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PUBLIC DEATH:  
LYNCHING DRAMA IN THE YEARS  
OF ITS GENESIS.

1858-1919

by

BARBARA B. LEWIS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2000

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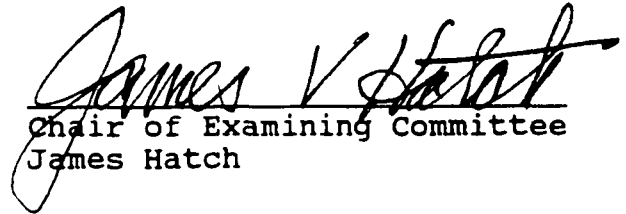
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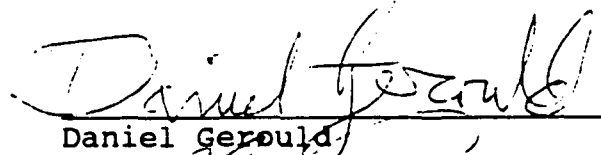
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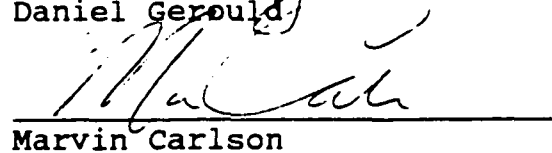
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## Abstract

PUBLIC DEATH: LYNCHING DRAMA  
IN THE YEARS OF ITS GENESIS.

1858-1919

by

Barbara B. Lewis

Adviser: Professor James V. Hatch

Ten lynching dramas are studied in this dissertation. In all ten, written from 1858 through the end of World War I, four elements are included, whether implicitly or explicitly. These four elements are chase, capture, chastisement, and consumption. In Escape (1858), by William Wells Brown, three slaves and a Northern abolitionist, are chased by a lynch mob but not caught, and therefore not consumed. Escape is the only one of the lynching dramas under review in this dissertation in which a lynching—as extralegal capital punishment—is threatened but avoided. All the other plays include a full-fledged lynching, whether in the past or present, and sometimes both. That is the case with The Noose (1919), chronologically the last play studied in this dissertation. In that play which is written by Tracy Mygatt, a hued man is accused of rape and is chased

and captured. This lynching recalls an earlier one that occurred in the same southern town when the mother of the main character was a young girl. Together, these two lynchings chart a line of development in the arc of lynching. The second lynching wave, which became institutionalized around the time of the 1915 release of The Birth of a Nation in Atlanta, adapted itself to technology and was more extensive in its effect than the first, which ensued after the Civil War and was generally local and clandestine. During the 1890s, mass media and technology began to influence the discourse of lynching, and the height of lynching fever was reached. At the same time, the hue had their own newspapers and a number of editors and publishers denounced the lynching onslaught with virulent words. One such editor is the target of a lynching bee in the first lynching drama written by a woman of hue: that play, Rachel (1916), initiated a feminine response in drama to the lynching outrage. The second half of the dissertation addresses the four plays written by women in opposition to the phenomenon of lynching, which, as it became more nationally known through technology, acquired religious connotations of communal feasting and sacrifice.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work has had a long gestation period. In fact, I probably would still be writing it, in Sisyphean fashion, if it were not for the chance comment of a man who responded with a question to my observation that he seemed reticent when it came time to introduce me socially. Did I want to be described as someone who was writing a dissertation, he asked. I realized that since the answer to that question was no, I had to get beyond the apprentice stage in my life. I am grateful to him and to all the others who have pushed, prodded, and assisted me along the way. At the top of that list is my adviser, Dr. James V. Hatch. I would also like to thank the two other members of my committee, Dr. Marvin Carlson and Dr. Daniel Gerould who shepherded me through my doctoral studies with kindness and much-needed insight.

I would be remiss if I did not mention my gratitude toward Joseph Roach, who, at a critical moment in my decision-making process, indicated that my choice of topic was a worthwhile one. Judith Stephens, indefatigable in pioneering the field of lynching drama, humbles me with the warm-hearted encouragement she has consistently shown. As a person and as a scholar, she continues to be an inspiration for me. This is also the time and place to express my appreciation for the patience and support of my dissertation writing group, which included Susan Tenneriello, Shari Troy, and Alisa Roost. Anne Beck and Bevy Rosten, who preceded me at the doctoral bar, have showered me with motivations to keep going, and I am indebted to their friendship.

This was not an easy dissertation to write. Many people thought that I was crazy to take on this subject so full of violence and hatred. I am, or at least I like to think that I am, a person who refrains from any strain of violence, emotional or physical. Why was I drawn to this subject? Did it pick me? I don't know the answer to that question. All I know is that one day, about four years ago, I was browsing in the library and passed a copy machine where I noticed a journal article that some other reader had left behind. That article was about lynching in the aftermath of the Civil War. I was intrigued. I remembered stories that I had learned, after my maternal grandparents had died, about a place where they used to farm. On that land in South Carolina, an uncle told me, when it rained, blood that had soaked into the ground would rise and flow in rivulets. The lynching that had caused streams of blood had claimed the lives of two innocent teenage boys and a teenage girl who was pregnant. After hearing that members of my family knew someone whose lives had been brutally ended out by lynching, that gruesome ritual no longer seemed so distant. I wanted to see its face, know more about its lineaments. I took a trip to the South and started doing some research for a novel in which lynching would figure. I never wrote that novel.

When I saw the journal article more than a decade later, I remembered my curiosity about a time that I could only then touch through words in books and the ringing words of people, no longer living, who had witnessed what my eyes had not seen. They were my heroes and my gods, these ancestors who had suffered and survived on a shoelace and managed to do so with a measure of grace and above all, humanity. I wanted to be able to touch their spirit and give renewed life to their

words, enter into the domain of their feeling. I wanted to join my voice to theirs, to be in the same chorus singing the same song. I wanted somehow to be closer to my grandparents and their neighbors and friends and what they had lived through. This work then is a homage to the unsung lives of my grandparents who were born in the nineteenth century, a time of which I am immeasurably fond, although, like today, it was not a perfect time. But it was the century in which members of my ancestral family gained freedom. In writing this dissertation on the cusp between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I endeavor to merit and extend the freedom that is mine.

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Introduction: *From Slavery to Segregation on the Lynching Trail*

Slavery in the New World was more private than public. Slaves were the private property of individuals, but they were not themselves considered individuals capable of exerting influence on the public domain, but chattel, without public substance. In the Constitution, they were regarded as resembling humans, merely fractional shadows constituting three fifths of a person for representational purposes. They were not recognized legally within nor did they exist largely in the public arena, although they might be seen publicly as they pursued errands for their masters. Often (and certainly after dark), they needed written dispensation to be moving about in the public sphere. It had to be made clear that they were about their master's business. *What I mean by public is that the body is deemed to have recognizable worth; it possesses rights of peerage that safeguard it from unwarranted trespass; it can claim and assert sovereignty over its own affairs as well as over the affairs of others. Public therefore suggests a duality, a public image and a private one, both of which configurations (or masks) are constructed as the maker so desires.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the title of this dissertation, public is used in the sense of public fare (or fair—the celebratory aggregation of a people). All those who were considered worthy in the community could participate in and cause the death of the unworthy, without penalty

Segregation, the racial policy that replaced and secularized slavery in the concluding decades of the nineteenth century, was more public than private, but this increased public inclusion for the former slave came at the cost of chastisement by all who were white.<sup>2</sup> The slave, owned by one, became, after Emancipation, the virtual public property of all those who, through whiteness, possessed the semblance of mastery.

Under the policy of segregation, the former slave was designated a circumscribed area for inclusion in public life. Those who were segregated could not eat, sleep, study, travel, live, worship, or relax in the same places as whites. The wage for limited public involvement was sequestration. The areas where the segregated lived could be invaded with impunity on a moment's notice. What the segregated owned was virtually leased to them. During segregation, a revision of slavery, the body of the former slave was accessible to the eyes of all, it did not possess inherent privacy that would secure it as inviolable. Segregation increased public participation for former slaves, who were no longer technically chattel. Segregation allowed them to move about in public without

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for theft of life. Regularly reenacted, this crime, fictionalized and dramatized as social boon, constituted the ancestral and original sin that conceptualized the community into a sanctified and privileged existence.

2 It is worthwhile to note here that the public presentation of the hued performing themselves on the minstrel, or popular, stage occurred in sizable numbers subsequent to the Civil War. There was an interregnum period, which can be termed carnivalesque, between slavery and segregation. Known as Reconstruction, the period has become historically notorious as a span of years in which the previous rules of racial order were reversed. Former slaves had political power. They could vote and hold local as well as national office. Reconstruction ended in 1876 although it took a few more years to largely erase its effects. Segregation attempted to stamp out the temporary gains achieved during Reconstruction.

authorizing letters, but it demarcated common public space. It pushed former slaves into an ostracized gutter, consigning them to the revised adage, *Better not to be seen or heard, except when summoned.*

Slavery is the ground, the genesis, out of which the character of lynching was born and took shape in America. Extraordinary force is required to keep one part of a population subservient to and separate from another. Think of a river. In order to keep the drops of water terraced away from each other, an enormous and complicated system must be built. The same is true for those people who speak the same language and live in the same place but must be divided, one from the other, by a social and legal architecture that effects a preconceived arrangement.<sup>3</sup> Some antipathies will occur naturally between people; so will some affinities. But any intimacies must be avoided or sacrificed to the structures of differentiation. The utter divorcement of groups of people of the same locale must be continually policed and maintained.

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<sup>3</sup> “[I]n the course of the seventeenth century, the freedom-loving English colonies developed a series of laws and judicial rulings to define the black situation. Beginning in Virginia at the end of the 1630s, laws establishing lifelong African slavery were instituted. They were followed by laws prohibiting black-white intermarriage, laws against the ownership of property by Africans, laws denying blacks all basic political rights (limited as they were among whites at the time). In addition, there were laws against the education of Africans, laws against the assembling of Africans, laws against the ownership of weapons by Africans, laws perpetrating the slavery of their parents to African children, laws forbidding Africans to raise their hands against whites even in self-defense.

Then, besides setting up legal barriers against the entry of black people as self-determining participants into the developing American society, the laws struck another cruel blow of a different kind: they outlawed many rituals connected with African religious practices, including dancing and the use of the drums. In many places they also banned African languages. Thus they attempted to shut black people out from both cultures, to make them wholly dependent neuters.” Vincent Harding, *There Is A River:*

Lynching, the marshaling of extreme might to track people and squelch by mass force any infraction of the norm, was the strong enforcing arm of slavery and of segregation. Through lynching, the outsider, the one who challenged the law and dogma of the community, was made an example for others not to emulate. The public display of cruelty was the prerogative of the punisher and prohibitive for the punished. That refractory creature who dared defiance was deemed a social sinner for whom no discipline or excoriation was too strong. When slaves did not obey or were slow to do their work or took food to augment their meager fare or ran away, they were chastised, humiliated, and usually beaten publicly. Excruciating pain was the penalty for stepping outside the status of the slave, who had no option but servile obedience. Sometimes these public exposures or beatings ended in death, as in the case of the long-suffering Tom in Uncle Tom's Cabin, the most popular nineteenth-century novel and stage presentation, which assumed a multiplicity of dramatic incarnations. As with Tom, what constituted crime on the part of the slave did not have to be grievous. The mentality of lynching presumed guilt in the absence of corroborative evidence. To be a slave was to deserve whatever punishment the hand of the master decided to mete. To lynch was to deanimate, to remove what made life pleasurable. To lynch was to cast into torment. To be lynched was to suffer outside the comfort of sympathy. To be lynched was to be socially orphaned, without recourse. To be lynched was to demonstrate the power of the lyncher(s) and the powerlessness of the lynched.

The arm that wielded the whip or fastened the chain was not alone. It was

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The Black Struggle for Freedom in America (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 27.

buttressed by the power of the slave regime, which was legion. After slavery came to a legal end, many Southerners were embarrassed by the decline in self-evaluation that accompanied defeat. It was perceived that the cause of the downturn in their affairs was the former slave for whom many lives had been lost and who was now expecting great improvement in circumstances, even equality. The status quo to which many whites had become accustomed had to be preserved. The tactics of punishment that had prevailed during slavery escalated. When segregation became national policy in 1896, lynching was already bounding toward its modern temperament, helped greatly by newspapers and railroads. Lynchings were advertised as upcoming events in local newspapers that also reported the macabre details of the most recent lynching and, on occasion, seemed to encourage the lynchers to pursue their handiwork with dispatch.<sup>4</sup> People often traveled to these advertised and trumpeted events by train, and special excursion trains were

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in February 1893, this article appeared in The Chattanooga News: “The atrocious crime that was committed upon the person of Mrs. Mary Moore this morning must have caused the devils in hell to shudder. The inhuman act will be placed in the annals of crime as one of the blackest and most revolting. A brute alone, devoid of any sensibilities excepting those of sensuous frenzy, could have been guilty of the incarnate deed, and if caught, the buzzards should be allowed to tear the flesh from his infernal body. Hanging would be too good for this contemptible villain, who has destroyed a pure woman’s honor and virtue, and probably her life. Since noon, the best citizens of the city have spoken in open condemnation of the affair and a lynching is expected before tomorrow morning. Mrs. Moore was alone in the house this morning ...when she beheld a Negro man about 32 years of age. Like a panther after its prey, the strong brute approached the weak, sick defenseless woman. He placed his hands upon her—a brute without a thought save to further his own hellish designs and passions. Virtue, honor and purity to him were things unknown. The frail little woman was but a willow in his hand, a flower to crush, and he, the brute, to besmirch the godliness of nature and the edict of man. With the demon’s arm about her and with his hand over her mouth, she fell lifeless to the mattress on the floor. Oh, God, draw the veil.” Mark Curriden and Leroy Phillips, Jr., Contempt of Court: The Turn-of-the-Century Lynching

sometimes scheduled to take passengers to the lynching venue. Lynching kept pace with the latest technology. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, movies and telephones and cars guaranteed as well as augmented the appeal of lynching as spectacle and mass event that drew together and consolidated the witnesses and self-appointed executioners into a whorl of unassailable supremacy. The public despising of the lynch victim and the community to which that victim belonged advertised the lack of worth and regard to which the victim and community were entitled. In fact, there was no entitlement whatsoever. The most private and sacred moment in a person's life, his or her death, was made into a matter of public traffic.

As the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, lynching continued to adapt to the times. One evening at the end of the twentieth century, viewers tuned in to their local and national television stations to hear the news of the 1998 dragging decapitation of James Byrd, a man in Texas who had accepted a ride from three white men in a pick-up truck. The recompense for his trust was death. The offense he had committed was being born with his complexion. James Byrd, the victim of racial intolerance, may have died in untimely and brutal fashion on a lonely back road, his body pulled apart and his head severed. But his ordeal was recreated, over and over, for millions of readers of newspapers and magazines and viewers of television. His torture was vivid in the eye of the mind. Collectively, we pictured what had happened. Many of us had thought that lynching was a barbaric ritual of the past that no longer had a place in the modern world. We were wrong. Lynching lives and is breathing and breeding still. It may have

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that Launched 100 Years of Federalism (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999), 45.

relocated to Technology Street, but it is still robust in its more modern form. The suffering of James Byrd was imagined and talked about by countless numbers. Being seen and having what is seen augmented by what is heard and said is the essence of theatre. The word *theatre* originally meant a site for seeing. But the kind of seeing that is theatrical is more than what is perceived by the eye. Theatrical seeing is related to what is seen in common with others, and the impact of the seen on a multitude of people. The Byrd lynching was restaged on the screens of our brains. Lynching is repeated whenever a force of superior institutional power directs its arsenal against an inferior power with little provocation other than the perceived enemy status and visual appearance of the victim. The three men who assaulted Byrd saw themselves as powerful not only because they outnumbered him but because they had whiteness, which they interpreted as privilege, on their side. Byrd was a member of a disempowered group and the three men who dragged him acted like Achilles when he dragged the body of Hector behind his chariot. They were enjoying a sport of victory. They believed that they were members of the empowered class, and were entitled to act as they chose, without observing the respectful limits due to one of equal station. A power differential is key in the definition of lynching. This asymmetry of power is not individual, but institutional. The power derives from the group to which the lyncher is affiliated. The purpose of lynching is didactic. It is intended to rivet the attention and announce supremacy. Lynching enacts an absence of power for the traditional victims of lynching and a presence of power for those who have a history of lynching. Whether or not we want to admit it, lynching is a recognizable figuration of substance, an icon, in our collective pantheon of values.

Not long after the lynching, some firemen in Broad Channel, New York, celebrated Labor Day with a parade. On one of the floats in this raucous parade, a group of white males staged a mock lynching party. They catered to the pleasure of their onlookers by presenting a minstrel version of the Byrd lynching. One fireman blacked up his face and impersonated the lynch victim while the other firemen on the float affected postures of domination. The engagement between the portrayal of lynching on a variety of American stages--ad hoc as well as more permanent--and its actual occurrence on the quotidian stage of life is my concern in this dissertation. This work has been written as theatrical history, as an investigation into the confluence between history and theatre, how what is seen on stage can reflect what is transpiring in the thoroughfare of the public and what that intersection says about the cultural values and beliefs of a society. Lynching has been written about from a number of perspectives, historical and sociological, as well as literary. Only recently is it being discussed as belonging to the realm of theatre and performance.

