar tie-up for Pepsi, and yet questions abound.[34] Why is Pepsi so prominently displayed in ways that other brands with similar agreements are not? Why is

28 Often, "publicity executives" such as Marty Weiser orchestrated early product placement deals. See Kerry Segrave, *Product Placement in Hollywood Films: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 78; see also Marty Weiser Papers, manuscript files, "Strangers When We Meet," Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library. For a comprehensive review of the history of product placement, see Jay Newell, Charles T. Salmon, and Susan Chang, "The Hidden History of Product Placement," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 50, no. 4 (December 2006): 575–594, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem5004_1. For firsthand accounts of early product placement, including the stigmas against it and the indeterminacy around the inclusion of brand names, see *An Oral History with Richard Kahn, interviewed by Douglas Bell* (Beverly Hills: Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2013), 431; *An Oral History with Leo C. Popkin, Interviewed by Douglas Bell* (Beverly Hills: Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2007), 265–267; and *An Oral History with Eugene Zukor, Interviewed by Douglas Bell* (Beverly Hills: Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 1997), 368–369.

29 Tie-ups were also often referred to as "tie-ins." For a full definition of "tie-ups," see Newell, Salmon, and Chang, "Hidden History," 577, 582.

30 Eric G. Stacey to Red Correll, Leo Lynch, and George Hopkins, October 12, 1955, box 1, folder 1441, *Pajama Game* files, WBA; and Steve Trilling to Mort Blumenstock, Bill Hendricks, Eric Stacey, and Joe Hiatt, October 11, 1955, box 1, folder 1441, *Pajama Game* files, WBA. For "technical advisors," see Frederick Brisson to Irving Cohen, August 8, 1956, box 1, folder 1441, *Pajama Game* files, WBA.

31 "10 National Advertisers to Participate in Promotion Backing 'The Pajama Game,'" *Showmans Trade Review*, August 17, 1957, box 2, folder 658A, *Pajama Game* files, WBA.

32 As noted in Stacey's memo to Correll, Lynch, and Hopkins, October 12, 1955, "this tie-up is being made, but as is our usual practice, we do not intend to advertise this brand either visually or orally." By the following year, a letter to Lubin-Weeker stated that "the studio have granted permission for the 'figure' to appear on the screen innocuously once in a while and at Warner Bros. and our taste and discrimination." Brisson to Cohen, August 8, 1956.

33 See Segrave, *Product Placement*, 114.

34 Steve Trilling to Charles Greenlaw, November 30, 1956, box 1, folder 1441, *Pajama Game* files, WBA.

Pepsi featured at all? Whereas the partnership with Lubin-Weeker was logical because of the pajama factory setting (and because the company provided props for the Broadway version), the partnership with Pepsi was far less straightforward.[35]

If soda were just another prop in *The Pajama Game*, it might as well have been Coca-Cola. Established earlier and with formidable financial means, Coca-Cola had quickly become the American standard, with its elaborately blown glass bottles, unified national advertising campaigns, and overwhelming presence in soda fountains, military bases, and drugstores.[36] "Coke" was virtually synonymous with the term "soft drink," and as a result, it appeared more frequently in novels, plays, and set designs by default, if not by deliberate choice.[37] *The Pajama Game* was therefore doubly likely to feature Coca-Cola, since the line that mentions Coca-Cola vending machines comes directly from the original Broadway script.[38] The studio's initial resistance to using Coca-Cola may have had more to do with internal politics than principle or preference: Joan Crawford, whose early, career-making films were made by Warner Bros., married Pepsi president Alfred Steele in 1955 and had become a valuable spokesperson for the brand.[39] Because of Steele's Hollywood connection, it is perhaps unlikely that *The Pajama Game* would feature his company's prime competitor.[40] Eventually, the matter reached Jack Warner himself, when co-writer, co-director, and producer George Abbott sent a memo, stating, "We are having a good deal of nuisance over a line in the show which was okayed by one department and is now questioned by another. This could be changed if it suits your policy better to 'Pepsi Cola machines' but one line or the other is essential to me since it starts off the scene which would otherwise be dead." Scrawled across the top of the letter is the word "meet!" indicating that a personal conversation about the issue took place but was never documented.[41] The very next day, Steve Trilling (Warner's assistant) sent an interoffice memo instructing Milliken that "in this instance

35 For Broadway partnership with Lubin-Weeker, see Hal Prince to Steve Trilling, August 29, 1955, box 1, folder 1441, *Pajama Game* files, WBA.

36 For Coca-Cola in drugstores and soda fountains, see Tom Dillon interview, May 23, 1984, box 15, The Pepsi Generation Oral History and Documentation Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. For Coca-Cola and its association with the military, see Mark Weiner, "Consumer Culture and Participatory Democracy: The Story of Coca-Cola during World War II," in *Food in the USA: A Reader*, ed. Carole M. Counihan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 123–142.

37 Ernest Dichter, "Progress Report on the Psychological Study of Sales and Advertising Problems of Pepsi-Cola," April 1951, 29–30, Ernest Dichter Papers Collection 2407, box 6, file 107B, Hagley Museum and Library; and George Abbott, Richard Bissell, Richard Adler, and Jerry Ross, *The Pajama Game: A New Musical Comedy* (New York: Random House, 1954), 42.

38 Abbott, Bissell, Adler, and Ross, *Pajama Game*, 42.

39 See Joan Crawford, *My Way of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 101–109.

40 Steele had a sour relationship with Coca-Cola after he had a falling out with CEO Bob Woodruff. Shortly after this, he became the head of Pepsi. Walter Mack interview, December 16, 1985, box 17, The Pepsi Generation Oral History and Documentation Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

41 George Abbott to Jack Warner, November 26, 1956, box 1, folder 2953, *Pajama Game* files, WBA.

it will be okay to use" Pepsi-Cola instead.[42] Although the decision to use Pepsi was deliberate, archives do not offer a definitive reason for the use of one brand over the other, or why—especially when Weldon Pajamas received such limited exposure—so much "nuisance" was raised over what kind of beverage the factory workers preferred.