Two recent texts, one an article and the other an anthology, establish the place of lynching within the context of theatrical presentation.<sup>5</sup> The article, Kirk W. Fuoss'

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5 Judith L. Stephens, the scholar who has done most to promote the genre of lynching drama, published an article approximately a year later than the one written by Fuoss. Fuoss's article, which appeared in African American Review in the winter of 1999, concentrates on lynching dramas written during the Harlem Renaissance. Thanks largely to the pioneering work she did in prior articles and in the Strange Fruit anthology, by the time Stephens published her 1999 article, the idea that theatre and lynching were by no means strange bedfellows was already established. In 1997, Stephens published an article in the Journal of American Drama and Theatre that stated that there was no full-length study devoted to the field of lynching drama. Stephens' article helped to focus my attention on plays about lynching. As a result, I decided not to do what I had originally

“Lynching Performances, Theatres of Violence,” was published in 1999, the penultimate year of the twentieth century. Shortly before the Fuoss article, Kathy Perkins and Judith Stephens edited a collection of plays about lynching that were written by women, Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women; this 1998 anthology proved that the genre of lynching drama existed. The pioneering work to broach lynching within the realm of literature is the one by Trudier Harris, Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals, which was published in 1984. Hazel Carby followed with Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist. Sandra Gunning picks up the discussion from Harris and Carby and expands the field of writers across the demarcations of race in Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912. In this dissertation, I draw from all prior works. Like Fuoss, I am sensitive to the performance aspects within lynching. Like Perkins and Stephens, I am interested in the centrality of women in the evolution of plays that address

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intended, which was to investigate the performance base of lynching as social drama. I chose instead to write a historical study on the development of lynching drama as an American theatrical genre. Stephens and I, however, differ in some important respects. According to Stephens, lynching drama is a twentieth century phenomenon that begins essentially with Thomas Dixon, Jr.’s, The Clansman. I, on the other hand, trace lynching drama back to the antebellum period and credit William Wells Brown, the self-manumitted slave, as the founder of the genre. Stephens acknowledges that Brown mentions lynching in his play, but describes his inclusion of lynching as incidental. In her work, Stephens does not mention The Octoroon (1859) by Dion Boucicault, an Irishman who immigrated to America; The Respectful Prostitute (1946) by Jean Paul Sartre is the only play about lynching by a European that Stephens cites. Stephens remains, to date, the scholar who has written most exhaustively about lynching drama. The appendix to Strange Fruit includes over fifty lynching dramas written between 1906 and 1995. My dissertation seeks to demonstrate that lynching drama is a genre that begins in the antebellum era with the protest writing of William Wells Brown rather than in the first decade of the twentieth century with the apologist (or celebratory) writing of

lynching. Like Harris, Carby, and Gunning, my time period is that vexed span of years that lead from the nineteenth into the twentieth century. Further, my dissertation draws a great deal from history, particularly from Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation, 1890-1940 (New York: Vintage Books, 1998). Like Hale, I am cognizant of and curious about the impact of technology and modernism on the trajectory that lynching takes as it adapts itself from one era and mind set to another. The differences should be enumerated as well. Although I understand that lynching possesses a performative character, that is not my main focus. Nor am I an anthologist. I seek to understand a specific chronological selection of plays about lynching within the context of the times and circumstances out of which they were written and produced. I do not look at these plays only as literature, but as emblems of thought processes and attitudes that are not contained within the covers of a book. They are not strictly historical, in the sense that their particular moment has not passed. Many of the feelings that are articulated in and by these plays still have current resonance.

This dissertation examines the earliest representations of lynching in American plays, which coincide with the transition from the Civil War Era to the onset and conclusion of America's participation in the Great War, the war that was going to end all wars and launch an era of peace. This period was formative for the arts in America. Theatre was not yet replaced as the most important collective art form giving expression and vent to the moods and feelings of the American people. Film, the new artistic kid on the block, was fast gaining ground but television and radio were not yet invented. Also, in

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Dixon.

the years just before and after World War I, female playwrights, some who were hued and one who was not, asserted themselves, dramatically, in the cultural controversy over lynching, taking a decided position against the excesses of the spectacle that lynching had become in the 1890s.

Before I proceed any further, I need to make clear a departure from convention in which I engage throughout this dissertation. I refrain from using the terms *African American* and *black* and *people of color*. These terms and other similar terms of racial designation may appear in the following pages, but only when used by other authors in material that I am quoting or in titles of works on which I am reliant. The reason that I have decided not to invoke the usual epithets is simple. The specter of race has become monstrous in America, and I want to pull away, if at all possible, from routine terminology about race that is qualified and oppositional. After writing at least one draft of several chapters and being disappointed with the result, I realized that part of my dissatisfaction had a linguistic base. The way we racially designate ourselves in this country is polarizing and divisive. We separate ourselves into camps that fly and flaunt the banners of diametrically opposite colors. We thus announce and continue our antagonistic stance through the language we use and the symbols we choose. With such an inherently hostile situation firmly in place, it is very difficult to effect a meeting ground on which the terrain of accommodation is anything but rocky and unequal. Our racial premise is inimical. No wonder that lynching, the public pillorying and killing of the *metaphorically blackened*, takes on so much weight and fraught meaning in our history. In order to write about lynching, I had to distance myself from the familiar.

Before a person is lynched, that person is reduced in humanity. This reduction is engineered partially through language. With words as measure, the person is affixed on an evaluative ladder beneath the rung of human. The potential victim is linguistically set aside, winnowed out from the rest of humanity, which is portrayed linguistically as worthy. Initially, I employed the racial adjectives to which we have all become accustomed. After repeating them time after time, they began to impinge on my comfort. In and of themselves, they may be innocuous. Having no recourse but to use them, I felt psychologically imprisoned, segregated. I understood that to write about this subject that is rife with connotations, I had to wage at least part of my battle in a way that confronted connotations. It was clear to me that we exist in a *cul de sac* of terminology. I decided to advance a linguistic thread to help guide my way out of this labyrinth. The thread that I have used possesses more than one ply. It is polyvalent rather than monovalent. I have commandeered a noun, *hue*, and adapted a past participle, *hued*, to communicate the sense of variety and possibility that I intend. I wanted to disentangle from the givens of the known. New words sometimes take the sting out of old wounds. Some might argue that my experiment in estrangement or voluntary, purposeful alienation serves little end. They may say that *hue* is no different from *color*. I respond by saying that there is a variation understood in the term *hue*, which is not present in the term *color*. And this range or variation is what is appealing to me. Adjectives of race seem to restrict latitude and extension for those so described, instead confining them within a known and sometimes demeaned--at the very least set-aside--category. I wish to steer clear of as many such limitations as possible. I do not claim that I have solved a problem of how to

designate race without pejorative connotation, but I wish to state that I am interested in so doing, and the means I choose is a personal exercise in deconstruction. Whether or not my substitutions succeed is the decision of the individual reader.

Largely through an examination of race, a primary distinguishing element in the history of this country, American drama was taking on a particular indigenous character at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. O'Neill, who built much of his early career around issues of race, was acknowledged as the American master, but before O'Neill there were other dramatists focused on the racial theme. Among them were Torrence, Sheldon, Dixon, Campbell, and William Wells Brown. Boucicault, who was not native-born, has honorary inclusion in this American assembly. This time period also includes the historical acme of the lynching phenomenon in the 1890s, when segregation was reconfiguring slavery, when the country was suffering financial difficulty and there was an increased determination to reverse the political, social, and economic gains that the hued had made during Reconstruction. Lynching, as practiced in the corridor of its greatest currency, was a program of intimidation and mastery primarily directed against former slaves and their descendants. It was essentially a fratricidal war against an unacknowledged brother. The blood of master and slave merged during slavery, as well as subsequently. Therefore, all Americans are, on one level, the same people, in that they share a bloodline as well as a history and a common territory, but they are separate people in that their perspectives, values and aims are not the same. Metaphorically, one travels the high road and the other the low. Contrary to the tenets of democracy, one brother was determined to dominate and destroy the family

of the other. But that is a recurrent tale that, with Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve, finds a significant place in the Bible. Abel was a farmer who tilled his fields with diligence and his lands brought forth abundance. Cain was jealous of the plenty born of his brother's labor. Cain took Abel's life as well as his profit. The American Cain claimed the sweat of Abel, his despised brother, as his due and sacrificed him ritually to appease and slake his greed.

Escape (1858), the first lynching drama written in America, is the only one of the ten lynching dramas under review in this dissertation in which a lynching--in the sense of capital punishment--is threatened but avoided.<sup>6</sup> All the other plays include a full-fledged lynching, whether in the past or present, and sometimes both. That is the case with The Noose (1919), chronologically the last play studied in this dissertation. In that play, which is written by Tracy Mygatt, a hued man is accused of rape and is chased and captured and perhaps castrated. This lynching recalls an earlier one that occurred in the same southern town when the mother of the main character was a young girl. The mother's father--the main character's grandfather--was then the sheriff, and he tried to caution the community not to rush to judgment against the hued victim, who, it was later discovered, had not committed the crime of which he was accused. Together, these two lynchings chart a line of development in the phenomenon of lynching. From the lynching that took place roughly twenty years prior, and thus at the end of the nineteenth century,

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<sup>6</sup> The ten plays are: Escape: or, A Leap for Freedom (1858); The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana (1859); The White Slave (1882); The Clansman (1905); The Nigger (1909); Granny Maumee (1914); Rachel (1916); Mine Eyes Have Seen (1918); Aftermath (1918); and The Noose (1919).

to the later one, in the first decades of the twentieth century, lynching renewed itself during two successive postbellum eras of lynching. The second wave matured and became institutionalized around the time of the release in Atlanta of The Birth of a Nation (derived from the fourth play discussed in this dissertation). This second phase (actually the third phase when lynching during slavery is included) embraced technology and was thus more extensive in its effect than the first, which was more local and clandestine. Over two hundred victims were claimed annually in 1892 and 1893 when mass media and technology began to impact lynching. By 1900, according to W.J. Cash, a white southern author, the South was addicted to lynching, a habit it indulged in with surprising regularity, at least three to four times a week in some years.<sup>7</sup>

The hued fought back. To the extent of their abilities, they armed themselves and sometimes intervened to stop a lynching. In the early decades of the twentieth century, A. J. Smitherman was a lawyer and businessman in Greenwood, Oklahoma, a suburb outside Tulsa destroyed by lynching fever in 1921. Three years before the assault on Greenwood, Smitherman "led an armed group of black farmers to prevent the lynching of a black prisoner in nearby Bristow. He was also brazen enough to write about them in his paper, *The Star* ... which campaigned vigorously against lynching, while the white-owned *Tulsa Tribune* tacitly endorsed it."<sup>8</sup> The hued had their own newspapers and a number of editors and publishers denounced the lynching onslaught with virulent words, and would

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<sup>7</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation, 1890-1940 (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 204.

<sup>8</sup> Brent Staples, "Unearthing A Riot," The New York Times Magazine, December 19, 1999, 67 [64-69].

not temper their rage to save their skins. One such editor is the target of a lynching bee in the first lynching drama written by a woman of hue: that play is Rachel (1916), and is, of course, included in this dissertation. Even if primarily verbal, the retaliation of the hued was not well met, however. In 1892, one especially eloquent and fearless woman journalist of hue, Ida B. Wells, who later became well known, was sought by a lynch mob that took out its vengeance on her press when she could not be intimidated, or worse, in person. Even if they weren't present at the lynching sites in large numbers, the hued were witnesses of the violence directed against them. They may have hidden away from impending danger, but they felt its fury and saw its telltale signature, the charred, lifeless and mutilated body suspended from a tree branch. Mygatt depicts a hued servant, a foil for the lynch victim, who follows the progression of the lynching and expresses his justifiable fear that, once unleashed, the beast of lynching will come chasing after him.

Ancestrally, lynching is a cousin of the medieval practices of charivari, a regulative activity engaged in by the collective which is designed to right whatever wrong is perceived to beset a given community. *The Return of Martin Guerre*, a French film set in the 1500s, includes a charivari scene. A group of men from the village dress up in costumes decorated with raffia and stand outside the house of a man believed to be impotent. Through the agency of special dress and masks similar to the regalia of the Ku Klux Klan, the offender is taunted about his inability to procreate. It is believed that he is harming the community by not doing his sexual share to increase the population and thus the power of the community. “[T]hese ... temporary masks [were] intended for the

common good.”<sup>9</sup> Hawthorne includes a scene in The Scarlet Letter about a charivari proposed by women in colonial America. A group of matrons gathered outside a Boston jail one seventeenth-century summer morning in Boston. They were discussing the punishment that they felt Hester Prynne should have received for birthing an illegitimate child and refusing to name the father. If Hester Prynne were turned over to them for correction, her penalty would not be nearly so lenient as public display in a pillory for several hours.

“Good wives,” said a hard-featured dame of fifty. “I’ll tell ye a piece of my mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof, if we women, being of mature age and church-members in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne. What think ye, gossips? If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not”<sup>10</sup>

Charivari, like lynching, is thus a form of collective legislation, engaged in more often by men but also participated in by women who may be more vicious. The welfare of the group, however that is perceived, is used as determinant of the rules that the individuals who belong to the group must follow. In America, lynching began in colonial times--when life was still fairly feudal in its organization. Large tracts of the country were still

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<sup>9</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, The Return of Martin Guerre (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), 40.

<sup>10</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 37-8.

considered frontier, not subject to a settled corpus of law, and the people themselves spontaneously legislated permissible behavior. In the New World, there were hierarchical divisions similar to *lord* and *serf*, although the American descriptives were *master* and *slave*.

The focus of lynching, in which women as well as men were involved, was not only transgression, but also the accumulation and reinvocation of power. The threat that lynching sought to dispel was destabilization. The offender was disciplined in front of his or her peers. Their edification was often the reason for the extra degree of severity in the punishment. Slaves had to be taught not to disobey, not to ask for more than their limited due. As the eighteenth century turned into the nineteenth and as colony became nation, slavery and its abuses--which in many instances took on a sexual character--became more and more a burr in the American conscience. This society that was founded to guarantee freedom lived with a contradiction in its conception. Slavery--the absence of freedom for a substantial population--was that contradiction. Rather than end slavery--on which many in the country had come to depend--the slave was made suspect. Those who had done the enslaving understood that they themselves would not suffer slavery easily. Their minds would have been focused on deliverance. The enslavers thus had to conceive of how best to control the slave, to insure that he or she did not have thoughts of liberty ever present in the mind. The slave was watched continually. Laws were enacted to keep slave interaction at a minimum. Whoever did not obey these laws was subject to dire punishment, even to death. The world has known slavery before. In the past, slavery was the consequence of war. The captive often looked like the captors. That was not true in

America, at least not at the beginning. The preponderance of those who were slaves in America were identifiable by their complexions. This distinction became the mark of the alien. And the alien lived outside the protection of the law.

Lynching is an activity that does not bow to measure. Lynching is extreme. It answers to no one. It can rage out of control, like fire. On American soil, lynching slowly developed a particular character that was racial. In the colonial era, whites were lynched as often if not more often than the hued. But after the American Revolution when the colonists gained their freedom, more and more slaves became disenchanted with their unfree status and began to plan revolts and to slip out of their chains, as did William Wells Brown.<sup>11</sup> With the breaches in the lines of slavery, more and more slaves had to be turned into spectacles of example. Lynching--extreme physical torture possibly ending in death--was one way of shoring up systemic holes. Frighten the slaves into compliance. At first, lynching simply meant public punishment, most often taking the form of beating or tarring and feathering in the period loosely delimited by the fifty years after the American Revolution. With the increase in runaways, and the rise of abolitionism in the 1820s and 1830s after the 1822 Denmark Vesey Insurrection and the 1831 Nat Turner Rebellion, the definition of lynching began to evolve into its contemporary connotation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "It has been estimated that at least 100,000 slaves escaped from the South during the antebellum period." Lerone Bennett, Jr., Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 107.

<sup>12</sup> Following the American Revolution (even in New York where slavery was universal until 1827), [s]ome [slaves] pressured their masters for improved treatment, occasionally even extracting written promises of freedom. Large numbers of others simply disappeared—so large, in fact, that runaway notices filled local papers and gangs

In the aftermath of the Civil War and during the years of segregation, former slaves were treated as virtual runaways. They were considered defectors from the established regime. A representative number were defined as criminals, whether or not they had committed any actual crime. They were chased by self-designated catchers (the lynching posse), captured, chastised, and charred as punishment for attempted escape from the hereditary plantation, that was no longer a specific location but generalized into a settled state of mind. Lynching became ritualized murder, communally enacted in the arena of the public, after protracted torture, by a white crowd who suffered no accountability against a hued transgressor, usually, but not always, male and adult.

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of white 'blackbirders' were able to make a living as free-lance slave catchers." Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 285.

It is also instructive to note that the first slave revolt occurred in New York City in 1712. "[I]n 1741 rumors that another was planned produced a preemptive white rampage against blacks, the first recorded race riot in American history." Paul Johnson, The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815-1830 (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999), 317.

## Chapter One, "A Speck of Hue"

Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom by William Wells Brown and The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana by Dion Boucicault were published and produced in consecutive years.<sup>1</sup> Escape was published under an abolitionist imprimatur in Boston in 1858, but it was not produced in a traditional theatrical venue or under traditional theatrical circumstances during the playwright's lifetime. Instead, William Wells Brown performed all the characters in his play on the lecture circuit throughout the northeast. His audiences were largely sympathetic to the abolitionist platform, and his play was sufficiently well-received that two years before the play was published, the playwright resigned from other duties at the Anti-Slavery Society in order to give more time to "his lyceum lectures and the reading of his drama."<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that Brown was performing Escape as a one-man show during the extraordinary success of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of the novel but not of the various dramatized versions, also had

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<sup>1</sup> "Octoroon" refers to racial mixture. The octoroon has one great grandparent out of eight who is not white, and can easily be mistaken for a white person. There was sufficient sexual interbreeding between master and slave during slavery to create a panoply of different complexions and racial classifications. The mulatto has one white parent. The offspring of a mulatto and a white is a quadroon. The offspring of a quadroon and a white is an octoroon.

<sup>2</sup> John Ernest, "The Reconstruction of Whiteness: William Wells Brown's The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom" PMLA 113.5 (October 1998):1109.

abolitionist leanings. Given the superlative success of the multiple stage versions of Uncle Tom's Cabin, it is conceivable that abolitionists would have capitalized on the money-making potential of Brown's play by producing it--rather than just publishing it. The reasons they did not can only be the occasion for speculation. But, I would surmise that race was a factor. For a hued male to write a play that called into question the morals of the southern plantocracy was less acceptable on a national scale than for a similar attack on slavery from a northern white woman of exalted background. According to precedent, the privilege of writing about any aspect of American life belongs to a member of the master class. Brown belonged to a group that did not yet enjoy the benefits of citizenship; therefore, Uncle Tom's Cabin became the official narrative about slavery even though it was written by someone who had never lived under its regime. Escape, published only a year after the Dred Scott decision that denied the right of the hued to citizenship, was one of the first American plays to include a lynching scenario. Research has not yet turned up an American play that acknowledges the threat of lynching earlier than the Brown play.

The Octoroon made its debut at the Winter Garden Theatre in New York toward the close of the year in 1859.<sup>3</sup> And as far as is known, The Octoroon is the second play, written in America, to express a position on lynching, which is the extralegal and

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<sup>3</sup> The Octoroon was an extremely popular play that became a theatrical staple and was performed frequently throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century as well. When the play was performed in England in 1861, where it played on and off for roughly a decade, continental audiences did not share the same American desire to see the slave punished. The English demanded a happy ending and Boucicault rewrote the end of the play to please his English patrons.

collective taking of a life from one who is presumed to have transgressed the laws and custom of a particular region or society. Lynching is a spontaneous and informally arranged public execution ratified by communal attendance or acceptance. Lynching often includes extremes of torture such as the severing of fingers, toes, ears, and penis, as well as removal of other parts of the body, generally followed by hanging and incineration that begins while the victim is still alive. The death of the victim is taken in by the watching crowd as a pleasurable event; to lynch others is to entertain the self. The inclusion of lynching in drama is to point out its Horatian underpinnings. Lynching is intended to instruct as well as pleasure the spectator. The viewer is instructed that he or she possesses the godlike power of assigning and carrying out a sentence of death. The viewer is entertained, held fixated on the spot, by the display of his or her omnipotence, measured in the teleological suffering of the victim. Lynching is a social drama that designates the roles of victor and victim, ruler and ruled. Those who lynched believed that they owned and controlled everyone and everything that trod on American earth. They had taken this land and their might and mind, their intellectual capacity to name and claim, had made it right. All others were wrong. The crime that was committed against the ruled (and the rules) was generally considered so egregious that no civility was required on the part of those who were punishing the alleged wrongdoer. In Escape, the prospect of death at the hands of a lynch mob faces a man from Massachusetts. His crime is sympathy for a passel of slaves on their way to a slave auction. What is honorable in one location can be cause for extinction in another. In The Octoroon, a crowd is immediately transformed into a lynch mob at the news of the murder of a young boy, but

the person unilaterally thought guilty did not do the killing. The lynching frenzy is rarely rational. Excessive violence directed against a vulnerable victim whose culpability is not always proven is part and parcel of the lynching scenario, whether on stage or in life. Increasingly after the 1830s with the Nat Turner revolt, and before that with the Haitian Revolution and the Denmark Vesey revolt in 1822, lynching took on a mantle of racial urgency. All of these uprisings clustered in the first three decades of the nineteenth century shattered white certainty in the security of its policing mechanisms. So did the rise of abolitionism, which challenged the moral legitimacy of slavery.

Nat Turner and his followers massacred fifty-five whites in the bloodiest slave insurrection in American history. Turner remained at large for more than nine weeks. Captured, tortured, jailed, interrogated, and tried, he was executed on November 11 [1831]. In the aftermath of the insurrection, a wave of white terror swept across the entire South. No one knows how many blacks were murdered; historians' estimates range in the hundreds. In Southampton, twenty other blacks were hanged and ten were transported, and elsewhere in Virginia and North Carolina twenty or thirty more were executed.<sup>4</sup>

The presence of slaves everywhere became a threatening proposition. Slaves were duplicitous. They could smile and pretend to be dutiful and be plotting death in some secluded spot before and after nightfall. They could not be trusted. They had to be

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<sup>4</sup> Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 269. Introduction by Jean Fagin Yellen.

shown who was boss, and in a way that could not be refuted. Those who questioned the American racial creed that slavery was beneficent were the most frequent culprits in the upsurge of lynching and mob vengeance that began to plague the nation in the third decade of the nineteenth century. We can interpret the inclusion of lynching in Escape and The Octoroon as a comment on the existence of spontaneous violence as a fairly widespread phenomenon in antebellum America. Riots, many of them racially motivated, hit a highpoint in the 1830s, which has been described as the most violent decade in American history.<sup>5</sup> One short but illustrative period during that extended span of convulsive activity was the long summer of 1835, which lasted from June to October. During that summer, Americans got a taste of what to anticipate in the reign of King Mob. At that time, there was

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<sup>5</sup> It was the emergence of the penny press in the 1830s that helped to whet the public appetite for stories of violence. In addition, in most states, 1830 also marked the point at which public executions, which had been a popular form of entertainment, were moved inside to the privacy of prisons. It is instructive to consider that when public hangings of white criminals were privatized, there was an increased tendency to violence in the public thoroughfare, and more than a modicum, but certainly not all, of this violence was racially motivated. Many Americans in the antebellum era were avid to consume the sight and sensation of another's death. "When Peter Robinson was executed in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in 1841, huge crowds surrounded the prison and commandeered the rooftops of adjacent houses and a church. Disappointed when Robinson's body was not exhibited to them, some swarmed the prison yard, cut up the hanging rope, and threw it to the mob outside. When it failed, people pressed against the wall nearest the scaffold, climbed ladders and trees to peer over the jail's walls, positioned themselves on rooftops and at garret windows, and purchased tickets for seats on a nearby barn and an elevated platform built for the occasion. Such interest reportedly pervaded all social classes; the curious drove to Robinson's hanging in vehicles ranging 'from the humblest milk-cart, to the smart two-horse wagon.'" In the postbellum era, public participation in the spectacle of death was continued by journalistic renditions of lynching--for those who could not actually be present--and by clamorous attendance at the lynching site. Karen Halttunen, Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American

maximum mob mayhem, in numbers and variety of riot never before or since surpassed in the United States. The riotous interlude of 1835 offered an introduction not only to the variety of mobs that were to follow but also to the peculiarly explosive potential of those centered on slavery, in contrast to all other issues where disruptions were sharp and sometimes deadly but quickly handled and absorbed. The riotous slavery arguments of these months, aided by the abolitionist mail campaign of religious suasion, changed the South's soothing "someday" about slavery's end to a firm "Never!" It also led to strident demands that either laws or mobs silence those who publicly questioned the institution. Since laws weren't feasible, mobs became the preferred tactic, in the North against abolitionist speakers and associations and in the South against anyone someone chose to call "Abolitionist!"<sup>6</sup>

The spate of racially influenced violence did not significantly abate in the 1840's and 1850's. By the mid-1850s, when Brown and Boucicault were writing, sectional differences were proceeding toward the point of eruption. The Octoroon opened in New York in the same week that John Brown was hung in Virginia.<sup>7</sup> Brown and his men, several of whom were hued, had sounded the clarion call that the Civil War had

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Gothic Imagination (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 70-72.

<sup>6</sup> David Grimsted, American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), ix.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Roach, "Mardi Gras Indians and Others: Genealogies of Performance" Theatre Journal 44.4 (December 1992):479.

unofficially begun.

The trend toward violence in antebellum America was also expressed theatrically. Melodrama, the most popular dramatic genre of the era, struts across the stage with exuberant violence. “[M]elodrama is full of violence -- stabbing, shooting, hanging, strangling, poisoning, suicide, fire, shipwreck, train wreck, villains of extreme savagery, revenge-seeking ghosts, heroes and heroines who experience a series of fearful physical catastrophes and domestic agonies.”<sup>8</sup> And the behavior of theatrical audiences was violent as well. When they did not get what they wanted in the way of entertainment, they would vent their dissatisfaction with violence, hurling missiles, intended to harm or at least annoy, at offending actors. Performers were known to beat up other performers from rival companies. On one occasion at least, such a skirmish took on a racial cast. In August 1822, Ira Aldridge, who later became the leading nineteenth-century classical actor of hue in Europe, was assaulted and injured on a street in the Five Points district by a white male laborer named James Belmont who was a part-time circus performer. George Belmont, the brother of James Belmont, was implicated in the 1822 riot that destroyed the African Theatre where Aldridge served his American apprenticeship as an actor<sup>9</sup>

Antebellum theatrical riots were often chauvinistic in character, and several were directed against the English, who were considered cultural interlopers. In 1825, Edmund

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Booth, editor, Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), 9.

<sup>9</sup> George A. Thompson, Jr., A Documentary History of the African Theatre (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 99-101.

Kean, the English melodramatic actor par excellence, came on tour to America for the second time. He had not been well received during his first visit in 1821 when he refused to perform in Boston because of poor attendance. His refusal was interpreted in the press as a slight against Americans. Because of an American grudge, Kean's second tour was not cordially received. At the Park in New York, rioters outside the theater threw rocks at the windows and audiences inside made such a ruckus that the actor left the stage unheard. At the Federal Street Theatre in Boston, audience members were angered by the sight of him and broke the lighting fixtures, tore up the seats and removed the doors to the boxes from their hinges. Another riot ensued in Baltimore and Kean quitted the American stage forever.<sup>10</sup> At the Bowery Theatre in New York in 1834, there was another riot that had nationalistic overtones. An English actor was the manager of the Bowery and one of the English actors employed there made a comment calling into question the intelligence of Americans. A mob soon descended on the theater and demanded an apology from Hamblin, who managed the Bowery. Since the English were big supporters of the antislavery movement at the time, there were abolitionist connections made in the riot at the Bowery.<sup>11</sup> In 1849, the most notorious anti-English theatrical riot occurred at the Astor Place Opera House in New York. Rioters were

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<sup>10</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 166.

<sup>11</sup> "English and Welsh immigrants invariably identified with the abolitionists. ... Anti-abolitionist riots ... tended to save some of the roughest treatment for English immigrants." Leonard L. Richards, "Gentlemen of Property and Standing": Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 68-69.

determined that Charles Macready, the reigning Shakespearean tragedian of his day, would not perform. Macready and the Astor Place Opera House, with its rigorous dress code, symbolized aristocratic values in a democratic land. Many of the rioters preferred the talents of Edwin Forrest, an American Shakespearean actor known for bombast also performing in the city at the same time. The theater was charged by a gang of lower- and working-class men. Again, lighting fixtures were destroyed and rocks were thrown through the windows. This time, the militia was called in and shots were fired. The Astor Place Riot left over a score dead and hundreds wounded.<sup>12</sup>

Lynching is melodramatic, inclusive of a violence that is extreme, sensational and spectacular. The physicality as well as the spectacle of lynching is etched deeply in the mind in lurid gestures. Melodramas punctuate their thrills with exclamation points. Lynching lays claim to the lion's share of pictorial space and newspaper headlines. The emotionality of melodrama is quickly communicated, telegraphic, big and bold, insistent, intended to exert immediate hold over the sentiments. Like melodrama, lynching can be morally sententious, adamant about its own righteousness. Melodrama polarizes the forces of good against bad, with those perceived as good always winning. Lynching does the same. The good guys punish the wrongdoer. Like melodrama, lynching is more interested in types than in individuals. There is a villain and there is a hero. The villain has a certain look and so does the hero. There is little variation in the formula. Someone who is made to carry the cross of guilt is hunted or chased and then expelled from society

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 65.

in the melodrama and the same happens in lynching. "In the growing brutality of the crime story (a brutality protected by the convention of the form, as it is conventionally impossible that the man-hunter can be mistaken in believing that one of his suspects is a murderer), detection begins to merge with the thriller as one of the forms of melodrama. ... In the melodrama of the brutal thriller we come as close as it is normally possible for art to come to the pure self-righteousness of the lynching mob."<sup>13</sup> Like rioting, whether in or out of the theatre, lynching involves monolithic and impassioned mob responsiveness. The lynchers catch sight of their prey, the outsider, one who is fair game because he or she does not belong to the communal group as it defines itself. These were not halcyon times. The nineteenth-century tendency to take immediate umbrage, expressed in its theatrical behavior, in lynching, in melodrama, and in riots, shows that sectional and other differences were paramount in America as it moved into the second half of the century. The country was marching toward a war in which slavery was a primary--if not the overriding--issue.

Mid-nineteenth-century America was a highly theatrical period. The emotions of the people found vent and expression on stage and in extravagant theatrical display. Pretense was king. Masking in private and in public allowed an ambitious populace to shelve its past and remake itself according to the image of its choosing. Each class aped its betters. In its rage for parlor charades, the bourgeoisie brought theatre into the home. Fashion by Anna Cora Mowatt, which was produced at the Park Theatre in 1845, brought

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<sup>13</sup> Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), 47.

to light the growing middle-class American predilection for masquerade, a predilection that tended to swallow up authenticity. The pose was what mattered. In fashionable circles, actuality was dull. It had to be enhanced with, at a minimum, a dusting of pretense.<sup>14</sup> In professional entertainment, the minstrel mask reigned supreme. Under the thrall of minstrelsy, white males covered their faces with grotesque and comic blackface masks. The idea that blackface was a suitable collective image for all Americans derives from the revolutionary period when Americans bemoaned their slave status relative to the British. They were virtual slaves and underlings, a misrepresented and colonized people who had to win their freedom from the master nation. The first references to single figures appearing in blackface in America belong to the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Initially a solo art, the minstrel phenomenon took wing in the early years of the Jacksonian administration, which ended in the 1830s. In the next decade, minstrelsy became a choral or group art, and its first practitioners, the Virginia Minstrels, were primarily of Irish descent. It is plausible that part of the reason for the prevalence of masking in America in the central years of the nineteenth century was the huge influx of immigrants, many of whom were Irish. These new arrivals dispensed with their previous identities and generated new roles for themselves in the quotidian of America. These new roles

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<sup>14</sup> Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 153.

<sup>15</sup> Dale Cockrell cites a 1751 performance of Othello as the first legitimate blackface representation in America. He also mentions three other late eighteenth century blackface performances in American productions. The plays in question are: The Padlock (1769), The Irishman in London (1793), and Laugh When You Can (1799). Dale Cockrell, Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15-16.

required an array of new masks. The immigrants were eager to differentiate themselves from those who were equated with the social leers. Immigrants were not slaves. Some of them could put on the slave masks, but they knew that they could wash the smut from their faces. This ability to put it on and take it off made them superior to those who did not have the same options of self-metamorphosis. (However, it was just this capacity for self-refashioning that Brown attached to several slaves in Escape and for which he, in his own personal life and experience, served as testament.) Minstrelsy was the lens through which those Americans who considered themselves free viewed the others, those who were slaves or the children of slaves. As the country edged toward war and entered it, minstrel performers moved from depicting a diversity of hued life to focusing on the satisfied slave who had no desire or capacity to be free. During the war, minstrels tended to portray blacks as happy and contented inferiors. The genius of minstrelsy was that, unlike the vitriolic anti-Negro propaganda that blatantly advocated repression of blacks, minstrelsy phrased racial subordination in terms of benevolent paternalism. While Negrophobes tried to scare whites into openly putting aside the American creed and forcing Negroes to be an inferior caste, minstrels took threatening images of blacks and softened them into those of good-natured children or at the very worst of ludicrous incompetents who required supervision for their own good. Thus, whites who listened to minstrels could actually take

pride in racial subordination as a *fulfillment* of the American creed.<sup>16</sup> Minstrelsy helped to give the chaotic realm of slavery a semblance of order. Those darker inhabitants of the country could be controlled. They might look different, but their difference could be channeled and understood through the application of masks. Like Topsy or Tom, they could be cajoled or beaten into obedience. They could be raped or lynched.

The phenomenal success of Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), as novel and as dramatization, demonstrates how completely concern over slavery had taken hold of the domestic imagination in antebellum America. On the stage, Uncle Tom's Cabin became "a force whose power resided not only in the usual appeals of melodramatic action but also in its ability to redefine slaves as human beings who were entitled to the dignity accorded other members of American society."<sup>17</sup> In the aftermath of the American and French Revolutions, the overriding question was how could one human being deny liberty to another. This question had been debated for roughly three quarters of a century when Stowe, an abolitionist, published her novel in serial form. Before the novel was published as a book, the dramatists and adapters had lined up. Five versions were shown in New York theaters in 1852 and "[b]efore the end of 1852 there were at least eight versions of the play at different theatres in London, including an equestrian version at the

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<sup>16</sup> Robert C. Toll, Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 119.

<sup>17</sup> Gary A. Richardson, American Drama from the Colonial Period through World War I (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 103.

Adelphi and a pantomime at Drury Lane.”<sup>18</sup> In New York in 1853, “competition between Barnum’s production of Conway’s version of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and an adaptation written by George Aiken at the National Theatre sparked a notorious theatre war that led to street disturbances among spectators partial to one of the rival productions.”<sup>19</sup> Brown and Boucicault, men whose eyes were primed for the polemical, could not help but notice the astounding popularity of this play about slavery.

It is unlikely that Boucicault, an expatriate Irish playwright of French extraction born in England, and Brown, a fugitive slave born in Lexington, Kentucky, belonged to the same social circles and discussed their ideas about lynching. Boucicault was not known to be an avid abolitionist and Brown, who, like many others, had rallied to his own self-emancipation, decidedly was.<sup>20</sup> For approximately four years, however, Brown

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<sup>18</sup> Walter J. Meserve, “Social awareness on stage: tensions mounting, 1850-1859.” in Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller, The American State: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 91-92.

<sup>19</sup> Bruce A. McConachie, Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870 (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 178.

<sup>20</sup> “The abolitionist movement was essentially a product of the black community, although whites played a role in it. Abolitionism was at all times dominated by African-American freedmen.” George P. Rawick, From Sunup to Sundown: the Making of the Black Community. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 111. “In the BBC docudrama, A Son of Africa: The Slave Narrative of Oloudah Equiano (1995), Stuart Hall makes an important point about agency: ‘The historiography of the abolitionist movement itself has kind of written out the agency of Blacks themselves. It is as if abolition was really a gift by liberal and reforming whites to the enslaved peoples, and not one in which slaves themselves played an active part.’ Phyllis R. Klotman, “Military rites and Wrongs: African Americans in the U.S. Armed Forces” in Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Cutler, editors, Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 63n.5.

and Boucicault were in Europe at the same time. In 1849, Brown went to Great Britain, where he lived until 1854, when he returned to America and became involved in writing plays.<sup>21</sup> Boucicault came to America in 1853.<sup>22</sup> It is conceivable that Brown and Boucicault caught sight of each other on the continent, and they may even have been guests at some of the same functions, but it is unlikely that there was anything other than a passing acquaintance, if that, between the two. Boucicault is not mentioned in the biography of Brown by Farrison, nor does Brown factor in any way into the several biographies of Boucicault. We can assume, therefore, with some security, that each was writing independently and reacting to what was presented to the eye and ear in the American panorama at the time. Since their interest in lynching did not come from their intense personal communications, it is safe to surmise that it came instead from their mutual tendency to record the most compelling trends of their time. Boucicault has a history of dramatically mining the contemporary. He did so most spectacularly in The Poor of New York (1857), which explored the economic reversals of 1837 and 1857, and in The Octoroon, which concentrated on slavery, the dominant concern in the “domestic

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<sup>21</sup> William Edward Farrison, William Wells Brown: Author & Reformer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 244.

<sup>22</sup> “Boucicault arrived in America in 1853. He had established his reputation in France, which he said treated dramatists fairly by paying them ten percent of the gross receipts of the house. In England, where he worked next and where conditions regarding royalties were as deplorable as in America, he tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Dramatic Authors’ Society to push for the French system. Discouraged, he arrived in America in 1853, surprised to find the quality of theater superior to that in England. However, without copyright protection, he was reluctant to produce his own work and thus spent three years primarily studying the theatrical tastes of Americans, while also serving as a forceful advocate of the bill.” Thomas M. Kitts, The Theatrical Life of George Henry Boker (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 117-118.

American political imagination in the first part of the nineteenth century.”<sup>23</sup> Brown’s novel, Clotel; or, the President’s Daughter, which was published in London in 1853 and holds the record as the first novel published by an American author of hue, waded right smack into the waters of controversy. In Clotel, Brown depicted a president who had two racially mixed daughters of the octoroon strain. Because of paternal neglect, these daughters ended up on the auction block. There were speculations about Jefferson’s slave children in various contemporary newspapers and journals.<sup>24</sup> Brown spied a good story and fictionalized it.

Brown was aware ... that such reports concerning Jefferson’s fathering and neglecting such children could have and even might have been true. He knew that similar reports certainly were true of many other slaveholders, some of whom he had known personally. He did not worry, then, about whether the reports concerning Jefferson were literally true in every detail; he merely used them for their sensational value to illustrate the ironical inconsistencies that existed between the theories and the practices of soi-disant democratic American slaveholders, of whom the famous author of the Declaration of Independence and *Notes on the State of Virginia* with its especially remarkable “Query XVIII” might be taken, he thought, as an

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<sup>23</sup> Richardson, 102.