The lack of explanation for Pepsi's bold presence lends it semantic fluidity and rich signifying possibilities. Regardless of intent, the brand had very specific connotations. Audiences in the 1950s would undoubtedly have been familiar with its postwar identity as a beverage that catered to working-class and African American consumers.[43] Irrespective of what tie-ups were planned or what motives various players had in the debate, Pepsi's extra-narrative social biography sets *The Pajama Game*'s mise-en-scène in productive tension with its all-white narrative.

The brand identity that shaped Pepsi's image throughout the postwar period had its roots in the Great Depression. In 1933, spurred by unprecedented financial constraints, Pepsi began selling its product in bottles that were twice the standard size (established by Coca-Cola as six ounces) but for the same price (five cents), hoping to increase sales. Unable to produce their own uniform bottles, Pepsi repurposed twelve-ounce beer bottles and adopted the slogan, "Twice as much for a nickel."[44] By this time, Coca-Cola's advertising campaigns (featuring Santa Claus and Norman Rockwell paintings) aligned the company with a nostalgic, racially homogenous, and therefore exclusionary national identity.[45] Pepsi, however, with its deep discount and array of secondhand bottles, appealed on both a practical and symbolic level to many underrepresented populations—groups that Coca-Cola purposely neglected. While many of the "all-American" institutions that served Coca-Cola—the armed forces, drugstore counters—remained segregated by race, Pepsi obtained most of its business through the take-home market.[46] While Coca-Cola dominated sales to white Americans, Pepsi focused on working-class and Black consumers, instituting production lines for Black workers by the late 1930s and initiating a number of landmark changes throughout the 1940s: establishing a Black traveling sales team, running advertising campaigns—some of the first to feature non-caricatured images of middle-class African Americans—in *Ebony* and other Black publications, and sponsoring a number of college scholarships and internship programs

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42 For personnel list, see "WB Personnel," accessed December 6, 2021, https:// warnerbrosarchives.wordpress.com/home/about/wb-history/wb-personnel/. Steve Trilling to Carl Milliken, November 27, 1956, box 1, folder 1016B, *Pajama Game* files, WBA.

43 Harvey Russell interview, November 15, 1984, box 18, The Pepsi Generation Oral History and Documentation Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

44 Mack interview, December 16, 1985; Bob Stoddard, *The Big Nickel Drink: The Pepsi-Cola Story and a Lot More* (Claremont, CA: Double Dot Enterprises, 2003), 3; John Soughan interview, November 20, 1984, The Pepsi Generation Oral History and Documentation Collection, box 18, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

45 See Mark Pendergrast, *For God, Country and Coca-Cola: The Definitive History of the Great American Soft Drink and the Company That Makes It*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 246.

46 Dillon interview, May 23, 1984.

open to African American students.[47] In 1962, Pepsi, after dropping the "-Cola" in 1961, promoted Harvey C. Russell Jr. to vice president of the Special Markets Division, making him the first African American vice president of a major international corporation.[48] By contrast, Coca-Cola did not begin to seriously address the African American market until the 1950s: it ran its first advertisements in Black publications and began to feature African American athletes in advertisements in 1951. One of the first Black women (Mary Alexander) appeared in a Coca-Cola advertisement in 1955.[49] And a decade later, before the company featured a Black celebrity in its mainstream television ads for the first time.[50] For many years, the company claimed that it would risk losing that 10 percent of the market in order to keep its most loyal (white) consumer base.[51]

Despite its apparent progressiveness, Pepsi's efforts to target the African American community were limited and flawed: its production lines were not integrated, and Black salespeople were expected to sell primarily to Black consumers.[52] Yet its business practices took the first tentative steps toward greater equality in the workforce. This fact was not lost on African American workers and consumers, who began to see soda as a battleground in their struggle for racial equality. In 1950, when Coca-Cola's then-president Robert W. Woodruff declared his support for a white supremacist senator, Black Pepsi employees participated in the protest against the company.[53] Later that year, when a Coca-Cola executive urged President Harry S. Truman's administration to lessen its civil rights work, organized groups such as the National Fair Play Committee initiated a national boycott. Criticizing Coca-Cola for its racist practices and unfair employment policies, the committee openly associated Coca-Cola with exclusionary whiteness.[54] In doing so, it conflated soda with civil rights and urged consumers to consider social justice issues when making their beverage choice.

This historical context allows Pepsi to become a storytelling device, deployed as a reminder of the role that race played in the American labor struggle. Pepsi serves as the silent specter of this elided history in many key scenes. In the scene when Babe and Sid first meet, for instance, the Pepsi vending machine is like a third character in the frame, on the same side of

47 For production lines, see Mack interview, December 16, 1985. For a detailed account of the formation and wide-ranging work of the sales team (the initial one in 1940 and the postwar team that began in 1947), see Stephanie Capparell, *The Real Pepsi Challenge: How One Pioneering Company Broke Color Barriers in 1940s American Business* (New York: Wall Street Journal Books, 2007). For more information on Pepsi's non-caricatured advertisements, see Capparell, 113–129. And for scholarships for African American students, see Russell interview, November 15, 1984.

48 Russell interview, November 15, 1984.

49 Capparell, *Real Pepsi Challenge*, 205, 248; "The Most Important Events in the History of the Coca Cola Company in the Years 1950 through 1959," Coca-Cola Great Britain, accessed December 14, 2021, https://www.coca-cola.co.uk/our-business /history/1950s; and Brian Braiker, "How Mary Alexander Became Coke's First Black Female Model," *AdAge*, February 21, 2019, https://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy /real-thing/316673.

50 Pendergrast, *For God*, 267.

51 Russell interview, November 15, 1984.

52 Capparell, *Real Pepsi Challenge*, 40.

53 Capparell, 179–180.

54 Capparell, 201–203.

the banister as Babe, and sporting the same colors as her smock (see Figure 1). Shortly thereafter, the president of the union grips a bottle of Pepsi in his fist as he rails against the company's unjust wages (see Figure 2). In this light, the much-contested line spoken by the company owner, "What right does the union have to run their Pepsi machine with our electricity?" comes as little surprise: the capitalist villain speaks of the union and Pepsi in the same breath, and both are a bother.