<sup>24</sup> “In 1802 he [Jefferson] was unwilling or unable to deny an accusation in the *Richmond Register* that he kept a slave concubine, Sally Hemmings, and had a son Tom and other children by her. Sally was, in fact, a quadroon; two of her children passed into white society.” Paul Johnson, The Birth of the Modern: World Society, 1815-1830 (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999), 304.

archetype. Brown's novel grew out of his desire, not to attack the character of Thomas Jefferson, per se, but to win attention, by means of an entrancing story, to a comprehensive and persuasive argument against American slavery.<sup>25</sup>

Scientific testing has since supported the assumption that Jefferson, who at one point owned over two hundred slaves, had children by at least one slave woman. Jefferson was no stranger to the proper management of his slaves.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the presumed absence of personal intimacy between them, Brown and Boucicault shared some convictions or tendencies. Certainly, both had a flair for the dramatic and the topical, and both were prolific writers. Brown and Boucicault were both denizens of the sensational. Boucicault devoted his energies to the stage and he wrote somewhere between one hundred and four hundred plays in an active career that spanned approximately fifty years and began in England in 1841 when he was still in his twenties. London Assurance, the first play of his plays to be produced, was an immediate success, partially because when it was staged by Madame Vestris and Charles Matthews at Covent Garden, it was among the first plays to use the realistic box set. The set for Assurance "utilized a dazzling array of real carpets, furniture, chandeliers, and looking glasses. The

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<sup>25</sup> Farrison, 218.

<sup>26</sup> An anecdote suggests that Jefferson understood the instructive value of a good beating for a recalcitrant slave who had attempted escape more than once. "In 1812 Jefferson had Jame [Hubbard], as he himself wrote, 'severely flogged in the presence of his old companions,' and then sold him. The purpose of the flogging was to warn the other 'boys' what would happen to them if they too got the idea that they were entitled to their freedom." John Anthony Scott, Trumpet of a Prophecy: Revolutionary America 1763-1783 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 126.

painstakingly realistic setting of the piece was an attractive novelty and predated the realism of Tom Robertson by a quarter of a century."<sup>27</sup> In addition to writing for the theater, Boucicault changed the theatrical landscape in America in other ways. He brought continental practice as well as seasoned experience to America. For example, he set the fashion for the matinee and a later evening curtain, and was responsible for the first American copyright law, enacted in 1856.<sup>28</sup> But it is his record as a playwright that is most stunning of all. "At least half dozen of his plays were among the most spectacularly popular and successful that the English-speaking stage offered during his lifetime, and a score of others were more popular than sixty or seventy percent of the current output today."<sup>29</sup>

Brown was an indefatigable writer as well, but his outlets were more varied. Brown expressed himself in the novel, in travel writing, in history, in autobiography, in journalism, as well as in the drama. Writing at the same time as Emerson, Hawthorne, Lowell, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman, William Wells Brown not only shared but exemplified the mandate of the American Renaissance writer, which was to examine and expand the nation's egalitarian mission. The American Renaissance writer was

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Goode Hogan, Dion Boucicault (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969), 31.

<sup>28</sup> Boucicault asked an American playwright, George Henry Boker, to draft the Dramatic Authors' Bill. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts introduced the copyright bill to the senate in March 1856. It was signed into law by Franklin Pierce in August 1856 and first tested in November 1856 "when Boucicault stopped a pirate production of his Violet; or The Career of an Actress. The amendment thus marks the beginning of a playwrighting profession in America." Kitts, 118-119.

<sup>29</sup> Albert Johnson, "Fabulous Boucicault," Theatre Arts (March 1953):28.

committed to bringing to fruition the explicit as well as implicit promises of the Declaration of Independence.

They felt it was incumbent upon their generation to give fulfillment to the potentialities freed by the Revolution, to provide a culture commensurate with America's political opportunity. Their tones were sometimes optimistic, sometimes blatantly, even dangerously expansive, sometimes disillusioned, even despairing, but what emerges from the total pattern of their achievement — if we make the effort to repossess it — is literature for our democracy. In reading the lyric, heroic, and tragic expression of our first great age, we can feel the challenge of our still undiminished resources.<sup>30</sup>

Literally a one-man writing machine, Brown inaugurated the published efforts of the hued in history, travel, fiction, and the drama.<sup>31</sup> As the first playwright of hue in America whose work can be read and, on occasion, witnessed today, William Wells Brown stands as the forefather of the hued nation, dramatically conceived. Through his enormous linguistic output, Brown, along with other members of the nineteenth-century slave and free intelligentsia, helped to mark the transition of the hued from a primarily non-literate,

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<sup>30</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), xv.

<sup>31</sup> There was a playwright of hue prior to William Wells Brown. His name was William Alexander Brown and he ran the African Theatre in Greenwich Village in the 1820s. His play, The Drama of King Shotaway, was produced at his theater at least twice before 1825 according to George Odell. For information about the basis for the possible popularity of Shotaway, see Thompson, 29.

oral people dependent on others to represent their interests into a people capable of wielding a pen on their own behalf. Other writers who participated in this nineteenth-century transition along with Brown were David Walker, Maria Stewart, Frederick Douglass, Mary Shadd Cary, Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, and Martin Delany.<sup>32</sup> "The [slave] autobiographies, whether in bound, pamphlet, or periodical form, became so numerous that one critic writing in the early 1850s expressed his belief that 'the whole literary atmosphere has become tainted' with 'those literary nigritudes — those little tadpoles of the press which run in editions of hundreds of thousands."<sup>33</sup>

A fugitive slave who, from first hand experience, found the institution of slavery despicable, Brown was also the first playwright of hue to be published in America.<sup>34</sup>

Brown and Boucicault were both playwrights who performed. Boucicault appeared as

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<sup>32</sup> In 1829, David Walker published a manifesto denouncing American slavery as unchristian. Influenced by Walker, Maria Stewart, an orator in New England, published Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build in 1831. Frederick Douglass published his first autobiography in 1847, and it has been canonized as the most studied slave autobiography published in this country. In 1849, Mary Shadd Cary, an editor and the first woman of hue to become a lawyer, published a work arguing for self-reliance. Harriet Wilson published Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There (1859), reputedly the first novel by a writer of hue to be published in America. Harriet Jacobs wrote Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself (1861), an autobiography about her self-imposed confinement in an attic in order to escape the sexual advances of her white master. Martin Delany, who trained as a doctor at Harvard but was prevented from graduating published a novel, Blake; or, the Huts of Africa (1859-61). This list of nineteenth century hued writers is illustrative, not exhaustive.

<sup>33</sup> William L. Van Deburg, The Slave Drivers: Black Agricultural Labor Supervisors in the Antebellum South (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 130.

<sup>34</sup> Ernest, 1109.

Wahnotee in The Octoroon and Brown performed all the roles in Escape, which was never produced traditionally during his lifetime but which was performed regularly as a staged reading on abolitionist platforms in New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.<sup>35</sup> When Brown acted out all the roles in his play, those with power as well as those without, he was demonstrating the range of his possibilities in front of an assembly gathered to watch and hear him. Those who came to hear and see Brown perform were primarily white. There is an ironic relationship between the mostly abolitionist audience gathered to see the performance of a lone hued male on a central stage and the lynching audience that assembled to watch and hear the utterings of a lone hued male on a specially constructed central stage. The lynching audience came to see the protracted torment and listen to the dying groans of a single hued male on public display, but in that instance, the roles of that single hued body were reduced, cut down to size, not extended.<sup>36</sup> The crowd that bore witness was revived as the victim died. The crowd drew sustenance from and consumed the spectacle of another's demise. There was sympathy between the audience and the singular hued body in the performance of Brown before the abolitionist assembly, but there was little sympathy or empathy in the lynching

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<sup>35</sup> Farrison, 304-305.

<sup>36</sup> There were instances when several people were lynched at a time. Eleven Italian immigrants were lynched in New Orleans on March 14, 1891. In March 1892, three hued males were lynched in Memphis, Tennessee. Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 207-208. Incidentally, it was not until the eleven Italians were lynched in 1891 that there was a bill put forward to prevent lynching. If it had passed, that bill would not have protected American citizens, but would have applied only to immigrants. Rayford Logan, The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 76.

audience toward the hued body that suffered in its midst.

Escape begins the conversation between white playwrights and those of hue who wished to at least interrogate if not present an alternative to the master myth. The racial myth was agricultural at its core. On the land, the hierarchy of class was clear. The planters harvested the profits and the slaves planted the seeds. The planters had power and privilege. The slaves did not. But then the separate racial vines became entangled. The myth got corrupted. Some slaves were more intelligent and inventive than others. They did not cotton to the yoke. A number of planters gamboled freely in the gardens of their delight, sometimes intending to punish recalcitrant male as well as female slaves and sometimes determined to quench their own desire. Paler fruit was born on the dark trees. The Octoroon was the second American play about a slave of liminal racial status. It was preceded in 1857 by Neighbor Jackwood. Even though that play, unlike The Octoroon, had almost no commercial success, the appearance of these two plays at this mid-century moment suggests that racial melange was sufficient for notice. The lines of difference had to be reinforced. So a story was told and retold and then told again about the impurity of the fruit and how it had to fall from the tree in death or disgrace. Sometimes, as in the case of lynching in the plays written after Escape and The Octoroon, the disgraced fruit had to be dragged back to the tree where it was then burned and displayed. In Escape, the slaves were not unilaterally happy. They grumbled among themselves. They had individuality and they also had community. Some of those who had special information shared it with those who needed it. On occasion, a slave would oppose the wishes of the master and the mistress, and might even come to blows. Why else would

the master and mistress walk around with a whip never far from the fingers if the slaves were so contented and compliant. In Escape, Melinda bests the mistress when she sweeps away her accusations and her wig with a broom and Glen bolts from jail but not before giving the overseer the chance to feel his wrath and shed some blood. The wages of such triumph, at least according to Brown's play, is not death. Rather it is life, a life lived in fresh, free air away from the fen and shackles of slavery.

Although written in the North, both melodramas of "entitlement and dispossession" are set in the South, or in areas that condone slavery.<sup>37</sup> The Octoroon, set in Louisiana, is a traditional mortgage melodrama which excites public emotion, eliciting sympathy for the impoverished widow and children who are about to lose their home at the hand of the cruel, grasping villain, in this case a Yankee overseer and speculator named M'Closky.

This play is astonishingly complex and action filled, a classic example of melodrama in full flower. In fact, it contains almost every melodramatic device and thrill invented by the human mind. For example, there is the heavily mortgaged plantation with the upright young man, George, and his kindly aunt trying to save it. There is the honest, shrewd Yankee attempting to help them and the dastardly villain who steals the letter from Liverpool that will save the plantation. There is the beautiful octoroon slave girl, Zoe, noble, self-sacrificing, and silently in love with George.

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<sup>37</sup> Joseph R. Roach, "Mardi Gras Indians and Others: Genealogies of Performance," Theatre Journal 44.4 (December 1992):462.

There is the theft of the papers that would free Zoe and the murder of the boy, Paul -- both by the villain, with the murder being recorded on the film of an unnoticed camera. There is the heiress who wants to marry George and is willing to buy the plantation to get him; the foreclosing of the mortgage; the revelation that Zoe is a slave; and her sale to the villain. There is the trial of an innocent Indian boy for the murder of Paul, the sudden appearance of the photo that shows the murderer, and the recovery of the stolen letter from Liverpool. Then occurs the trial of the real villain; his escape; the burning of a ship; the villain's pursuit, capture, and death at the hands of friends of the murdered boy. Finally, there is Zoe's midnight visit to obtain a dose of poison, her suicide just before the arrival of the good news that the plantation is saved, and her death in the arms of George, the man she cannot marry because she is an octoroon.<sup>38</sup>

One twist in this play, however, is that the children, Zoe and Paul -- the latter a quadroon -- are illegitimate, and tolerated as such. Zoe is the slave offspring of Judge Peyton, the previous master of the plantation who has been dead for two years when the play begins. Paul may be as well. He enjoys privileged status on the plantation. He is not made to work in the field. He spends his days and possibly his nights in idleness, entertaining passersby at the seaport and doing occasional errands but generally free to do as he pleases. One of his more lucrative occupations was minstrel pickaninny dancing and

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<sup>38</sup> Garff B. Wilson, Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre: from Ye Bare and Ye Cubb to Chorus Line (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall,

singing for coins on the waterfront and another was hunting and fishing. “[M]any a picayune he picked up for his dance and nigger songs, and he supplied our table with fish and game from the Bayous.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike Mrs. Gaines, the wife of the plantation master in Escape, Mrs. Peyton, the widow of Judge Peyton, is indulgent toward his two favorite slaves, both of whom are quite attractive and charming, especially the daughter, Zoe, who is the octoroon of the title. There are three men in love with Zoe, and Paul enjoys the devoted companionship of Wahnotee, who probably accompanies him on his hunting and fishing expeditions. With three men -- M'Closky, Scudder, and George Peyton -- loving her, Zoe, who is dispossessed of the ease to which her appearance seems to entitle her, becomes the source of violence in the play. M'Closky, the more venal of the two Yankee overseers, is so desirous of Zoe that he murders to insure his hold on the plantation and over Zoe. George Peyton, with whom Zoe is in love, is the prodigal who has left a mass of debts and broken hearts behind him in France. Like his uncle the judge, George Peyton cannot redeem the plantation from insolvency. He is bought as a trophy husband by Dora Sunnyside. He is handsome. He has manners and he has lived in Europe. In a sense, he is a decorative slave, like Zoe, up for purchase. But it is his character, not his birth, that enslaves him. His prodigal habits entitle him to nothing except possession by others.

Escape, set in Kentucky where Brown was enslaved as a young man, also inflects the basic entitlement theme. Brown claims that the slaves, several of whom are

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1982), 127-28.

<sup>39</sup> Boucicault, 19.

unacknowledged children of their master, are entitled to much better treatment than they receive. The dispossession in Escape is dual. First, it is visited upon the slaver, Dr. Gaines, who loses three slaves who have been the source of his amusement as well as much of his monetary standing. Second, the son of Dr. Gaines, who looks enough like him for a visitor to note it, is dispossessed of his lineage. When Escape begins, Sampey, the unacknowledged son of Dr. Gaines, is present in the room but silent as Gaines discusses his domestic affairs with Mrs. Gaines. In this unholy initial trinity, Brown presents a southern counterpoint to the holy family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. In contrast to the Immaculate Conception, Brown gives us the Invisible Fathering of Dr. Gaines and his ilk, the southern planter who is the paterfamilias of all he surveys. He has consolidated and extended his power through abuse of an abused people. By being forced to come to America and labor for others against their will, slaves were dispossessed of history, land, family, individuality, and legal standing. At the end of the play, Cato redeems himself. He has delivered himself from possession by others.

Even though Dr. Gaines would be happy for a few cases of incurable disease so that he could add more gold to his coffers, no one dies in Escape. If one interprets the loss of three slaves as a kind of symbolic death knell to the system of slavery, then there is institutional mortality in Escape. There are three deaths in The Octoroon. Paul is murdered by M'Closky, who, in turn, is murdered by Wahnotee, and Zoe takes poison, which she has obtained on a pretext from an elderly female slave.

Aunty, there is sickness up at the house: I have been up all night beside one who suffers, and I remembered that when I had the fever you gave me

a drink, a bitter drink, that made me sleep -- do you remember it?"<sup>40</sup>

Zoe sat outside his bedroom door and heard George Peyton say in his sleep that he would rather see her dead than the property of some other man, and so she has made up her mind to die. When she sees George again in the morning, she looks pale and asks him to pour an antidote for her into a glass. Dora Sunnyside offers to do it, but Zoe is determined that George should pour it for her. It is by his hand that she wishes to die. By having George as an unwitting accomplice in her suicide, Boucicault is suggesting that Zoe is not alone in engineering her death. She understands that the community does not have a place for her that would fit in with her own desires for herself. She threatens the self-concept of the community in which she has grown to adulthood. Her looks are too close for comfort.

"Making visible the coerciveness of American identity, black Americans could evoke as much anxiety in their resemblance *to* as in their difference *from* white Americans."<sup>41</sup> Even though she looks white, Zoe is a burr in the side of whiteness, an element to be crushed and eliminated, a pariah to be dehumanized. She cannot be the lady that she wants to be and was trained to become. She can only be a slave, subject to possession by another. She wants to protect her maidenhood, but cannot. Maidenhood is a privilege to which she has no access, but Boucicault understands that Zoe and her desire to remain virtuous is appealing to an audience that is used to the presentation of virtue in its fair demoiselles. "The sacrosanct nature of maidenhood and the necessity of its

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<sup>40</sup> Dion Boucicault, The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: The Gregg Press, 1970), 35.

<sup>41</sup> Priscilla Wald, Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 216.

defense at all costs was a theme that pervaded the theater of the period. In the value system of the day, maiden virtue was the touchstone by which all other values were tested. Hence the theme was never too far below the surface in popular drama and never failed to elicit the warm responses of a sympathetic public."<sup>42</sup> Because she doesn't fit the script, she excises herself. She offers the community a vision of her sacrifice. Her killing falls close to the perimeter of a lynching, which is the communal execution of the outsider, the one who departs from the communal script. In the antebellum period, the arm of slavery was collective. The slave masters stood together in the South and acted as a body corporate. They exerted the right to kill or otherwise dispose of their property and protect it from any encroachment whatever. The slave body was property, chattel. Even though he does not realize that he is poisoning her, George Peyton, the master at Terrebonne, is acting to protect Zoe, his chattel--his jurisdiction over her has been extended for a day--, from possession by an owner who is not southern, and therefore external to the fold. The spectators at the performance of The Octoroon who watch Zoe turn white after death are surrogates for the lynching spectators who witness the purification of the hued body at an actual lynching. All three of those who die in The Octoroon are outsiders. Paul and Zoe are racial outsiders. M'Closky is a profiteering Yankee who does not respect the ways of the South, but wants to exploit them. Actually, he wants to mimic the aristocratic landowner of the South, he wants to become his image of them. He wants to possess their land and slaves. He wants to become their peer. It is

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<sup>42</sup> James H. Dormon, Jr., Theater in the Ante Bellum South, 1815-1861 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 266.

his desire that kills him as well as Paul and indirectly, Zoe. By taking poison from the hand of George Peyton, Zoe shows that she is totally subject to the grasp of slavery.

Zoe's "self-immolation offers a tableau of submission."<sup>43</sup> Her heart was with George, the man of the South, not with M'Closky, the interloper from the North. Cato, Glen, and Melinda in Escape show that their eyes are set on the North and the South does not deserve their allegiance.

Escape, which is largely autobiographical, as the playwright claims in his preface, takes place on a plantation called Muddy Creek.<sup>44</sup> The name bespeaks the author's attitude toward slavery. It is at best a muddy and small-minded enterprise. "The time of the action in the drama might have been any time after the 1830's -- after the Underground Railroad began doing a remarkably large amount of business."<sup>45</sup> There is also a reference to the Fugitive Slave Law, which was made much more stringent in 1850, and became the rallying cry for much abolitionist activity in Boston. The escaped slaves who had sought refuge in the North were no longer safe there: they could be extradited and returned to those who claimed them in the South. To secure their safety after 1850.

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<sup>43</sup> Deborah Root, Cannibal Culture: Art, Appreciation, and the Commodification of Difference (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 27.

<sup>44</sup> "The Escape parallels the author's autobiography in a number of incidents. The 'melodramatic' ending, where Glen and Melinda fight off their pursuers to 'jump into the boat as it leaves the shore' for Canada, is more than a great theatrical climax; it is a rendering of a real battle near Buffalo in which Brown, with black and white friends, fought off the sheriff and a posse to save slaves from recapture." James V. Hatch, editor, Black Theatre, U.S.A.: Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974 (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 34.

<sup>45</sup> Farrison, 298.

runaway slaves had to leave the country and they set their sights on Canada, where they settled several towns, one of which, Chatham, became a reputed haven. The Octoroon takes place in 1858. There is a reference in the text to a debt incurred twenty years before, in 1838. We can also tell that the action is after the 1830s because Wahnotee, the Choctaw Indian who is friendly with Paul, the slave son of Judge Peyton, is told at one point in the play to go west to his reservation. The Indians were pushed west of the Mississippi in the 1830s. The center of the action in the melodrama is Terrebonne plantation near New Orleans. The designation of Goodland, a rough translation of the name by which the Louisiana plantation is known, suggests that Boucicault may not have the same degree of enmity toward the system that Brown harbors. Indeed, that was the consensus of critics at the time. Boucicault was charged with dispensing good feelings to every one, Northerner and Southerner alike. Joseph Jefferson, who, in the original cast, performed Salem Scudder, the less venal of the two Yankee overseers, described it as "non-committal. The dialogue and characters of the play made one feel for the South, but the action proclaimed against slavery and called loudly for its abolition."<sup>46</sup> Once again, Boucicault is reading the vane of his times.<sup>47</sup> As 1850 advanced toward 1860, public

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<sup>46</sup> Arthur Hobson Quinn, A History of the American Drama, from the Beginning to the Civil War (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951), 374.

<sup>47</sup> "Most white Americans act out their need for racial subordination only when they feel that their own interests and values are challenged. The 1850's were just such a time. The accelerating agitation of black and white abolitionists for full exercise of Northern Negroes' rights, the intensified pitch of the propaganda battle over slavery, the enforcement of the fugitive slave law in the North, the increased use of race as a political issue, the controversy over Uncle Tom's Cabin, and finally the outbreak of a virtual civil war in Kansas — all combined to make slavery and race seem real and immediate threats to white Northerners. By the mid-1850's, everything Northerners were committed to —

taste tended to favor the southern side of the argument relative to slavery, which was revealing the impossibility of rapprochement between North and South.<sup>48</sup> Boucicault was not interested in alienating any segment of his audience. As a consequence, he puts equal weight on both sides in the controversy. Actually, he might be more disposed to the southern side since in the pivotal auction scene, he portrays southerners as more humane than northerners.<sup>49</sup> The auction scene is the centerpiece of the play.<sup>50</sup> Lynching the hued body and auctioning the slave body have something in common. In each, the crowd gathers specifically to enjoy its difference from the body on display. There is a scattering in each, the sundering of the body itself in the lynching and the sundering of family and personal ties in the auction. In each, the hued body is turned into a bauble, a source of amusement and titillation for the white crowd. The hanging of the hued body is the symbolic puppetizing of the hued body who has no ability to do what it wants: it can only obey the whim of the white masses. In each, the hued body is exposed to public view. In each, acquisition of the hued body is the objective. In the lynching, a piece of the hued body will suffice for satisfaction, as participants at the lynching scramble for fragments of the sacrificed corpse. On the auction block, the hued or chattel body is disposed of whole, but that disposition is dependent upon the fragmentation of the integrity of the

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national destiny, social order, their own status, the plantation myth, and the Union itself — seemed at stake.” Robert C. Toll, Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 87.

<sup>48</sup> Toll, 92.

<sup>49</sup> Hogan, 74.

<sup>50</sup> Joseph R. Roach, “Slave Spectacles and Tragic Octoroons: A Cultural

chattel community.

Whether the plantation is perceived as murky or utopian, both playwrights suggest that only the outer form is holding. The inner core is thin, vitiated. It lacks sufficient internal substance to sustain itself for long. In The Octoroon, the plantation is plagued by negligence, by benign inclusion of everyone, defenseless widow, marriage-eager heiress, Indian, foreigner, petted slaves, and Yankee opportunists; it is an over-loaded institution that stands over a chasm, brought there by absentee and ill-guided management. In The Escape, the institution of marriage is a sham and the slaves duplicitous and determined to defect. The head of the plantation in each play can be read as symbolic of slavery.<sup>51</sup> In Escape, Gaines is a medical doctor and Peyton in The Octoroon is a judge. Neither one is a good representative of his profession. Neither one lives up to the letter or to the spirit of his obligations. In the melodramas of the time, "promise making and promise keeping, whether legally binding or not, is idealized as the path to virtue for men."<sup>52</sup> Dr. Gaines does not live up to the Hippocratic oath. He wishes for a yellow fever epidemic or at least a bout of cholera because that means his pockets will be fuller; he also shirks his duty to the sick whenever possible. He refuses to treat slaves and trains Cato, a slave apprentice, to take up that duty. According to Brown, southern society is diseased, with only a distant prospect of being healed, given the venality of the medical profession,

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Genealogy of Antebellum Performance" in Theatre Survey 33.2 (November 1992):175.

<sup>51</sup> "Nineteenth-century melodrama from Pixerecourt onward relied on typological characters who stood in symbolically for moral and social attributes." McConachie, 190.

<sup>52</sup> McConachie, 188.

which Dr. Gaines represented. Brown also attacks the ministry and its assertions of sanctity. Parenthetically, this was a favorite subject of William Wells Brown. An earlier play, Experience; or, How to Give a Northern Man a Backbone, now lost but surviving in synopsis, focused on a pro-slavery minister who was whipped, a precursor of the current definition of lynching, and forced to undergo a conversion when he traveled to the South.<sup>53</sup> In The Octoroon, Judge Peyton has not used the law that he has presumably mastered in order to secure the future of his home, his widow, or his children. The judge was a spendthrift who mortgaged and remortgaged his plantation for a good time. Now his dependents are suffering because of his profligate lifestyle. Boucicault questions the viability of the law through the character or lack of character of Judge Hardin, but he extends his questioning beyond individual cases and extends it to lynching, which circumvents law and establishes itself as the only primordial authority. Both plays conclude that the foundation of the plantation manor is corrupt and its equity is eroded, if not totally defunct, in value. For Brown, the house of slavery is a den of lies, evasions, and contradictions. For Boucicault, it is prey to a legion of self-created assaults and prevarications and any letter of credit will be too late to save the best of what it once was.

The contemporary setting of The Octoroon is the 1850s, "a period in which the various strands of American society, both entangled and stretched taut by fanatic individualism, experienced a turmoil of ever-increasing intensity. The fermenting search for personal freedom that stimulated the imaginations of many individuals also pushed

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<sup>53</sup> Farrison, 278.

boundaries westward and encouraged idealism and dreams."<sup>54</sup> New Orleans was included within that arc of westward expansion, that rush of the nation for more and more territory. Scudder, the more modern and inventive overseer in The Octoroon, refers to Louisiana as the "selvage of civilization," the margin that reveals what is transpiring at the center.<sup>55</sup> Like Americans elsewhere in the country, Louisianians were churning over a concept of themselves in the melee of ethnic and regional tensions. Then and now, New Orleans was known as a city of latitude. Boucicault took dramatic advantage of his first-hand acquaintance with the expanded range of life in New Orleans during the months that he managed the Gaiety Theater, formerly the Varieties, in New Orleans. From 1855 to 1856, Boucicault took charge of the Gaiety, where his actress wife, Agnes Robertson, performed in several plays, including Violet: or the Life of an Actress.<sup>56</sup> In a magazine article published after the couple left New Orleans, Boucicault related his impressions of the multiplicity, openness, and inherent drama in that teeming urban hub on the Mississippi, which had tripled in population between 1825 and 1850.<sup>57</sup>

It was not a city. It was a theatre. It was a huge fair. Bunting of all nationalities, and of no nationality, was flaunting over the streets. Poles of liberty accentuated the 'rights of man.' Bands of music preceded

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<sup>54</sup> Meserve, 81.

<sup>55</sup> Boucicault, 37.

<sup>56</sup> Dormon, 227.

<sup>57</sup> Mary Ryan, "The American Parade: Representations of the Nineteenth-Century Social Order" in Lynn Hunt, editor, The New Cultural Editor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 136.

processions of ragged boys bearing flags and tattered banners. Irish was spoken at the wharves, German in the saloons, French in the restaurants. But the chiefest feature of this polyglot city was its boyhood --a boy in heart, but a man, and a very shrewd man, in head.<sup>58</sup>

All nationalities and ages and races took to the streets in New Orleans and unfurled the flags of their various identities. They maintained their individualities and yet they merged and coalesced and everyone became young. The nation was young. So was the time. Those who marched together in the parade celebrating the newness of their possibilities swirled together into a common ceremony that was not oppressive or reductive. The dramatic and vibrant combinations of people in the Crescent City fired Boucicault's imagination. So did the question of slavery which was being hotly discussed everywhere in the 1850s. This was the decade of the Fugitive Slave Law, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, the publication and first production of Uncle Tom's Cabin, the Dred Scott decision, and the raid of John Brown on Harper's Ferry.<sup>59</sup> Boucicault was always drawn to the contemporary, the controversial, and the vivid. In addition to Boucicault's

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<sup>58</sup> Townsend Walsh, The Career of Dion Boucicault (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967), 50.

<sup>59</sup> "[S]lavery was, without a near competitor, the dominant political issue in the 1850s, so it became for a time — at a critical time — the dominant trope through which Americans were encouraged to understand their private situation and national destiny. Slavery had slipped its bounds. It could no longer be regarded simply as the condition of some millions of black people far removed in the South: it had become a belligerent philosophy of government predicated on the elimination of freedom. It was now evidently an aggressive, expansionist culture that proposed to remake by force the lives of all Americans." Hubert J. von Frank, The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 322-323.

own sparked interest, another acknowledged source of the play was a recently published novel.

His melodrama retails the plot of Captain Mayne Reid's romance The Quadroon: or, A Lover's Adventures in Louisiana (1856). In both play and novel, a rare beauty of delicate manners and mixed race, legally exposed by the foreclosure of a mismanaged plantation, finds herself auctioned off as a slave to the highest bidder, who turns out to be the moustache-twirling villain. Reid's hero rescues the Quadroon, and then he marries her.

Boucicault reversed the outcome for the American version of his play.<sup>60</sup>

Then, two years after the play premiered in New York, he changed it again for the English rendition. Above all else, Boucicault was adaptable. He adjusted his words and situations to fit the tastes of his customers.

Scudder, the good Yankee, is always inventing gadgets. One of his newest is self-developing film, and he is using it in his photographic session with Dora Sunnyside. "I've got four plates ready, in case we miss the first shot. One of them is prepared with a self-developing liquid that I've invented. I hope it will turn out better than most of my notions."<sup>61</sup> At the time that Boucicault was writing, photography was still a novelty, invented twenty years before. Latching onto the technology of the future, he was prescient in his treatment of the visual as arbiter. A master of the message, Boucicault understood the appeal of the visual in communicating to many different groups of people,

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<sup>60</sup> Roach, "Mardi," 479.

<sup>61</sup> Boucicault, 13.

some of whom spoke different languages or at least varying dialects. For them, the picture was unifying. It became fact, irrefutable testimony. Drama appeals not only to the ear, but also to the eye. In this play which comments on the overwhelming value of the visual, Boucicault included its coming preeminence. Boucicault was influenced in his use of the camera in the plot by another novel. “[T]he accidental photographing of the murder appears to be borrowed from Albany Fonblanque’s novel, The Filibuster, while several other incidents appear to be Boucicault’s own invention.”<sup>62</sup>

Boucicault knew what elements to put together and what to leave out. He was the consummate dramatic quilter with a firm sense of the fundamental pattern of the now and the looming. Ever since his apprenticeship in the theatre when he regularly went back and forth between London and Paris, translating French plays and putting them on the stage in England, Boucicault had octopus hands. Remember those were the days before copyright law. In fact, it was Boucicault who helped to get a copyright law passed in America in 1856. Throughout his career, Boucicault adapted plays from a variety of sources, transmuting them in the process. He was a weaver of myths, which pull together strands of the past, making them visible and resplendent in the present as well as in the future.

To contact many minds at once, myth must employ a semiotic repertoire that time and usage have hallowed and rendered widely accessible, so a mythology is a composition of cultural metaphors. The creative power of myth is largely a function of the degree to which its signifiers are familiar

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<sup>62</sup> Hogan, 73.

to the audience; as a myth endures. its figures, images, tropes, and narratives become part of the semiotic repertoire, to the point that they -- and the myth as a whole -- seem organic or cosmic. For this reason, myth is inherently conservative, relying not on new or revolutionary ideas and significations but on those that have survived the changes of the years. Myth therefore tends to reinforce the dominant ideology, which itself tends to rest on tradition.<sup>63</sup>

Brown and Boucicault enlarged the treatment of hued characters. The murder of a slave had not been represented as a loss to the general community before. Yes, it was a shame when Tom was whipped to death. But it was only his former master and a few plantation slaves who regretted his passing. When Paul was killed in The Octoroon, however, there was general outrage and the men of the community came together to retaliate against the diminishment. There had never been a heroine dominant on the American stage before who, like Zoe, so radically blurred the line between slave and free. In Escape, Glen and Melinda were somewhat like George and Eliza. But in Uncle Tom's Cabin, the issue was labor and the right to enjoy the fruits of one's inventiveness. In Escape, the issue was sexual. Melinda was being pursued against her will. She was being presented with obstacles to her virtue. The slave master was inducing her to sin and she refused. This made Melinda morally superior to her master, and herein lies a clue to the mystery of why the abolitionists did not produce Brown's play in more expanded

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<sup>63</sup> Jeffrey D. Mason, Melodrama and the Myth of America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 10-11.

form. It is one thing for whites to present their foibles for correction, *en famille*. It is quite another to be depicted as morally inferior by a former, supposedly depraved and ignorant, slave. In Uncle Tom's Cabin, St. Clair, the kindly plantation master, had his faults, but desire for dark flesh wasn't one of them. Desire is a leveler. To desire and not be desired is demeaning and the cause of suffering. White playwrights did not usually depict whites as suffering. That was the province of slaves. But Brown, who had been a slave, showed that the master did not always win. Sometimes, the master was tricked into loss. That was the case with Cato, the slippery slave in Escape. Cato is a new image in the slave pantheon. He is wily. His acquiescent, pleasing demeanor is a sham. His primary interest is himself, and he hides his intent behind a surface of minstrel charm. He plays the game for his own ends. The anagram of his name is Coat and he is a facile character who can change his identity with only the exertion required to pull on another garment. The eroding line between slave and free is a new topic in American drama. Following the precedent set by the dramatizations of Uncle Tom's Cabin, there was a tendency in the plays of the 1850s to humanize the slave. Even in that play, some slaves, like Topsy, were sometimes assumed to be born from the ground, like a plant. Others were thought to be harnessed to the furrows of the soil, like an animal. Slaves were natural creatures, figments of the moment, incapable of conceiving a future. Why think of the future? It would be just like the present, every day blending into the next until the day of death. Every day belonged to the master and so did any conception of the future. In The Octoroon, the humanity of Paul is seen by the reaction of the community to his death. They are outraged and thus we understand that Paul is valuable to them. He is not

just another piece of chattel. Zoe is also humanized by the heavy dose of white blood flowing through her veins. It is telling that the role of Zoe was played by a white actress, Agnes Robertson, the wife of the playwright. Only in this manner was the characterization of the hued woman improved. “[S]he was distinctly a new addition to the Negro stage-type. Not a servant, she had much the same status in the household as the whites. Like the typical Southern belle she was gentle, delicate and frail.”<sup>64</sup> In The Octoroon, it is the influx of white blood that humanizes. In Escape, it is character that humanizes.

When Escape and The Octoroon were written, lynching had not yet acquired the profile that it would later possess. The meaning and form of lynching was in flux. In the eighteenth century, when lynching originated in America, it referred to whipping as a penalty for those suspected of lawless behavior who could not be easily convicted.<sup>65</sup> Either because of time constraints or the pettiness of the crime, retaliation against the transgressor was handled outside the usual legal channels. The term retained that meaning at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1817, a New Yorker named Williams was charged with robbing a store in Indiana, but protested innocence. “Only circumstantial evidence could be adduced against him and he was acquitted. ‘The people of the place,

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Moody, America Takes the Stage: Romanticism in American Drama and Theatre, 1750-1900 (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1969), 76.

<sup>65</sup> “Lynching was an American institution--it went back to the 1780s, to the last phase of the Revolutionary War when Colonel Charles Lynch used ‘lynch law’ against British Loyalists in Virginia Piedmont. It was used increasingly against blacks, but in the early decades of the nineteenth century, it usually expressed itself in 39 lashes (in accordance with the Old Testament); hanging came later.” Johnson, 317.

however, prejudiced against him, as a Yankee, deputed four persons to inform him, that unless he quitted the town and state immediately, he should receive Lynch's law, that is, a whipping in the woods."<sup>66</sup> Lynching was conceived during a time of war to handle enemies or outsiders: it remained a policy for those considered social excludables. Today, when the word lynching is mentioned, the automatic assumption is that the victim is hued, and that the end result of lynching is, at the very least, humiliation. Lynching encompasses a range of punishment that has as its object the containment of the sufferer within a painful dimension. Often, the result of the castigation is fatal. Traditionally, the public death of the hued was prefaced by extreme torture, often taking the form of burning. That was not unilaterally the case in antebellum America.

Whites were lynched with surprising frequency before the Civil War. Some were killed, some were merely given corporal chastisement. Abolitionists were the favorite focus of antebellum lynching: in three out of four cases of pre-Civil-War lynching, the white victims were harmed or killed because they were opposed to slavery.<sup>67</sup> One lynching that became a cause celebre at the time was the 1837 mob murder in Alton, Illinois, of an abolitionist editor and minister named Elijah Lovejoy, a graduate of Princeton. The killing of Elijah Lovejoy galvanized John Brown. As a memorial service

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<sup>66</sup> James Elbert Cutler, Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States (Montclair, New Jersey: Patterson Smith, 1969), 76-77.