Throughout the 1950s, Pepsi cycled through a number of campaigns. Steele oversaw a series of changes intended to make the company brand more sophisticated, from revising the bottle design and reducing the sugar content of the syrup to debuting "the Sociables" campaign, in which couples in ball gowns and tuxedos pulled Pepsi from sterling silver ice buckets.[55] Crawford was inseparable from the brand during this period. However, her glamour as a Hollywood movie star, as well as her blackface appearance in the 1953 film *Torch Song* (Charles Walters), clashed with the working-class and race-conscious reputation of the brand. Some of the company's initiatives, such as "the Sociables," flopped, and the fumbling trial and errors of this era reflected the challenge of trying to shift Pepsi's brand image without losing its historical consumer base.[56] By the end of the decade, studies revealed that consumers viewed Pepsi as "democratic," "every day," and "friendly," suggesting that its Depression-era connotations remained, albeit in a less political form.[57]

Thus, in the 1950s, Pepsi's continued availability in segregated, underserved communities coincided with its growing appeal to the mainstream, white market, uniting consumers across social boundaries.[58] But for many, the brand's progressive history remained a distinguishing feature, echoed in the very materiality of the product. Although the elegant "swirl" bottle design would help revolutionize the brand's image in 1958, the version on the market during *The Pajama Game*'s release still carried much of its Depression-era, beer bottle bulkiness.[59] In this regard, Pepsi lends realism to the mise-en-scène but also gestures toward another type of verisimilitude: reminding viewers of the labor movement's cross-racial solidarity, which whitewashing in postwar Hollywood tried to forget.

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55 Marketing executive John Toigo wrote a mission statement titled "The Escape from Poverty" when he was hired by Steele in the 1950s; for this, the bottle design, and the efforts to make Pepsi "lighter," see Philip Hinerfeld interview, November 7, 1984, The Pepsi Generation Oral History and Documentation Collection, box 16, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. For lowering the sugar content of Pepsi, see Stoddard, *Big Nickel Drink,* 20. For the Sociables, see Dillon interview, May 23, 1984; and John Soughan interview, November 20, 1984.

56 For "the Sociables" failure, see Soughan interview, November 20, 1984.

57 Ernest Dichter, "Testing of Five Soft Drink Ads, submitted to Norman Craig and Kummel, Inc.," March 1959, 6, 25, collection 2407, box 6, folder 107F, Hagley Museum and Library.

58 Eventually, it would still be another seven years before the "Pepsi Generation" campaign in 1964 completely replaced the brand's raced and classed connotations with the image of youthful rebellion. See Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 6–8.

59 For a discussion of the "clumsy" Pepsi bottle shape, see Dichter, "Progress Report," 45; see also Milward Martin, *Twelve Full Ounces* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962), 130; and Stoddard, *Big Nickel Drink*, 30–31. Note that by the 1950s, the eight-ounce bottle became standard. Capparell, *Real Pepsi Challenge*, 231.

Figure 1. Babe (Doris Day) and Sid (John Raitt) disagree by the glow of the Pepsi machine in *The Pajama Game* (Warner Bros., 1957).

Figure 2. The president of the union (Jack Straw) grips a bottle of Pepsi as he criticizes the company's unfair wages in *The Pajama Game* (Warner Bros., 1957).

"I GUESS YOU'VE JUST GOTTA BE ON A TEAM."

By bringing people of color into the workers' fight, Pepsi's presence in *The Pajama Game* evokes a particularly generative era of labor history, when inter-racial collaboration within unions spiked and workers' rights became synonymous with civil rights. The Depression era witnessed an influx of workers of color into unions and the founding of organizations such as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which directly benefited many Black and Latino laborers.[60] Betrayed by the capitalist system, many white workers in the 1930s recognized that financial ruin and inequity cut across racial lines. As union leader Arthur Osman claimed, the white working class began to see African Americans' oppression as "reflections of [their] own struggles."[61] But by the 1950s—the era in which *The Pajama Game* was filmed and is set—such gestures toward solidarity, collective sacrifice, and social justice faded in favor of a pro-business and free enterprise attitude.[62] At the same time, government officials such as Senator Joseph McCarthy and director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation J. Edgar Hoover deemed the Civil Rights Movement full of communist sympathizers who sought to spark discontent with the American way of life.[63] With their privileging of workers' rights over business interests and efforts to build cross-racial coalitions, integrationist unions quickly became a target of the American government's suspicion.[64] The more pro-labor federal policies of the 1930s were thus replaced in the postwar era by a fiercely anticommunist campaign and legislation that decimated union

60 The CIO formed in 1935 as a national organization for unskilled, industrial workers who were alienated by the American Federation of Labor's (AFL) privileging of white, skilled craft workers. Since many Black and Latino workers were semi- and unskilled laborers in industrial positions, the founding of the CIO greatly diversified the labor movement. Phillips, *Renegade Union*, 32, 36; Robert Laurentz, "Racial/Ethnic Conflict in the New York City Garment Industry, 1933–1980" (PhD diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 1980), 204; Robert H. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America since 1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 115, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkkh1.8. In the late 1920s, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) also worked to increase Black membership, largely in response to competing unions that were recruiting Black workers, and in the early 1930s, the ILGWU recruited thousands of Black and Puerto Rican members. Laurentz, "Racial/Ethnic Conflict," 93, 123.

61 Phillips, *Renegade Union*, 45. In spite of this, cross-racial unity during the Depression was not always easy in practice: many African American workers mistrusted unions, which had long histories of racial discrimination; at the same time, many ethnic white workers felt that they were in competition with Black workers for certain segments of the labor market. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 113–115. As Laurentz outlines in his study of the New York City garment industry, the ILGWU built an image of racial progressiveness in the 1930s and 1940s, even though it regularly denied workers of color the same opportunities as their white counterparts. Laurentz, "Racial/Ethnic Conflict," 129, 163–164, 213–225.

62 Phillips, *Renegade Union*, 106.

63 On Hoover, see Michael K. Honey, *To the Promised Land: Martin Luther King and the Fight for Economic Justice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 67–68; on McCarthy, see Honey, 34. Racial justice, just like labor justice, was a major part of communism in the United States. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict, 1919–1990* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 1–2. Many segregationists therefore believed that the fight for civil rights was part of a Soviet master plot against capitalism. Honey, *To the Promised Land*, 53.