<sup>67</sup> James Gordon Bennett, editor of the *Herald* in New York, characterized the abolitionist threat in 1835. "The abolitionists, a few thousand crazy-headed blockheads have actually frightened fifteen million people out of their senses. So terribly scared are these fifteen million that the ordinary operation of laws against evil doers are thrown aside as too slow." Richards, 10.

honoring Lovejoy was concluding, "Brown suddenly stood up, raised his right hand, and vowed that here, before God, in this church, in the presence of these witnesses, he would consecrate his life to the destruction of slavery."<sup>68</sup> Four days before The Octoroon opened in 1859, John Brown was hung for leading the assault on Harper's Ferry, Virginia, which he conceived as the first stage in a war to end human bondage.<sup>69</sup> The reason that I use the term *hung* for John Brown rather than writing that he was lynched is because those who sentenced Brown to death belonged to the same social and political class as John Brown. Further, the guilt of Brown was never in question. It was not just alleged. The lynch victim is never on equal social or political footing with those who require and take delight in his or her death. The lynch victim may or may not have committed a crime. For the lynch victim, the presumption of guilt resides primarily in his or her appearance. The fault is not the commission of a specific act, but membership in a specific group.

In his youth, William Wells Brown had worked for six months as an errand boy in Lovejoy's printing shop. Then one day as he was going about his duties in the streets of the city, he was beaten up by several young thugs who were the sons of slaveholders; later the father of one of the boys caned Brown so badly that it took him five weeks to recover. It was while in the employ of Lovejoy that Brown began to teach himself the rudiments of reading.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Stephen B. Oates, To Purge this Land: A Biography of John Brown (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 41-42.

<sup>69</sup> Roach, "Slave," 177.

<sup>70</sup> Farrison, 20-22.

Lynching originally meant public punishment that the community, or representatives thereof, witnessed and approved. In the sense of public discipline that might be administered as flogging, the 1856 caning of Charles Sumner, the Massachusetts senator, qualifies as a lynching. Further, there is a social hierarchy inherent in lynching. The lyncher does not rate the lynched as a peer. Preston Brooks, the South Carolina planter, who took out his aggression against Sumner considered him a social subordinate. That was the reason Brooks decided against a duel with Sumner. "Brooks refrained from challenging Sumner because, according to the code of the Old South, a duel must be between social equals; to call Sumner out to the field of honor would be to give him, in Southern eyes, a social respectability he could not otherwise attain. To punish an insulting inferior,' the Southern code ruled, 'one used not a pistol or sword but a cane or horsewhip.'"<sup>71</sup> Brooks beat Sumner in his chambers in Washington, D.C., in the presence of several senators and other onlookers. At least one witness later indicated approval of what Brooks had done.<sup>72</sup> Brooks beat Sumner so relentlessly that his gutta-percha cane was in slivers after the caning was done. But it was Sumner's body, rather than Brooks's walking stick that bore the full brunt of the violent encounter between the two, one a Northerner and the other a Southerner. Sumner was literally beaten bloody. "Sumner's 'shirt around the neck and collar was soaked with blood. The waistcoat had many marks of blood upon it; also the trowsers. The broadcloth coat was

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<sup>71</sup> David Donald, Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), 291.

<sup>72</sup> Donald, 296.

covered with blood on the shoulders so thickly that the blood had soaked through the cloth, even through the padding, and appeared on the inside; there was also a great deal of blood on the back of the coat and its sides."<sup>73</sup>

Lynchers rarely incur dire consequences. They enjoy protected status. They are often thought of as social heroes, doing what others would want to do if they had the nerve. Whether the endorsement is stated, lynchers are usually in confident possession of the sanction of their peers. "The Senate made no move to redress Sumner's injury. The Republican caucus, which met shortly after the assault, decided that it would be best not to make a party issue of the attack and that Massachusetts congressmen should not take the lead in any investigation."<sup>74</sup> According to the conventional interpretation of the lynching, Sumner, a well-known abolitionist, had provoked Brooks when, in a speech entitled, "The Crime against Kansas," he had impugned the honor of several southerners including Andrew Butler, a leading slaveholder in South Carolina. Butler was a relative of Preston Brooks. Earlier scholars wrote that Brooks was motivated to attack Sumner because of familial connections. A more recent interpretation is that Brooks's response "was not an impetuous personal act but was approved by much of the Democratic party both in anticipation of and following the attack."<sup>75</sup> A key component in lynching is the inequality of the ratio between attacker(s) and attacked. Even in the case where the

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<sup>73</sup> Donald, 297.

<sup>74</sup> Donald, 298.

<sup>75</sup> Michael D. Pierson, "'All Southern Society Is Assailed by the Foulest Charges': Charles Sumner's 'The Crime Against Kansas' and the Escalation of Republican Anti-slavery Rhetoric," The New England Quarterly 68.4 (1995):553.

attacker is single, the lynching scenario still prevails if the attacker is acting in concert with his (or her) peers. The arm might be single, but the force behind it is plural. New research shows that Brooks and his southern compatriots were angered by the morals charge leveled against slavery in Sumner's speech; Sumner characterized slavery as sexually rapacious.<sup>76</sup> This was an indictment to which Brown and Boucicault give testimony in their dramatic texts. Sumner obviously incited intense feeling and Brooks beat him so severely that it took "more than three years before he was able regularly to assume his Senate duties."<sup>77</sup>

It is likely that the national prominence of Sumner occasioned an indignant outcry in some quarters against untempered violence which may have found expression in these two lynching melodramas written shortly after the lynching of Sumner. Sumner's charge of sexual impropriety on the part of the slaveowners, some of whom were breeding their own children, for the slave market, was echoed in the two melodramas by Brown and Boucicault. Sumner was partially inspired to make his charge of sexual impropriety on the part of many southern slavers by the writing of Margaret Douglass, a white school teacher in Virginia who was incarcerated for instructing slaves.<sup>78</sup> Douglass observed that

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<sup>76</sup> Pierson, 533.

<sup>77</sup> Donald, 312.

<sup>78</sup> In 1959, Lorraine Hansberry was commissioned to write a play to be televised on NBC in commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the Civil War. In that play, The Drinking Gourd, the slave term for the Big Dipper which was used as a celestial guide by runaways determined to find their way North, a young male slave named Hannibal who is learning to read and write is blinded by an overseer, on the direction of Everett Sweet, the son of the plantation master, who may be Hannibal's half-brother. A reading and writing slave reduces the disparity between slave and master, a disparity

sexual relations between master and slave occur "to a fearful extent throughout the South. ... The white mothers and daughters of the South ... have seen their dearest affections trampled upon -- their hopes of domestic happiness destroyed. ... Southern wives know that their husbands come to them reeking with pollution from the arms of their tawny mistresses. Father and son seek the same sources of excitement, and alike gratify their inhuman propensities, scarcely blushing when detected."<sup>79</sup> In Escape, Mrs. Gaines is the neglected wife as Dr. Gaines makes sexual predations against the virtue of Melinda. In The Octoroon, M'Closky offers Zoe the opportunity to be his concubine, an offer she finds easy to refuse. In Escape, a slave owner named Wildmarsh comes to visit Dr. Gaines shortly after he has sold a young blue-eyed slave girl of whom his wife was jealous. Gaines says that he had always thought the slave was his daughter. All Wildmarsh will say in reply is that people will talk. He praises her beauty and regrets that he had to sell her before she reached maturity and could command a higher price for her appearance, but he never denies paternity.<sup>80</sup> In The Octoroon, Judge Peyton may not have bred Zoe for the auction block, but his laissez-faire attitude led her there.

An abolitionist from the dread state of Massachusetts, perceived by many

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which can be exploited howsoever the master chooses. It is this disparity that renders the human master into a semidivine lord who will have no brooking of his will and, under the tenets of lynching, will punish any such brooking to the fullest extent of pain that the body will allow. The high price that the reading slave was made to pay in the Hansberry play throws into high relief the odds against William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass and other runaways who refused to suffer enforced disparity. Robert Nemiroff, editor, The Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 210.

<sup>79</sup> Pierson, 552.

<sup>80</sup> Hatch, 44.

southerners as the guilty crux of antislavery activity, is one target of lynching in Escape. Mr. White, the abolitionist, arrives at the American Hotel -- a comment on the commercialism of America where everything can be bought and sold, even human bodies -- after Mr. Jennings, a slave speculator. Business is booming at the American Hotel, which is on the banks of the Ohio River, a river from which one can go anywhere, North or South.<sup>81</sup> The Ohio was also the place of origin for the minstrel character, Jim Crow, created by Thomas Dartmouth Rice.. "Coming out of the commercial bustle on the Ohio River, wearing Uncle Sam's red, white, and blue striped trousers and a blue coat beneath his black face, the enormously popular 'Daddy' Rice combined Yankee, frontiersman, and minstrel into a single national icon."<sup>82</sup> The American Hotel symbolizes the country that exists at a crossroads and is drawing all manner of men through its portals and to its tables. To partake fully of the communal fare, all these newcomers have to be shorn of their specific ethnic identities and recast as generically white, another term for American. Whiteness, however, is not a given. It is a state of mind, and a pledge of allegiance to the rightness of slavery guarantees *entree* into this ideological nation. Mr. Jennings, who has arrived with thirty-three slaves in tow, is well received at the hotel, but Mr. White is not. Mr. Jennings has visited this hotel often before. He is greeted as a regular. Mr. White is a newcomer. The ways of the South are foreign to him. He doesn't believe in

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<sup>81</sup> When he was a young man and just before taking the printing job with Elijah Lovejoy, the playwright worked at the Missouri Hotel, which undoubtedly provided him with a sampling of personalities and incidents which he fitted to the context of this drama. Farrison, 20.

<sup>82</sup> Michael Rogin, Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 28.

slavery but he has landed in a spot where the people are committed to it. White questions the existence of slavery. The response is that there are different laws for white and slave.

SECOND LOUNGER: He didn't mean that this was a free country for niggers. He meant that it's free for white people. And another thing, ef you get to talking 'bout freedom for niggers, you'll catch what you won't like, mister. It's right for niggers to be slaves.

WHITE: But I saw some white slaves.

FIRST LOUNGER: Well, they're white niggers.<sup>83</sup>

Under a system where slavery rather than color was definitional, it was not a contradiction for whites, those who had been amalgamated into whiteness as well as those who happened to be caught within the maw of slavery for whatever reason, to be classed as chattel. Slavery defined status.<sup>84</sup> And proximity to slavery, whether it was biological proximity or emotional proximity, determined the category into which one was placed within the southern milieu. Mr. White loses his whiteness, the protection and privilege assumed to attach to white skin, when he professes views contrary to those that are acceptable to and supportive of the southern status quo. Mr. White has come to a place where the inhabitants make their own laws. They respect nothing but their own authority. Those who do not share their perspective put their lives in jeopardy. In short, they become temporary slaves and can be treated as such. They lose the presumption of

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<sup>83</sup> Hatch, 53.

<sup>84</sup> "Slavery ... founded and fixed the meaning of blackness more than any transparent and transhistorical meaning of black skin founded the category of slavery." Hale, 4.

innocence and are immediately and unquestionably guilty. Shortly after the above exchange, Dr. Gaines, accompanied by Cato, comes to the hotel in search of Glen and Melinda who have run away. The loungers in the hotel accuse Mr. White of having stolen these two slaves. He is stunned that his constitutional right to express himself is denied. The bartender tells him, "We don't care for Constitutions nor nothin' else. We made the Constitution, and we'll break it. But you had better hide away; they are coming, and they'll lynch you, that they will. Come with me; I'll hide you in the cellar."<sup>85</sup>

The Muddy Creek slaves are the other focus of lynching, in its widest interpretation as corporal punishment inflicted for any infraction whatever against those considered social inferiors. In Escape, several of the slaves are regularly whipped and tormented with promises of being roasted and skinned alive. Their crimes are often gossamer. They are faulted with dressing well, pilfering and then cooking an old goose, refusing to marry within a week of losing a spouse, and disdaining to commit adultery. Their real crime is opposing what the slave master or mistress wants. Lynching often punishes independence. On the plantation, the slave is supposed to have nothing except what the master wants him or her to have. It is axiomatic that no slave is supposed to be the occasion of envy or have anything that others need to respect. A slave is only fit to be the object of scorn. Dr. Gaines expresses resentment at seeing a well-dressed slave, and it was the sight of this slave that made him want to take a whip to him.<sup>86</sup> Dressing beyond one's station was a lynchable offense during slavery and after. Lynching was sumptuary.

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<sup>85</sup> Hatch, 54.

<sup>86</sup> Hatch, 51.

It set limits on what the hued could do and be. Lynching defined the borders of honorary whiteness and privilege. Those whites in good standing could transgress any limits they chose. They could fornicate with slaves and kill any one who threatened their complaisance. But the slaves could not strike back, they were circumscribed, imprisoned in impotence. On the plantations, they were resident victims, vulnerable to anyone who cared to lash out at their bodies, to chastise them with violence. White women would also vent their vengeance and bad feelings on the slaves. They could treat them as whipping posts, bull's eyes for their anxieties. Mrs. Gaines knows that a "mulatto wench" is a rival for her husband's time, and she expresses her resentment by beating a slave woman who inconveniences her in Escape.<sup>87</sup> "I'll whip you well when I'm done here. I'll skin you from head to toe ... I'll whip you well for aggravating me as you have today. ...I've no doubt that I will miss going to heaven on your account. But I will whip you well before I leave this world, that I will. Get the cowhide and follow me to the cellar."<sup>88</sup> Excessive violence, even if it ends in death, is instructive for the slave. That is the means by which slaves--those who watch as well as those who are tortured--learns the penalty for violating the bounds of the circumference they are allotted. Lynching, during slavery and after, defines the circle of behavioral permissibility. And that circle is very small indeed.

After Mrs. Gaines takes Hannah to the basement for her physical lesson, she decides that she will marry Hannah to Cato since Hannah's husband has just been sold to

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<sup>87</sup> Hatch, 45.

<sup>88</sup> Hatch, 42-43.

a trader. When Hannah protests that she only cares about her husband, even if he is gone, and she doesn't love Cato, Mrs. Gaines insists that she jump the broom anyway. Slaves didn't merit a traditional marriage ceremony, nor did their affections carry much weight outside the doors to their cabins. Mrs. Gaines wants this slave marriage because she thinks it is a good way to keep Hannah and Cato under her thumb. When Hannah continues to resist this new bond, Mrs. Gaines calls for the cowhide one more time and takes Hannah back to the cellar to beat her into compliance. Marriage for slaves is not about feeling; it is about the convenience of the master class. Slavery and its repressiveness took the milk of human kindness from many a white female breast. Whipping, a less than capital form of lynching, is often expressive of frustrated sexual feeling. Power over the object, not gained in other, more legitimate ways, creates an alternative sense of potency and satisfaction in the person who wields the lash, the means of maintaining an *other* in obeisance and submission. Clearly, Mrs. Gaines could not stop her husband's philandering eye. He had been unfaithful before. He had fathered at least one child who was present on the plantation, constantly reminding her of her husband's failure to sustain his marriage vows. More than likely, he would be unfaithful again. Mrs. Gaines knew that he had selected another sexual favorite from among the slaves. He told his wife: "My, dear, I'll sell any servant from the place to suit you, except Melinda. I can't think of selling her--I can't think of it."<sup>89</sup> Mrs. Gaines knew that she had lost control over her husband, but she believed she could control the lives of the slaves in her charge. She had less power than her husband, but she had more power than the

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<sup>89</sup> Hatch, 45.

slaves, particularly the female slaves who were not protected by the pleasure of her husband. And she expressed that power negatively by venting her anger on those whose station was lower than her own rather than confronting the author of her discomfort. To maintain her own social standing as a wife, she could not force her husband to call a halt to his infidelities. In the faces of the slaves, Mrs. Gaines could read her own lapses and failures as a woman, wife, and mother. Dr. Gaines made it clear that he would not put up any resistance to a divorce.<sup>90</sup> She was no longer necessary to him. She had borne him no sons, but a slave woman had. Other slave women would probably bear him other children. Her services as a wife are decorative in public, but not essential in private.

Without his wife's knowledge, Dr. Gaines has settled Melinda in a small cottage ten miles from Muddy Creek, where he intends to maintain her as his concubine. He has removed her from the plantation to waylay his wife's suspicions. He has told Mrs. Gaines that Melinda has been sold. Because of past experience, Mrs. Gaines does not trust what her husband has told her. "He took the hussy away yesterday, and says he sold her to a trader; but I don't believe it. At any rate, if she's in the neighborhood, I'll find her; that I will. No man ever fools me."<sup>91</sup> Melinda is not happy about being sequestered away in this hideout. All she wants is out. She has no desire to be the mistress of Dr. Gaines and play circumscribed dress-up with the clothes that he promises her. She refuses Gaines, protesting that her affections belong to another, to her lawful husband, Glen, who is a slave on a separate plantation. "Sir, I am your slave; you can do as you please with the

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<sup>90</sup> Hatch, 53.

<sup>91</sup> Hatch, 48.

avails of my labor, but you shall never tempt me to swerve from the path of virtue."<sup>92</sup>

Gaines knows that Melinda loves Glen and he has purchased him to bring him under his total control. Once Gaines learns that Glen and Melinda are married, he exclaims,

"Melinda, you shall never see Glen again. I have bought him from Hamilton, and I will return to Muddy Creek, and roast him at the stake."<sup>93</sup> Roasting was standard in the lynching ceremony. Gaines would brook no competition for the body of the woman he wanted. He owned her and was therefore entitled to all of her, or so he believed. He recognized no right besides his own, certainly not the right of a slave. Glen should have known better than to oppose the will of a master. Burning the life out of Glen would teach him a lesson. Lynching would show Glen who was boss. Gaines and Glen meet and when Gaines hits him with a cane, Glen strikes Gaines, an act for which he is jailed. When an overseer is sent to whip Glen to the full extent of his ability to withstand punishment, the overseer is attacked and Glen escapes. Gaines calls for his hounds and swears that he will "whip him to death."<sup>94</sup> The lynching hunt has begun.

It ends at the American Hotel. Cato goes there with Dr. Gaines in order to track Glen and Melinda. Cato, Glen, Melinda, and Mr. White, the northern abolitionist, follow their separate paths to freedom and then jump together into the ferry that will take them across the waters to liberation. Together, they pull away from the shore of the past. Cato has changed his outfit for the trip. He has slipped out of his slave identity and clothed

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<sup>92</sup> Hatch, 51

<sup>93</sup> Hatch, 50.

<sup>94</sup> Hatch, 51.

himself as the master. He has disrobed Dr. Gaines. To lynch someone is to triumph over another, to remove from that person the possibility of retaliation. Disempowering the lynched empowered the lyncher. Such was the seesaw in the racial playground of America. Cato symbolically lynched and raped Dr. Gaines. He took away his identity. He left him in his underwear.

Under slavery, lynching and rape operated to keep the white woman and slave in check. Divisiveness was the *modus operandi*. One slave would sometimes tell on another. Cato told Mrs. Gaines when Hannah stole the old, stringy goose. Gender solidarity was rare. More often than not, the mistress had little sympathy for the female slave who could be her competitor in love. A wife who had been sexually left behind had limited options for retaliation. Divorce was frowned upon, and even if a wife were to pursue that option, she might lose everything she had once called her own, as happened with the English born actress Fanny Kemble who married a southern plantation owner.<sup>95</sup> Certainly, there were happy marriages in the antebellum South, just as there were those that were less than felicitous.<sup>96</sup> There were enough unhappy marriages for Charles

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<sup>95</sup> "Under nineteenth century laws of coverture, a woman personal property, her earnings and her children belonged entirely to her husband." Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, "So Unfemininely Masculine': Discourse, True/False Womanhood and the American Career of Fanny Kemble," *Theatre Survey* 40.2(November 1999):34.

<sup>96</sup> Wives (slave women could not technically become wives) were almost as incarcerated in their circumstances as slaves. Even Kemble, a renowned actress from an illustrious continental family, was totally subservient to her husband, Pierce Butler. If Kemble, a woman of public prominence, was forced to submit to the will of her husband, we can imagine the degree to which many women of lesser visibility were dominated by the patriarchal yoke. Kemble was under the thumb of her husband to such an extent that she contractually agreed to "conform to all rules and regulations" stipulated by her husband. Mullenix, 33.

Sumner to make an issue in the Senate of sexual laxity in the South; for Margaret Douglas to write a pamphlet denouncing the sexual excesses in which southern gentlemen engaged regularly with their slaves; and for playwrights on both sides of the racial coin to portray the southern antebellum marriage as one where infidelity was the norm, instead of an unusual occurrence. A wife could ill afford outright insubordination to her husband. Neither could the slave. The threat of lynching and rape exacts subservience. Slaves who dared defy the authority of the slaveowner had to be punished in a way that was summary and excessive. Non-conformity was met with lynching. A rebellious male slave who loved a female slave might find the woman of his choice being seduced by the master. A female slave who did not succumb to the wishes of her master might be whipped, even to the point of death. The imperial lesson had to be taught. Resistance was futile. That was often the way things were in the South. Slavery was a kind of moral frontier where the rules were written by those in control of the whip. They were the giants striding the earth and the other creatures were there only to do their bidding. It was the same in the frontier areas where the assembly of men in a given region wrote the law with their behavior. What they did and what they said had to be immediately obeyed. Not to comply meant death.

Lynching and rape figure prominently in Escape and The Octoroon. Both express the limitless power of the master relative to the slave. There is nothing that the master cannot demand of the slave. The master controls the life and body of the slave, its very breath and pleasure. The slightest loophole through which the slave may evade the dominion of the master is closed off, constricted. The slave is supposed to possess

nothing, neither in public nor in private outside the ken and approval of the master. The full compass of slave life, from birth to death, sits in the palm of the master. Lynching and rape are forms of suppression under the regime of slavery. Both ravage the body of the slave. Both involve the eyes of the self and of others. The slave woman who is raped and impregnated reads, on her body, the evidence of her subjugation. So do others. The slave who is whipped and lynched sees the evidence of his bodily destruction on his body. He sees and feels the scars of subjection. So can others. The raped, generally but not always a woman, and the lynched, generally but not always a man, exhibit the spectacular dimension of the discipline of suffering that enforces the rule of slavery. Together, lynching and rape express the range of containment required to keep the male and female chattel body -- adult as well as child -- in check, tethered to the will of the master. The auction block is prologue and epilogue to lynching and rape. The refractory male slave, the banished female slave, the child with the telltale resemblance to the master can be sold and the new mistress, the more conciliatory slave, the skilled blacksmith, the pleasant pickaninny, and the young field hand can be acquired on the auction block. Thus, the site of sale and purchase exists within the same disciplinary continuum of slavery as lynching and rape. Lynching and rape are fundamentally linked. Both involve abduction, subjugation, and domination. In the traditional American ceremony of lynching, the body is hunted and then paraded as a captive through public areas to the place of exhibition and execution. In lynching and in rape, the body is abducted; its lowly status is palpable and attractive; the weakness of the captive contrasts with and undergirds the power of the one(s) exerting control. Lynching and rape are also symbolic

of enslavement. The body African was captured, its status made low in America, where its demoted presence enhanced the position of those who could dictate its every move. The slaveocracy was predicated on the curtailment of power in the body of difference. In the same way, male power elevates itself by constricting the sphere of self-assertion for the female body of difference. Rape and lynching are complementary actions. The will of the other, the different, is eliminated in each, and the victim body is coerced in each. Brown shows how the tyranny of lynching and rape functions in the South.

So does Boucicault, although he is more divided in his attitude toward lynching and rape than Brown. Salem Scudder verbally denounces lynching in The Octoroon, but the workers on the docks, the communal throng, ratify that form of instant frontier justice. When it comes to rape, Boucicault puts the burden of punishment on the slave. The daughter of rape, Zoe, is made to suffer for the supposed blemish of her blood. Zoe possesses a speck of hue, and her hybrid status is a danger to the inviolability of the white community, members of which have bred from their loins this symbol of its own infiltration. Boucicault does not excoriate the master class for its lustful behavior. In the South on the jagged fringes of civilization, the provenance of law is printed on the human breast, and there are occasions when lynching, the rush to punishment, is justified. At least that's what Scudder says toward the end of The Octoroon when, thanks to an image fixed on film, the identity of the murderer is revealed, and the quick punishment of the one assumed to have committed murder is considered an expeditious affair.

What's the law? When the ship's abroad on the ocean, when the army is  
before the enemy, where in thunder's the law? It is in the hearts of brave

men, who can tell right from wrong, and from whom justice can't be bought. So it is here, in the wilds of the West, where our hatred of crime is measured by the speed of our execution -- where necessity is law. I say, then, air you honest men? Air you true? Put your hands on your naked breasts, and let every man as don't feel a real American heart there, bustin' up with freedom, truth, and right, let that man step out -- that's the oath I put to ye -- and then say, Darn ye, go it!<sup>97</sup>

In order to escape the lynching odds of many to one, M'Closky creates a diversion by setting fire to a steamboat. M'Closky slips into the water and swims away. He doesn't know it, but Wahnotee has slipped into the water behind him. In the American version, Wahnotee kills M'Closky offstage. The lynching frenzy that Scudder endorsed has not been carried out by the civilized community of white males. The job of making M'Closky pay for his crime has been ceded to Wahnotee, who has become a surrogate for the will of the white community. He is their proxy, the one who is savage enough to bloody his hands. It is tempting to wonder whether Wahnotee would have been assigned the job of killing M'Closky if Paul, M'Closky's victim, were not hued. In other words, even though the white community made a vocal outcry against the death of Paul, perhaps they were not sufficiently incensed against the loss of pickaninny blood to rend white flesh in retaliation. The white conception of self thinks of the self only as civilized. It is the other who is always savage.

In the English version of the play, first presented at the Adelphi Theatre in

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<sup>97</sup> Boucicault, 33.

London in 1861. the play ended with a difference. The confrontation between Wahnotee and M'Closky takes place on stage. On one side of the stage, Wahnotee drags the body of M'Closky, which he stabs over and over again. On the other side of the stage, George walks on with Zoe in his arms. Zoe revives in the English production.<sup>98</sup> Miscegenation was not such a taboo in England, "nor was slavery such a raw issue."<sup>99</sup> So Zoe marries George Peyton in England. The English version remained popular for over a decade. In 1862, while the Civil War was raging in the states, The Octoroon was produced at the Queen's Theatre and Opera House in Edinburgh and again in London at the New Adelphi. The play returned to the same Edinburgh theatre in 1863 and returned again in 1869 when it was produced at the Theatre Royal. In 1877, it was performed at Town Hall in Folkstone, England.

Back in North America, the old ending persisted. Having a bit of tainted blood from the slave side of the American family--*out, out damned spot*--did not spell happiness, only fatality. To some extent because it favored neither the North nor South, The Octoroon was revived continuously throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. The play was even-handed and could be enjoyed by all. It depicted bad points on both sides--the South had grown weak and effeminate, the North was peopled with grasping, scheming business types with barely a good heart anywhere. The Octoroon was a malleable bit of theatre. It could be adjusted to fit the desires of its various audiences. After the war, many in the country indulged in nostalgia about the wonderful days of

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<sup>98</sup> Roach, "Slave," 177.

<sup>99</sup> Hogan, 74-75.

slavery.<sup>100</sup> This desire to recreate the past was reflected in minstrelsy which, in its post-bellum phase, specialized in plantation scenes and skits that became monumental after the end of Reconstruction in 1876. Over and over, the story of the tragedy of race played on America's urban stages. Between 1862 and 1878, there were eleven productions of The Octoroon in Boston and six in Philadelphia. A poster from the first Philadelphia production at the Arch Street Theatre in March 1860 refers to "nightly crowds," and reports that "this exquisite play will be presented for the seventeenth time." The Octoroon also found fame in Canada, which had some interest in the slave question since a number of fugitive slaves found refuge within its borders. In August of 1860, there was an engagement in Montreal at the Theatre Royal. A poster for that production proclaimed that "4,000,000 People Have Witnessed this Drama in England and the U.S." The show did not travel to England until 1861, but it is possible that a tour was already planned at the time of the Montreal opening where it was heralded as "the most successful play

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<sup>100</sup> "After the Civil War, white minstrels concentrated their portrayals of Southern Negroes, a minor but significant portion of the show, on the nostalgic Old Darky. Whether these characters had gone North and then returned or had never left, they found their old plantation gone, destroyed by the war. Aged, weak, and alone, they recalled the happy, carefree prewar days, which further underscored the tragedy of the destruction of the plantation. Since it was gone, however, audiences did not have to hear protests against the more unfortunate aspects of the plantation--like slavery. Yet they could still bask in its warmth through the memories of the Old Darky. They could envy his carefree life of perpetual childhood--singing, dancing, and frolicking. They could even momentarily share his simple world, free of the worries, insecurities, and responsibilities that they had to face. At the same time, they could feel comfortably superior to him and certain that, whatever else changed in their lives, he would always be their subordinate. Through him they could also mourn for lost simplicity, order, and control. Although he certainly did not offer an antidote for their problems, the Old Darky provided a temporary diversion, a reassuring certainty that whites desperately needed and clung to." Toll, 187.

produced in modern times."<sup>101</sup>

The Octoroon also traveled west. In 1878, it was produced at the Baldwin in San Francisco where David Belasco served his apprenticeship as a playwright and stage manager, a job designation with functions similar to what a director does today. Five years before the first San Francisco production at the Baldwin, Belasco had worked for a limited period as Boucicault's secretary.<sup>102</sup> "Belasco was really the last significant twitch of the Boucicault tradition in the American theater [sic]. He admired Dion, he was much influenced by him, he had briefly been his amanuensis when Boucicault was appearing at Piper's Opera House in Virginia City, and he had later made a revision of The Octoroon."<sup>103</sup> The Octoroon was popular in the West, perhaps because it depicted a social as well as a geographical frontier.<sup>104</sup> In the summer of 1881, The Octoroon returned to San Francisco and the Baldwin, the theatre with which Belasco was connected. He heightened the chase scene between Wahnotee and M'Closky. "Belasco approached the pictorial development of the stage play much in the way that early film directors approached the chase sequence. In the need for a rapid succession of stage pictures Belasco had supplemented the conventional methods with the panorama. He had

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<sup>101</sup> The Octoroon Clipping File, The Billy Rose Collection, New York City Public Library.

<sup>102</sup> Hogan, 113.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> "It tells the story of the radical reduction of one kind of frontier, that of multiple identities, which are primarily a matter of culture, into another kind of frontier, that of the catastrophic antinomies of manifest destiny, which are primarily a matter of race." Roach, "Mardi", 479.

thus attempted, in a limited way, the kind of pictorial sequence which would suggest the motion picture."<sup>105</sup> The next summer, The Octoroon was performed again at the Baldwin. Both productions were full of changes that Belasco had wrought, but the second production was much grander. Minstrelsy was in its mammoth stage at that point. Four or five minstrel performers were no longer enough. Excess was the fashion, and The Octoroon was given a minstrel flair under Gustave Frohman in association with Belasco. The Octoroon was embellished with the entire cast of Callender's Minstrels, which enlarged the corps by more than 150 persons.<sup>106</sup>

Before completing its stint in San Francisco, The Octoroon had celebrated its twentieth anniversary at Haverly's Theatre on Broadway in 1879.<sup>107</sup> A revival of this melodrama two decades after its controversial debut testifies to the popularity of this antebellum story of forbidden love on a southern plantation.<sup>108</sup> "The audience was large and evidently well pleased with the production ... The Old Dominion Colored Vocalists introduced some of the quaint melodies ascribed to the plantation band in the old days of servitude, and pleased the audience sufficiently to receive encores for their various

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<sup>105</sup> Nicholas A. Vardac, Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), 123.

<sup>106</sup> William T. Leonard, Masquerade in Black (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 330.

<sup>107</sup> Programme from Haverly's Theatre dated November 17, 1879 in the Museum of the City of New York, Dion Boucicault Folder.

<sup>108</sup> The card catalogue at the Billy Rose Collection at the New York City Public Library lists memorabilia, poster, programmes and photographs from thirty-five productions prior to the 1879 twentieth anniversary revival at Haverly's. This list is certainly not comprehensive, but indicates the extent of the play's continuing appeal.

selections." a reviewer wrote in the New York Dramatic Mirror.<sup>109</sup>

Unlike the Boucicault play which was produced consistently throughout the nineteenth century, Escape had to wait until the twentieth century before being accorded a production that was not tied to the presence of the author. The Escape was produced at Emerson College in Boston in 1971. It was later adapted and staged three times, once at the University of Iowa, once at a college in Connecticut, and once at a professional theater, the Penumbra, in Minneapolis.<sup>110</sup> Its status as essentially a closet drama speaks to the fewer number of stages on which the work of the hued can receive a viewing and a hearing. Escape was dismissed for a while by hued as well as white scholars, but the writing of William Wells Brown is being redefined by a new generation of conscientious and appreciative scholars at the end of the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. It is being discovered that the ideas of Brown are very much in synchrony with the contemporary world. His time is now.<sup>111</sup>

The escape of Glen, Melinda, and Cato, their willed relocation to a space of freedom where the body and flesh of the formerly chattelized could assume its full and proper agency, symbolizes the departure of the hued from a state of dependence and subjugation. To their advantage they were using the less-than-bloody violence of

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<sup>109</sup> New York Dramatic Mirror, November 22, 1879.

<sup>110</sup> Hatch, 37.

<sup>111</sup> "[R]ecent scholarship on Brown indicates his importance, presenting him as a manipulator of the conventions of blackface minstrelsy ..., as a commentator on 'American genealogies' ..., as an interrogator of the 'racial grotesque' ..., and, in a study that terms *Clotel* 'a necessary prerequisite to [the] study of black women writers and the marriage plot,' as a purveyor of 'unreal estate'." Ernest, 1109.

disrupting past patterns and were setting forth for a world of newness, a modern world, pulled away from previous supports and the known. This unachieved space — toward which Glen, Melinda, and Cato were sailing, along with Mr. White, at the end of The Escape — is the region of unfettered existence that the hued playwright of historical conscience in the twentieth century has been writing into being. This region is limited and the means of access is also limited, the size of a small boat sailing away from oppression. The characters created by William Wells Brown jumped into this tiny boat and embarked on the courageous journey over waters that, then and now, are treacherous and troubled. The journey is difficult. It requires navigating through perils even more frightening and monstrous than those that threatened Odysseus on his way back to Ithaca. At least Odysseus had an Ithaca and a family waiting for his return. The hued have no Ithaca, no one identifiable place that looms as a sweet clime where kith and kin are yearning to see their face. They have to create a homeland, a place of comfort in words, a verbal latitude that recognizes their right to equal ground in a land largely constructed by their labor.<sup>112</sup> Rather than laboring for others, they have begun the process of laboring for themselves. Following the example of William Wells Brown, they laid claim to the skills and clothes of mastery. They have taken on the task of making themselves self-sufficient

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<sup>112</sup> On occasion, the hued have been able to create towns of their own. The Harlem Renaissance novelist Zora Neale Hurston was born in one which was settled by her father in Florida. But many of these towns have been little more than bedroom communities where the hued slept and conducted their lives when they were not working for whites who lived in nearby communities. That was the case for Eatonville, Florida--near Orlando--where Hurston first saw life. The hued also incorporated towns in other states, some of which were more prosperous than Eatonville. Oklahoma and Nevada are two such states. And in Canada, there were communities that were havens for runaway

and autonomous.

The popularity of The Octoroon as theatrical property persisted into the twentieth century. In the 1929 revival at the Maxine Elliot Theatre in New York, the play was returned to its pristine condition.<sup>113</sup> The program noted, "The present revival is in every way similar to the original production, even to the inclusion of the playing and singing of pre-Civil War ballads between the acts."<sup>114</sup> The ideology of the plantation panacea as a time of song and pleasure for all dies hard. Early films--certainly those about slavery--were often accompanied by the playing of songs. Well before 1929, The Octoroon was transferred to film, where it continued to fascinate another generation and imbue another medium with the southern saga of a faded but luxurious past of beautiful times and self-sacrificing slaves who were dying to be faithful to their social superiors. Not only did The Octoroon contain scenes whose staging required techniques such as cross-cutting and the creation of spectacular illusion which were adapted to film, but the playwright's understanding of the centrality of the visual has also made his play the standard for a number of subsequent films. More often than not, these later films were classified as detective in genre.<sup>115</sup> Some of the films that patterned themselves on the use of the photograph as criminal evidence in The Octoroon were Getting Evidence (Edison, 1906).

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slaves. One of these was Chatham, Canada. Another was North Buxton.

<sup>113</sup> A more recent revival was put on off-Broadway in New York at the Phoenix Theatre in 1961. Vinnette Carroll played the role of Dido, a mammy figure.

<sup>114</sup> Leonard, 331.

<sup>115</sup> Vardac, 45.

Falsely Accused (Biograph, 1908), and Zigomaur vs. Nick Carter (Eclair, 1912).

Lynching and photography were used to finger a criminal, which was the case in The Octoroon. Both lynching and photography rely on the unique physical imprint of a person. The lynching victim is often guilty on the basis of how he or she looks, and little else. Physiognomy can point to guilt in lynching and physiognomy can spell guilt in surveillance photography as well. "The photographed party ... is inflicted with an ineradicable visibility, betrayed by a body he or she cannot conceal but which is available and readable to the detection specialist."<sup>116</sup> In 1913, The Octoroon was filmed twice, first under the name of The White Slave and then as The Octoroon. The first version by Vitagraph was released six months before the second by Kalem. The first mixed elements from The White Slave, a play by Bartley Campbell written in 1882, with elements from The Octoroon.<sup>117</sup> In the Campbell play, the woman at the center of the story is white but has been told that she is not. This change allows for a happy ending, which would not otherwise be permissible in America, given its racial politics descended from antebellum days.

The conceptions of race that were current in the antebellum era were refashioned and made more strict in the postbellum era. The Octoroon showed that even though the hue could be pleasing to whites and could themselves affect whiteness, they were not entitled to advantages. Zoe may have had an extra infusion of white blood which made

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<sup>116</sup> Tom Gunning, "Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema," in Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, editors, Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 36.