64 By the 1950s, unions (particularly those affiliated with the CIO) were subject to federal scrutiny and anticommunist congressional subcommittee hearings. Phillips, *Renegade Union*, 91, 104–105.

strength.[65] Organizations that once advocated for workers of color fell in line with national anticommunist sentiment.[66] Within this political context, it is not difficult to see why *The Pajama Game* features an all-white cast. Aided by Pepsi's introduction of race into Sleeptite's struggle, however, various details throughout the film celebrate Depression-era labor politics, further distinguishing the film from the conservatism of its own era.

The Pajama Game's Pepsi references allude to the cross-racial identification that characterized parts of the American labor movement, and the garment industry in particular. Clothing manufacturing has long relied on the most vulnerable populations. Major de-skilling of the garment industry in the early twentieth century saw apprenticed male tailors replaced with throngs of unskilled female laborers (and later, workers of color) completing "section work" for minuscule compensation.[67] Changing fashions kept demand high, and the proliferation of garment factories meant that competition drove companies to cut labor costs whenever possible.[68]

All these factors led to the strong activist history of garment work in the United States and the industry's complex engagement with race. Some of the most significant strikes in history were in response to the now-notorious conditions of garment factories. Long hours and low pay were common, but so were sexual violence from male foremen and the hawkish oversight of women's time and bodies: covering the clock so that workers could not keep track of time, monitoring bathroom breaks, charging women for broken needles and the use of electricity to run their own machines.[69] These are historical realities that reframe some of the film's lighter moments, such as the "Racing with the Clock" number in which the foreman (Eddie Foy) lords over workers, who sing in robotic counterpoint, "can't waste time," to his increasingly frenzied demands that they "hurry up!" By the end of the scene, both sound and image are so hyperbolically sped up that everything dissolves into a maniacal blur.

Recognizing their precarious position, garment workers organized to form the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) in 1900. Although it began as one of the most powerful symbols of organized labor in the twentieth century, the ILGWU began to disenfranchise workers of color,

65 The passing of the Taft-Hartley Act, as Phillips notes, "was devastating to the labor movement" in that it rolled back much of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which provided the foundation for organizations such as the CIO. Taft-Hartley favored business interests, undermined many of the most effective union organization strategies, and required union leaders to declare their anticommunist stance. Many of the tactics that unions used to "organize workers, to pressure employers to abide by contracts, and to desegregate the shops where its members worked" were directly affected. Phillips, *Renegade Union*, 95–96.

66 The CIO merged with the AFL during this time and adopted an anticommunist stance, which contradicted its previous efforts toward racial and ethnic inclusion. As Honey states, "These tragic developments of the Cold War era cut short hopes that civil rights and labor organizing would move forward together." Honey, *To the Promised Land*, 35. For more on the postwar racism of the AFL-CIO, see Herbert Hill, "Racism within Organized Labor: A Report of Five Years of the AFL-CIO, 1955–1960," annual meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, New York, NY, January 3, 1961.

67 Laurentz, "Racial/Ethnic Conflict," 133–134.

68 Laurentz, 45–46.

69 Laurentz, 43–44.

straying away from its initial calls for a working-class revolution.[70] In response to these conditions, a host of new organizations formed in the 1920s and 1930s: the New York City Local 65, the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union (NTWIU), the Trade Union Educational League's needle trades section, and eventually, the CIO.[71] Many of these unions subscribed to the philosophies of the Communist Party, which viewed class struggle as inextricable from the struggle for racial equity and had made racial justice a critical part of its proletariat agenda since its founding in 1919.[72]

The very decision to retain the pajama factory setting (as opposed to a car factory or a television factory) in *The Pajama Game* aligns the protagonists with garment workers' politically active legacy. In addition, it is notable that one significant change—the name of Sleeptite's union—seems to imply its members' progressiveness. Although named the Associated Garment Workers of North America in the Broadway version, the film changes the name to the Amalgamated Shirt and Pajama Workers of America, which more clearly refers to the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), a group formed in 1914 in response to the exclusionary practices of existing unions.[73]

All of these historical details culminate in Babe's devotion to her peers, which stresses the film's ties to 1930s-era, pro-labor values. While featuring the requisite Hollywood love story, *The Pajama Game*'s ensemble musical routines outnumber love songs, with some of the most energetic ones— "Once a Year Day," "Steam Heat," "7 and 1/2 Cents"—devoted to expressing the union's internal cohesion and strength. In response to Sid's declarations of love, Babe vocalizes her devotion to communal, rather than individual, well-being: "I don't know why the union's so important to me, but it is. I guess you've gotta just be on a team!" Her willingness to sacrifice her own romantic desires for the sake of the collective is something that Sid, a non-member, can never understand. In its emphasis on the camaraderie of uncoupled, Pepsi-drinking adults, *The Pajama Game* encourages cross-racial collectivity during a time when such behavior was considered communist. For viewers

70 For ILGWU's early mission, see Laurentz, 47. For the ILGWU's discrimination against workers of color in the 1920s, see Laurentz, 80–104.

71 NYC Local 65 formed in the 1930s and was an alternative to unions such as the ILGWU for the lowest paid garment workers: warehouse workers, clerks, sweepers, and packers. It used an area-based organizing strategy to unite workers across different occupations and fought to desegregate the industries it represented. Phillips, *Renegade Union*, 7–9. The communist-led Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union (NTWIU) formed in the 1920s to offer garment workers of color the advocacy and opportunities that an increasingly conservative ILGWU denied; the Trade Union Educational League's needle trades section (TUEL, also formed in the 1920s) was initially founded as a more radical branch of the ILGWU and was eventually shut down because it advanced leftist politics through strikes and protests. Laurentz, "Racial/Ethnic Conflict," 93, 60–61.

72 Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds*, 1–2. Along with the communist-affiliated NTWIU and the leftist TUEL's needle trades section, the CIO was known for its communist leanings: "[F]rom its outset, the CIO attracted younger, politically engaged activists, many from socialist, communist, or radical union backgrounds." Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*, 112.

73 The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America formed in response to the racism and elitism of the United Garment Workers (part of the AFL); in the mid-1930s, it broke from the AFL to join the more inclusive CIO. Phillips, *Renegade Union*, 22–23. For information on the name change, see Milliken to Brisson, January 25, 1956, "Legal Censorship Memorandum."

who did not consume Pepsi regularly or embrace its politics, *The Pajama Game* remained a just-good-enough romantic comedy. For those who did, there was a deliciously rebellious message that lingered just beneath the surface. This message would eventually materialize through movement, diction, and gesture in the film's most famous musical routine, "Steam Heat."

GETTING HOT

"Steam Heat" is a stage performance at a union meeting by "Gladys and two boys from the [factory] floor" and serves as a rallying cry for union members to "get hot" about their issues. Debuting such Fosse standards as the hip swirl and pump step, it is often cited as the starting point of his legendary career and a highlight of the Broadway and film productions.[74] Its inclusion in both, however, was constantly debated. As a flashy diegetic stage act featuring minor characters, "Steam Heat" bears more resemblance to the "fizzy specialty numbers" that by midcentury were being replaced onstage and in film by routines that were more fully integrated into the narrative action.[75] Abbott, writer-director of both the Broadway and film versions, was known for stressing "clarity of plotting . . . , pacing, and the imperative to cut any song, scene, or dance—regardless of its quality—that slowed a show's momentum."[76] Abbott, at first, cut the number from the stage version, arguing that its tenuous connection to the plot slowed down narrative action. But unconditional support from co-director and choreographer Jerome Robbins, as well as an overwhelmingly positive response from pre-Broadway trial runs, convinced him to put it back in.[77] Its fame onstage then made it nearly impossible for Donen to cut it, though he faced the daunting task of condensing the lengthy Broadway show into the usual Hollywood runtime. As a result, "Steam Heat" is a noticeably unnecessary, if virtuosic, piece in an otherwise rigorously edited film.[78]

It is possible that "Steam Heat" remained in both stage and film versions because of its brilliance. But examining this dance purely in terms of Fosse's genius overlooks its multifaceted ties to labor history. Depression-era labor politics electrify the number in unexpected, penetrating ways, making "Steam Heat" less a "fizzy specialty number" and more of an intentional callback to the union's own past: an era in which workers regularly used dance as

74 See Margery Beddow, "Bob Fosse: Part I: *The Pajama Game*," *Dance Magazine*, September 1992, 52–53; and John Gruen, "Steam Heat Plus Mr. T and Mr. B," *Dance Magazine*, February 1991, 88.

75 Kevin Winkler, *Big Deal: Bob Fosse and Dance in the American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 36. Although it is not possible to offer a full analysis of "Hernando's Hideaway" here, I would like to call attention to the fact that it is also an excessive number (with little narrative justification) performed by the union workers. The number's Latin beat and vaguely North African décor, in addition to the presence of the only person of color in the entire film (the Black child who leads guests into the bar), can be read as further evidence of the white union's association with racial difference.

76 Winkler, 10.

77 "Steam Heat" was initially cut after the New Haven preview, despite a standing ovation, per Wasson, *Fosse*, 96. Because *The Pajama Game* was Fosse's first Broadway musical, writer-director-producer George Abbott had assigned Jerome Robbins as co-choreographer. Winkler, *Big Deal*, 3.

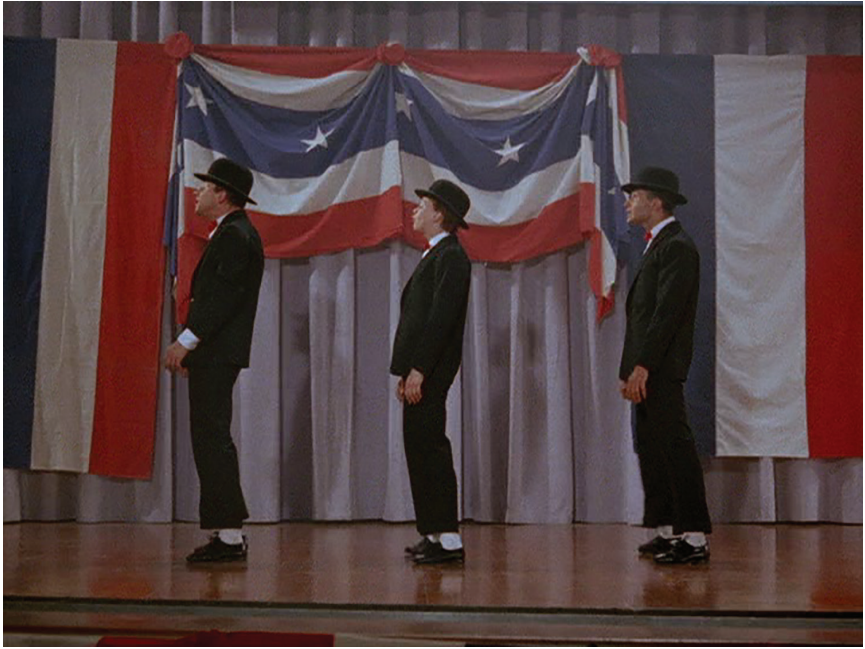78 For comments on shortening the film version, see Silverman, *Dancing on the Ceiling*, 249–250.

Figure 3. Bob Fosse's mechanical choreography first imagines the three dancers as a machine in *The Pajama Game* (Warner Bros., 1957).

a means of protest, and partnerships with Black workers laid a foundation for potential class revolution.[79]

"Steam Heat" expresses the workers' plight through its sounds and movements. Delivered with vocal clicks and hisses—"I've got [click click] ssssteam heat / but I need your love / to keep away the cold"—and accompanied by the dancers' stiff-jointed, staccatoed precision, a song that at first seems apolitical and benign begins to uncannily evoke the mechanical grind of a machine (and more specifically the steam engine, which served as the beating heart of modern industrialization). The way that "Steam Heat" transforms performers into what Robert Emmet Long calls a "hybrid, half human and half machine" reveals the political message beneath this frothy, virtuosic number: that industry's emphasis on uniformity and assembly-line rationality reduces the human worker to a soulless machine (see Figure 3).[80]

These quirky movements and their indictment of capitalism both have strong precedents in the wave of labor-oriented, activist choreography that helped define American dance in the 1930s. Art choreographer Ted Shawn, for instance, debuted *Labor Symphony* in 1934, which critiqued industrialized labor by transforming cast members into human cogs that are swal-

79 For "fizzy specialty number," see Winkler, *Big Deal,* 36.
80 Robert Emmet Long, *Broadway, the Golden Years: Jerome Robbins and the Great Choreographer-Directors, 1940 to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 150.

lowed up by repetitive motion.[81] At the same time, dancers outside of the concert hall began to embrace bodily movement as a tool for teaching and uniting the working classes. A song-and-dance-filled union rally may have seemed like a flimsy premise for a musical number in the 1950s, but in the 1930s, labor unions across the country offered dance classes and performances alongside political discussions as a regular part of their community programming.[82] White dancer-activists such as Edith Segal, Helen Tamiris, Lily Mehlman, and Nadia Chilkovsky passionately developed an accessible movement form called "radical dance," which drew in part from modern dance's movement lexicon while also relying on simple, direct choreography, pantomime, and improvisation.[83] The goal was for workers with no previous training to transition from using their bodies for capitalist production to using them as a tool for expression, protest, and collective action.[84] Throughout the 1930s, radical dance flourished in union halls and at political rallies: Segal choreographed *The Belt Goes Red* (1930), in which workers form an assembly line with their bodies and emerge from it as stiff-legged, glassy-eyed automatons, and pieces such as Jane Dudley's *Strike* (1934) and Segal's *Practice for the Picket Line* (1933) helped workers understand the value of moving as a singular unit while also preparing them for live protests.[85] In 1937, the ILGWU even produced the Broadway musical

81 See Mark Franko, *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 44. See also Julia Foulkes, "Dance Is for American Men: Ted Shawn and the Intersection of Gender, Sexuality, and Nationalism in the 1930s," in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities on and off the Stage*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 125.

82 Franko, *Work of Dance*, 4; and Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928–1942* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 41, 54–55.

83 Julia L. Foulkes, *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 105–110. For the style of radical dance, see Foulkes, 107–108; Graff, *Stepping Left*, 11–13, 29–35; and Franko, *Work of Dance*, 3, 24. Radical and modern dance developed side by side in the 1930s. Radical dance focused on introducing leftist politics through workers' movements (and found venues in union halls and rallies), while modern, concert dance focused on aesthetics and technique and was often performed in formal theatrical venues. Graff, *Stepping Left*, 11. However, as Graff notes, "[T]he two movements creatively coexisted, exchanging audiences, bodies, and ideas. It was not a question of dance *or* politics; it was dance *and* politics." Graff, 13. Radical dance and revolutionary dance have been used interchangeably by dance scholars to refer to this movement style of the 1930s. Dancer-choreographer Jane Dudley coined the term "mass dance" in 1934 to describe radical dance that focused on accessible, communal movement as an expression of solidarity between protesting workers. Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 109–110; and Graff, *Stepping Left*, 42–43. Many of the most well-known practitioners of radical dance in the 1930s were white women who were the children of working-class immigrants. Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 105. Although passionate about racial equity, they often cast other white women in dances about Black subjects and African American oppression. Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 64. Deeply ingrained racism and segregation within the dance world also limited Black participation in leftist dance, although there were some notable exceptions, such as the Modern Negro Dance Group and dancers such as Edna Guy and Alison Burroughs. Manning, 59, 64, 93–94. As Susan Manning argues, "[L]eftist dance supported Negro dance and Negro dancers [but] within distinct parameters." Manning, 58.

84 See Franko, *Work of Dance*, 25.

85 For *The Belt Goes Red*, see Graff, *Stepping Left*, 29, 31. For *Strike*, see Graff, 43, 59; and Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 110. For *Practice for the Picket Line*, see Graff, *Stepping Left*, 43.

Pins and Needles (1937–1940). Although it featured more typical revue-style dancing and singing, it recruited actual garment workers to dramatize the experience of factory labor.[86] Eventually, labor-oriented dance troupes formed, such as the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union Dance Group, the New York Workers International Relief Dance Group, the International Workers Organization Dance Group, and the Workers Dance League, the latter of which sought to make dance "a weapon in the class struggle."[87]

Not all radical dancers were affiliated with the Communist Party, but their work throughout the 1930s adopted a distinctly communist philosophy: first that "movement" was both political and physical but also—and most importantly—that interracial unity and cooperation was essential in the pursuit of economic equality.[88] This is perhaps best exemplified by Segal's *Black and White Workers Solidarity Dance* (1930), which features an African American dancer and a white dancer helping each other up from the floor.[89] Beginning with its machine-like movements, "Steam Heat" resonates deeply with radical dance of the 1930s. The dancers' marked transition into machines serves as a reminder that the history of exploited workers is incomplete without the history of enslaved labor, where people of color were brutally reduced to commodities and exchanged based on what were believed to be quantifiable amounts of productivity and efficiency. Long after emancipation, institutionalized racism kept many African Americans in unskilled, repetitive, and undercompensated jobs. In this light, "Steam Heat" links white and Black workers, producing a hybrid—not only of human and machine but also of the racial division that has historically been mapped onto this binary.

Such context becomes especially important when trying to parse the latter half of the dance, which most directly—and problematically—evokes the history of Black labor. In this part of the routine, the initially minimal vocal simulations of machinery are joined by full orchestral accompaniment. As the music mounts in tempo and volume, a sweeping pickup line pulls the song into a different key and cadence, leaving behind the onomatopoeic "sssteam heat" and replacing it with the discordant shouts of "they told me to shovel more coal in the boiler" and "they told me to pour some more oil in the burner." After a few moments, the accompaniment fades and the performers engage in a call and response of "coal in the boiler" and "no good." Now, rather than simply mime the machine, the dancers directly evoke the humans who have long been regarded as *machine-like*, citing the sounds and movements of those communities that have historically been limited to the most oppressive forms of work. The verbal construction of "*they* told me to . . ." and the response of "no good"

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86 Franko, *Work of Dance*, 136–144.

87 Graff, *Stepping Left*, 41; and Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 107. For the Workers Dance League, see Graff, *Stepping Left*, 7.

88 Many, such as Edith Segal, declared their membership in the American Communist Party (Graff, *Stepping Left*, 26), and many dance groups such as the Workers Dance League openly adhered to a leftist agenda, even if not officially part of the party. Stacey Prickett, "The Workers Dance League," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, September 5, 2016, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781135000356-REM85-1. As Franko argues, "[T]he primary physical practice of 'movement culture,' a euphemism for the culture of the Communist Party, was indubitably 'modern' dance"; see Franko, *Work of Dance*, 3.

89 Graff, *Stepping Left*, 37–38.

Figure 4. Later in the number "Steam Heat," dancers transition into miming the people who have historically been forced into machine-like labor in *The Pajama Game* (Warner Bros., 1957).

speak to the subordination, monotony, and denial of personal gain common to the forms of labor that support a capitalist, industrialist society. Likewise, the rhythmic clapping and call-and-response pattern reflect West African song, which served as an essential means of self-expression and survival for enslaved persons during the antebellum period.[90] Free now from the taut synchronization of the preceding section of the dance, the actors allow their bodies to move in time to the swing beat. As their steps become syncopated and rhythmic, their hands move out freely from the torso, their hips swivel, and their bodies make more concerted contact with the floor—shuffling and stomping the feet, gliding on the knees, tracing circles with the toes (see Figure 4). As dance historian Barbara Glass claims, this increased fluidity, looser body carriage, and hip-centric movement are all examples of the "Africanization" of American dance.[91]

Of course, white actors performing race through gesture and sound invokes a layered and complicated history. Most disturbingly, this section of "Steam Heat" bears unsettling resemblance to blackface minstrelsy, a

90 Barbara Glass, introduction to *When the Spirit Moves: African American Dance in History and Art*, ed. Barbara Glass (Wilberforce, OH: National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, 1999), 10, exhibition catalog.

91 Glass, 8–9; see Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Cultures between the World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 17; see also Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 15.

practice that grew to prominence in the nineteenth century. Blackface emerged from paradox: white performers and audiences wanted to assert their dominance and distance from Blackness while also embodying—temporarily and without consequence—their own fantasies of otherness.[92] The grotesque makeup and performance style of the blackface tradition allowed whites to indulge in unsanctioned, taboo behavior under the guise of impersonating Blackness while also demonstrating their privileged ability to shed this caricature at will.[93] This push-pull of fascination and repulsion was nowhere more charged than among the white working class, which used blackface in the antebellum period as a means of separating themselves from the northern Black workers with whom they were affiliated. Lack of education, poverty, and systemic disenfranchisement linked recent immigrants (mostly Irish) and African Americans, who worked side by side in low-paying and de-skilled jobs, socialized together, and lived in the same neighborhoods.[94] Sharing a similar socioeconomic position, the two groups were similarly maligned by other white Americans—a reflection of the fact that whiteness is more about status and the privilege of inclusion than about skin color.[95] Eventually, white immigrant workers sought greater social status, or what David Roediger, following W. E. B. Du Bois, calls the "wages" of white privilege.[96] Donning blackface and reveling in blackface performance were just some of the ways that white laborers tried to earn such wages.[97] By denouncing and ridiculing a group with which they had long been affiliated, white workers separated themselves from Blackness

92 As Eric Lott and others have argued, blackface is motivated by a toxic combination of not only fear and hate but also love, longing, envy, and anxiety. See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6–7. As David Roediger claims, antebellum white workers secretly admired and envied Black popular culture while also projecting onto Blackness all of the pre-industrial behaviors (indulgence, sexuality) they were supposed to leave behind. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2007), 107, 95–97. That they "admired what they imagined blackness to symbolize and hated themselves for doing so" is what helped found the practice of blackface, which ridicules Black Americans while also allowing participants to inhabit Blackness for a short time. Roediger, 106. See also Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 25.

93 See Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 118–119, for a discussion of this attitude in blackface during the antebellum period; see also Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 34.

94 Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 56–57; and Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 134.

95 Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 133–134.

96 According to Du Bois, ethnic workers earned an unspoken, psychological wage when perceived as white because they could partake in the pleasures and privileges of being in the dominant group. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 11–13.

97 White performers, and the audiences that identified with them, were not the only people to embrace blackface. As David Roediger notes, in the antebellum period, working-class whites blackened their faces for celebrations, public processions, and protests and used the language adapted from minstrelsy ("coon," "buck") in daily parlance. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 97, 104–105. For more on white working-class relationships to blackface, see "Blackface: The Birth of an American Stereotype," National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed December 15, 2021, https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/blackface-birth-american-stereotype; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 117–118; and Robert Nowatzki, "Paddy Jumps Jim Crow: Irish-Americans and Blackface Minstrelsy," *Éire-Ireland* 41, nos. 3 and 4 (Fall/Winter 2006): 173, https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2007.0010.

and aligned themselves with whites in power.[98] Ultimately, these actions sabotaged their own cause, weakening any potential that a racially unified laboring class might have had for collective protest and change.[99]

In a number of ways, "Steam Heat" unmistakably evokes nineteenth-century minstrelsy. Although some scholarship on the number has likened the three dancers to "Chaplinesque tramps," the dilapidated elegance of their costumes—the hems of their slightly ill-fitted suits falling awkwardly above their ankles—also recalls the blackface dandy caricature "Zip Coon," whose attempts and ultimate failure at maintaining white, urban pretenses marked him as a humorous Other.[100] Likewise, the colors of their dress—red bow ties and black suits and hats—mirror the "minstrel" palette, which often consisted of black and red to represent a primitive, cannibalistic impulse.[101] With their exaggerated verbal stylization, bulging eyes, and opened palms (a gesture made familiar by white-gloved minstrel acts), the dancers present a form descended directly from the minstrel stage.

Considering the latter part of "Steam Heat" within the context of the radical, leftist milieu of the Depression, however, complicates this reading. The performance of Blackness through music and movement may have begun on the minstrel stage, but in the 1930s white radical and modern choreographers began to embrace broadly sketched signifiers of racial difference as a means of expressing white workers' shared pain and solidarity with African Americans. Works such as Lester Horton's *Chronicle* (1937) aimed to retell American history and ended with a dramatization of a lynching (the white dancer, Bella Lewitzky, wore a brown veil to signify her affinity with Blackness); Segal's *Scottsboro,* based on the wrongful accusation of the Scottsboro Boys, cast white dancers in blackface; and in *Harmonica Breakdown* (1938), Dudley danced a representation of Black weariness—what dance scholar Ellen Graff calls "a strange, disjointed walk"—to the harmonica music of African American artist Sonny Terry.[102] One of the most (in)famous examples of this racialized performance is *How Long Brethren?* (1937), sponsored by the Federal Dance Project and choreographed by Helen Tamiris, in which white women in black veils dance to spirituals performed by a Black female chorus.[103] Through their movements to songs such as "Pickin' Off de Cotton," "Let's Go to the Buryin'," and "How Long Brethren?" they attempted to express the weight of racial oppression.[104]

98 Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 56–57.

99 Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 13.

100 Long, *Broadway*, 150. For "Zip Coon," see David Pilgrim, "The Coon Caricature," Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, last modified 2012, https://www.ferris.edu /HTMLS/News/jimcrow/coon/.

101 Manthia Diawara, "The Blackface Stereotype," in David Levinthal, *Blackface* (Santa Fe: Arena Editions, 1999), 11, exhibition catalog.

102 For *Chronicle*, see Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 146–147. For *Scottsboro*, see Manning, *Modern Dance*, 64. And for *Harmonica Breakdown*, see Graff, *Stepping Left*, 132–133.

103 Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 140–142.

104 Graff, *Stepping Left*, 94. The Black women singers did not receive credit in the program and were barely visible during performance, as they were positioned on the sides of the stage or in the orchestra pit. Graff, *Stepping Left*, 94–95; and Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 140. Despite this, *How Long Brethren?* ran for forty-two performances and earned Tamiris *Dance Magazine*'s first award for group choreography

Such performances are a manifestation of what Susan Manning refers to as "metaphorical minstrelsy": when "white dancers' bodies made reference to nonwhite subjects . . . present[ing] an abstraction or personification of others—Oriental, Indian, Negro."[105] But this, as Mark Franko states, is fundamentally different from blackface minstrelsy's "derisive mimicry of the Black body."[106] Part of what inspired many radical artists to make justice-oriented work was their own working-class, Jewish, and Eastern European backgrounds, which helped them, as Graff states, "identify with every other person who lacked a place in American mythology."[107] Embodying other races therefore offered radical dancers a means of working through their own feelings of alienation and struggle while also demonstrating their identification and solidarity with other oppressed groups.[108] Of course, the widespread exclusion of actual dancers of color meant that such work continued a long history of commoditizing and appropriating race for white benefit.[109] But as some scholars claim, the dances of Tamiris and her peers must be considered within the context of radical politics, which viewed the white performance of race as an easily legible expression of unity among the oppressed and as representative of communist antiracist ideals.[110] If radical dance was regularly associated with people on the margins of society, pieces such as *How Long Brethren?* represented the kinship that the artists felt with those who faced the height of oppression in America.[111]

It is possible that the visual and aural evocation of race in "Steam Heat" is too egregious to effectively unite the struggle for labor equity and civil rights. Indeed, minstrelsy still hangs heavy in this routine, which at worst uses African American history and aesthetics to motivate white union workers for their own cause. Still, tracing this history of "Steam Heat" brings out its parallels with radical dance, which unions used throughout one of its most inclusive and powerful eras as a means of urging cross-racial solidarity. Much like the presence of Pepsi, these messages were likely more legible to postwar viewers whose own experiences of oppression made them attentive to the

in 1937. Christy Adair, *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 137.

105 Manning, *Modern Dance*, 10.

106 Franko, *Work of Dance*, 91. Here, Franko responds to an earlier article version of Manning's "metaphorical minstrelsy" argument. In her book, Manning clarifies that metaphorical minstrelsy is not equivalent to blackface because it does not engage in mimicry or impersonation. Manning, *Modern Dance*, 10.

107 Graff, *Stepping Left*, 21.

108 For an extensive treatment of white dancers performing race and ethnicity during the 1930s, see Franko, *Work of Dance*, chap. 4, and Manning's discussion of *How Long Brethren?* in *Modern Dance*, 101–113.

109 Such racial segregation was especially pronounced in modern concert dance. Radical dance provided more opportunities for dancers of color, yet many radical dancers still chose to cast only white performers. Manning, *Modern Dance*, 59–60. Segregation also persisted in federally sponsored dance programs of the 1930s; for more on this, see Graff, *Stepping Left*, 95–96.

110 Franko, *Work of Dance*, 90, 93, 10.

111 As Graff notes, "[T]he integrity of Tamiris's purpose still shines through. Tamiris with her working-class Eastern European Jewish background and her progressive politics would have empathized strongly with Negro interests. In a Nordic and Protestant country, she too was 'other,' and perhaps she felt the language of movement was more significant than any difference in skin color." Graff, *Stepping Left*, 97.

parts of radical labor history that the number obliquely revives. The number's clumsy attempts to merge human and machine, white and Black, and past and present perhaps cannot be applauded as antiracist, but they can be related to the flawed antiracist efforts of the Depression era. Tracing the life cycle of the number's performance style enables us to look beyond the stain of minstrelsy and the gloss of Fosse's genius. It is an approach that opens up the possibility that, like Pepsi, "Steam Heat" is evidence of a politics that a postwar, anticommunist Hollywood dared not speak.

CODA

The question of whether *The Pajama Game*'s excesses were intended to imply interracial collaboration is difficult to answer. However, when the musical was first revived on Broadway in 1973, it cast African American actress Barbara McNair as Babe and white actor Hal Linden as Sid and inserted this response by Babe to Sid's request for a date: "It wouldn't work . . . there's a little thing called racial prejudice."[112] By casting an African American woman as the union leader and a white man as the management, this version of *The Pajama Game* seems to carry forth the film's implication that the struggles of the working class were also the struggles of African Americans and that the fight for labor equity was uniquely tied to the fight for racial justice. What is only hinted at in the film through bodily movements, red bow ties, and strategically placed bottles of Pepsi had, in the 1970s, come to the surface.

Analyzing *The Pajama Game*'s cinematic excesses introduces an alternate message for audiences who were also deemed peripheral and excessive. The postwar period was very good at enforcing conformity. The Production Code censored certain types of expression in film, the government silenced dissenters, and those who were in charge of writing history edged out those whose beliefs did not suit their own.[113] But what is consciously repressed in the narrative survives in the radiance of non-narrative, otherwise negligible details. By investigating the layered, complex histories behind film's excessive elements, we come closer to uncovering the unsanctioned double meaning of mainstream texts.

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112 Warren Hoffman, *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 126.

113 This is particularly true with regard to the history of modern dance, which was being written in the 1950s. Anticommunism during this era meant that radical dance was left out of most narratives about the art form, even though it was essential to the development of modern dance. See Graff, *Stepping Left*, 17.