<sup>117</sup> Leonard, 331.

her sexually liminal and desirable. Paul may have been a likeable boy who could dance and sing and make himself generally appealing, but their whiteness was useless to them. They both ended up prematurely dead. They had limited shelf lives. The Escape, on the other hand, looked beneath the layer of chattel existence and revealed the human aspirations of the slaves. Glen and Melinda exerted their own volition. They chose their partners for life and insured that they would spend their lives in a committed relationship. They desired and achieved stability and autonomy. Cato was more devious than Glen or Melinda. He accommodated himself to the demands of the master or mistress all the while keeping in mind his own desires. He was the wily slave, the one who played along to get along, but who emerged triumphant in the end. As an apprentice to the doctor, he acquired a skill that he could then use for his own benefit. In Brown, lynching is irrational, a deliberate, arrogant flaunting of the Constitution. In Boucicault, lynching is overtly an act in which only savages should engage and covertly the fate of any slave who infringes the limits of racial convention. Brown's conception of the underlying humanity of the slave was less popular than Boucicault's sentimental depiction of the sad fate of the partially white belle. Boucicault's drama was taken as model by subsequent white writers who depicted the hued as racial monsters whose ambition was an aberrant quality that invariably led to death.

## Chapter Two, "The Spectacle of Racial Triumph"

"The first man who places a hand on that poor girl, I'll kill with as little mercy as I would a reptile." Clay Britton announces toward the end of the second act in The White Slave.<sup>1</sup>

Britton has just learned that Lisa, the well-favored slave of his deceased benefactor, Judge Hardin, is now the property of Bill Lacy, his former gambling buddy, who seduced him down the path to ruin, despite Lisa's advice. Seventeen years before the play begins, Judge Hardin went to Italy with his only child, Grace, where she gave birth to an illegitimate baby. Her nobleman lover had deserted her and shortly thereafter she died. In the days when personal and family honor was paramount, Judge Hardin wanted to protect the reputation of his daughter. He therefore passed his grandchild Lisa off as an octoroon, the daughter of Nance, the quadroon slave who had gone to Italy with the family.

Like Escape, The White Slave is set in the 1850s in Kentucky . Whereas the trajectory is to the North in Escape, it is to the Deep South in The White Slave. After the schism of war, the national mind craved resuturing, a reconnection of the sundered parts. North and South, the primary concern was no longer whether or not to end slavery,

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<sup>1</sup> Napier Wilt, editor, The White Slave & Other Plays by Bartley Campbell (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1940), 222.

symbolized geographically as the North, but focused on the road back to the South and an earlier time before confrontation left its enduring mark on the national complexion. The aftermath of slavery created a contentious time.

Left alone with the freedpeople fighting to retain their citizenship, many white southerners turned wistfully away from present conflicts to a past named "old" and therefore distant, a time that northern minstrel shows had established as infinitely entertaining. Nostalgic celebrations of a golden age of racial innocence deflected present white southerners' hardships and hid rising racial violence and new forms of bondage like convict labor and peonage under a haze of moonlight and magnolias. The passage of time only multiplied the "possibilities," detaching any "historical" narration from the pesky details of everyday life and crafting "those old plantation days" into a golden age of perfect race, class, and gender harmony.<sup>2</sup>

A bifurcation existed between what was expressed legally and what was felt emotionally.

The law had changed on the books. Slavery was abrogated. But the laws of habit were deeply ingrained. The shell of slavery may have cracked, but its essence remained in force. Law is pivotal in The Octoroon and The White Slave. Both plays investigate the conflict between civil law and the law of the clan, the kind of law that prevails under slavery. Members of the clan support the actions of other members of the group, regardless of the rightness of those actions. The clan offers protection and asylum to all

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<sup>2</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940 (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 52-3.

its sons. The law of the clan also takes over in cases of lynching. The disdain that Clay Britton expresses for the person who would dare contravene his desire is the kind of animosity lynchers harbor for their prey. Either the status of the prey is such that harming them redounds no punishment to the one(s) inflicting harm or what has been done is so heinous that the person committing the act no longer has claim to the propriety or deference accorded another human being. The offending individual either has been placed or has moved down the evolutionary ladder to the rung of the vile, despicable animal.

The girl that Britton proposes to protect is Lisa, who has been raised as a petted octoroon, a woman whose status is socially and biologically liminal. She looks and acts white, but can be bought and sold like furniture or chattel. Lisa represents the unstable, seesawing, precarious quantity at the center of the play, the one whose identity must be resolved on one side of the coin or other. Britton cannot back up his offer of protection to Lisa, however. Even though he inherited Big Bend, a Kentucky plantation, and is thus a member of the clan of property owners, he has just lost command of the plantation and its slaves, including Lisa. He does not yet realize that his word is no longer law. It is no longer performative, capable of bringing into fruition the thought that impels the words. Gambling was his weakness, and it brought him to ruin. He mortgaged his inheritance and Lisa's security and that of all the slaves to pay for his racing addiction. Like his financial standing, his word has lost value and he has toppled from his standing among his peers. He cannot back up his threat to crush any opposition to his wishes. There is no force in his arm. He stands alone. In that regard, his situation is different from that of a

lyncher, who is buttressed by community sanction.

When the play begins, Judge Hardin is dying with the secret of Lisa's birth still intact. No one knows but the quadroon Nance and the judge makes her swear that she will never tell. He has made sure that Lisa was given the education due a lady and he has signed freedom papers for Nance and his granddaughter. Wanting Nance to take Lisa abroad to live, he has settled an annuity on them. The lion's share of his money goes to Lisa, a circumstance that his sister-in-law, Mrs. Lee, does not appreciate. She hires a lawyer to investigate the legality of this choice on the part of the judge. On his deathbed, the judge extracts a promise from the heir to the plantation, Clay Britton, to honor his wishes. Because of Clay's weakness for the horses, he is pressed to sell the slaves. Lisa is taken to Mississippi where her new owner, Bill Lacy, is grooming her as a replacement for his present concubine, Daphne, an octoroon by whom he has a son. Lisa loves Clay and spurns Lacy's attention. Daphne and Lisa talk. Lisa protects Daphne's son, Jim, who has gotten into mischief. Bancroft, the overseer, threatens to whip him. Lisa stands between the boy and the whip. When Bancroft tells her to move out of the way or else, Lisa answers, "Strike! If life means living among such scenes as this, death is welcome."<sup>3</sup> Lisa defines slavery as a living death. So it is. On a daily basis, the slave breathes the aura of lynching, total disrespect for one's life.

For stepping between a master and his property, Clay is put in jail where he has time to think. He realizes that he loves Lisa. His connection to her goes back to childhood and no one else has ever been such a good friend to him. In response, he has

forfeited her freedom and wagered away her annuity. Regardless of her race, he must make up, as much for himself as for her. He goes to Osceola, the Mississippi plantation that Lacy owns, to rescue Lisa. "The romantic liaison between Clay and Lisa drives the narrative; at the same time, it allows other issues to emerge, including the complexity of the category of whiteness, property rights, and lynching as a form of punishment."<sup>4</sup> When Clay Britton sets foot on Osceola, he fights with the overseer Bancroft who has a revolver.<sup>5</sup> In the scuffle, the revolver is dropped. Daphne picks it up and tells Lacy that she will shoot him if he ever brings Lisa back to the plantation. It is her action that enables Britton and Lisa to get away. By asserting agency, she has interfered with his will. Such egregious offense deserves the direst punishment. She is his property. She has transgressed the boundaries of her definition. In retaliation, Lacy shoots her. She is a

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<sup>3</sup> Wilt, 226.

<sup>4</sup> Diana Paulin, "Representing Forbidden Desire: Interracial Unions, Surrogacy, and Performance," *Theatre Journal* 49.4 (January 1997):423.

<sup>5</sup> Osceola is the name of a Seminole Indian chief from Florida who waged war against the United States in the nineteenth century and was never defeated. In Boucicault's *The Octoroon*, the Native American presence is represented by a character, Wahnotee, who had very little to say but was accused of murder and threatened with lynching. In *The White Slave*, the Native American influence has been reduced to a geographical location. This reduction is symbolic of the treatment that the Native Americans, the original settlers of this country, received as a race. The scope of my dissertation does not permit an extended discussion of the role of the Native American in the creation of an American drama. Let me note, however, that *Metamora* (1827?) which promotes the myth of the savage who is noble ---perhaps because he was on the point of disappearing -- is often credited with the beginning of American drama. Another theory, often discredited, is that theatre in America begins with Native American chants and dances. The roots of American drama are triracial, emergent from an Anglo-Saxon fixing of the personae of the Native American and the African on appropriate shelves in the cabinet of America.

creature of his whim, nothing more. Besides, he has grown tired of the woman with whom he has cohabited for the last five years. He feels he can dispose of her life without incurring any repercussions. Lacy treats Daphne with the regard he would show a reptile.

Slaves could whiten up, but they would never become fully white. They could never be let into whiteness, not even through the back door. And that was the only door open to them. Any respectable portal to whiteness and life inside the American dream was denied them. “[M]arriage across ethnic and religious lines has symbolized the making of Americans. African Americans were excluded from that process ... legally as well as symbolically.”<sup>6</sup> Lacy’s son, Jim, who was whiter than his octoroon mother, was threatened with the whip just like any other slave. He was bred for the slave market like the master’s children in Escape and The Octoroon. Jim’s paternal heritage offered no protection. It gave him no rights, no claims. His maternal heritage outweighed everything. That kind of thinking is melodramatic, polarized like the mind of the lyncher who sees guilt in others, but never in the self. Lacy insinuated his way into Daphne’s bed, impregnated her, and was preparing her child for the dehumanizing gaze of the auction block, but he was not guilty of any wrongdoing. By killing Daphne, his slave, a woman over whom he has the power of life and death, Lacy lynches her. In its most basic sense, lynching means the hand of cruelty raised by a social superior against a social inferior. The social superior has the power to eradicate the existence of the social inferior, to abrogate the spirit and will, even the body, of another. What happens to the body in

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Rogin, Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 264.

lynching -- its annihilation -- symbolizes what has already been done to the humanity of that person. Once again in The White Slave, themes of rape and lynching are intertwined in a play set in the antebellum South. To lynch is to rape, to act outside the law, to take what rightfully belongs to another, to render the will of another useless, to make that other a pawn and plaything.

Eighteen eighty-two was the year that Tuskegee Institute began its tally of lynching casualties.<sup>7</sup> In the first decade of record-keeping, lynching claimed over fifteen hundred casualties.<sup>8</sup>

By the early twentieth century, the lynching of African Americans was as common as it was catastrophic throughout the American South. There were almost twenty-five hundred black fatalities in the forty-eight years from 1882 to 1930 in the ten southern states that Stewart Tolnay and E.M. Beck study in A Festival of Violence, a sociological analysis of these

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<sup>7</sup> Lynching statistics vary according to source. Exact numbers were difficult to compile because some lynchings were unremarked. "Since calculations in the scholarly record of lynchings are culled from articles in leading newspapers, the tally includes only the newsworthy--an evidentiary trap that ensnares the historian. When acts went unreported, they were also unrecorded. One investigator explained why the death toll in official tabulations of this sort of terrorism might best be considered to be the tip of an iceberg: [C]ountless Negroes are lynched yearly, but their disappearance is shrouded in mystery, for they are dispatched quietly and without general knowledge.' Those missing altogether from the records are inaccessible to historical inquiry. For that reason, many lynchings belong to a secret and unrecoverable past." Vincent Vinikas, "Specters in the Past: The Saint Charles, Arkansas, Lynching of 1904 and the Limits of Historical Inquiry" The Journal of Southern History 65.3 (August 1999):541.

<sup>8</sup> "Beginning with 1882 the annual number was 114, 134, 184, 211, 138, 122, 142, 176, 128, and 195 in 1891." Rayford W. Logan, The Betrayal of the Negro: from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 76.

phenomena. For the states they examined, Tolnay and Beck conclude,

The scale of this carnage means that, on the average, a black man, woman, or child was murdered nearly once a week, every week, between 1882 and 1930 by a hate-driven white mob.<sup>9</sup>

In 1882, the curtain first went up on The White Slave by Bartley Campbell.<sup>10</sup> The debut of The White Slave in 1882 coincided with a reawakened regional interest in a "picturesque quaintness."<sup>11</sup> The agrarian offered a respite from the thronged streets, noxious smells, and cut-throat atmosphere of the modern, continually changing, industrialized city. Tempers between North and South had subsided since the war and southern locales and manners had returned to favor with the spirit of reconciliation that was emphatic, even insistent, two decades after the national debacle. The rush to forget past slights and discrepancies of attitude between North and South was precipitous at the cusp of the century. All was forgiven in the courting period which was celebrated in fiction and drama. Symbolically, the marriage bed was wide enough in The White Slave to accommodate three unions. The legally purified Lisa married Clay Britton, the morally purified reprobate. Letty, Lisa's cousin, married a doctor, a barely respectable profession at that time. After much persuasion on the part of the prospective groom, Mrs. Lee, Lisa's

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<sup>9</sup> Vinikas, 541.

<sup>10</sup> Bartley Campbell also wrote The Virginian which should not be confused with the film made in 1929 with Gary Cooper in the lead and then made again in 1946. Both films were based on a novel by Owen Wister, which also led to a hit television series in the 1960s.

<sup>11</sup> Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr., The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1981), 6.

aunt and Letty's mother, married the lawyer who had proven that Lisa was indeed a white woman. The frazzled times were reknitting themselves.

On the shady side of the street, a lynching campaign, the kind we tend to associate with the Ku Klux Klan, had been ongoing for some time. Lynching the emancipated body became virulent in the postbellum years, hence the need to chart and keep track of its escalating numbers. Emancipation was perceived as a problem. Slavery was a known: emancipation was not. What to do with all these hued bodies no longer constrained by the leash of bondage? Their newly enhanced status was dangerous. They might take it seriously. Better not let that happen. They had to be deterred from thinking that they were just going to waltz into the open arms of citizenship without a fight. God forbid that they climb into the marriage bed with Lisa and Letty and Mrs. Lee. If that were to happen, the whites would not be able to stay separated. Everything would get all mixed up. Slavery may have ended, but old mind sets die slowly, if at all. For the benefiting group, the separations and inequalities of slavery were much too seductive. Slavery ordained that since you look different you and your children work right here and make my life comfortable or over there and give me everything you produce in return for meager sustenance. As a viable category, however, difference began to erode as the ranks of slavery became lighter and lighter. Nevertheless, difference (even when it was visibly negligible) was talismanic--like a flag--, something to kill for, a cause to defend. A war had been fought and lost, but the losers did not like the score. They set out to change it, and created special guerilla forces for that purpose. Forced to disband in the 1870s because of the outrageousness of its activities, the first Klan had been founded in

Tennessee in 1865 by disgruntled veterans from the Civil War. One of the most active early members of the Klan was an uncle of Thomas Dixon, Jr., the author of The Clansman (1905). Dixon adapted this novel as a play, which then served as the seed for The Birth of a Nation (1915), the first blockbuster in the history of American cinema. We will be looking at the play and film in detail later in this chapter.

The Ku Klux Klan was not the only terrorist, guerilla group to specialize in intimidating former slaves, who had been freed. These former slaves were eager to fend for themselves, reestablish the families that had been sundered by the demands of the plantation system, and start institutions that would secure their social and emotional well-being. The whitecaps, an organization of white farmers, began assaulting the hued right after the Civil War and continued their pogrom of terror at least through the second decade of the twentieth century. After the war ended, there was a fight between white and hued over who would have unquestioned access to privilege, who would be entitled to prosper. Competition for fertile ground was key. "Signs appearing on lands desired by whites and worked by blacks warned 'If you have not moved away from here by sundown tomorrow, we will shoot you like rabbits.'"<sup>12</sup> Note that the object of racial rage and scorn is referred to in animalistic terms. The difference between the comment that Clay Britton made in The White Slave and the one by whitecap terrorists is that the first animal is not generally considered edible and the second one is. The threat escalates. Not only will the victim be crushed, but consumed as well, chewed and spit out by the jaws of greed.

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<sup>12</sup> Leon F. Litwack, Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 157.

Not confining themselves to farm lands, barns, and homes, nightriding whitecaps

also destroyed the institutions that helped to sustain a black community-- churches and schools— and assassinated 'leading' or 'troublesome' blacks. The total effect of white terrorism and intimidation was to discourage blacks from accumulating enough to arouse white resentment, while forcing the more enterprising to abandon their homes and occupations and leave the county without any protection or any compensation for their property.<sup>13</sup>

Such was the timbre of the times, at least in the South, when The White Slave was at the height of its popularity. The play continued to be performed at major theatres and on tour until 1901. Even then, the appeal of the melodrama had not yet abated. The country yearned for the days of yore when slaves were dependent and devoted, not ambitious, not demanding equality, not moving to the cities and learning to read and write and drive cars and wear fancy, store-bought clothes. From 1912 to 1918, Robert Campbell, the playwright's son, took The White Slave on an extended national tour which ended at the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia.<sup>14</sup> While this tour was ongoing, The White Slave was transferred to film. The myth of the American plantation was being updated, put into new, modern form.

Vitagraph was the producer and the script was a composite of the Campbell play

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<sup>13</sup> Litwack, 158.

<sup>14</sup> Wilt, lxxviii-lxxix.

and The Octoroon by Dion Boucicault, both of which were set in the 1850s, with references back to the 1830s. Vitagraph, which became part of Warner Brothers in 1925, was one of the most successful of the early film studios. "By 1908, Vitagraph was producing eight films a week, mostly one- and two-reelers cast from the studio's stock company of four hundred players." The standing of Vitagraph at the time can be judged from the celebrities associated with it: among its stars were Rudolph Valentino and Norma Talmadge.<sup>15</sup> A force to be reckoned with during the silent era, Vitagraph contributed to the progression from short film to narrative feature. During rehearsals, the Vitagraph film was called The Octoroon. Later, the name was changed to The White Slave, and that was the title under which it was released in May, 1913. The story was popular. It was filmed again in December, 1913, by Kalem, a much younger and very innovative studio founded in 1907, which began the fashion for going overseas for on-site shooting.<sup>16</sup> The Octoroon was part of a series of five Boucicault melodramas that Kalem put on film between 1911 and 1913, several of which were filmed in Ireland. The Octoroon was filmed in Florida: it starred Guy Coombs and Marguerite Courtot, and was probably directed by Kenean Buell, a principal at Kalem. "It is not at all surprising that the Boucicault melodrama [sic] should have been taken into the films. For these plays, by

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<sup>15</sup> Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905-1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," in Tino Balio, editor, The American Film Industry (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 82.

<sup>16</sup> "The idea of American companies shooting films on location abroad is not a new conception. Its genesis is with the Kalem Company's excursions, first to Ireland and then to the rest of Europe and the Middle East." Anthony Slide, Aspects of American Film History Prior to 1920 (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 87.

virtue of their dependence upon external effects, as well as by virtue of the values inherent in their dramatic style, were prime cinematic material."<sup>17</sup> Norma Talmadge, who later became a big star, had a small role as a slave in blackface in the filming of The Octoroon, but she was not pleased with her wages and so she and some friends staged their own show of resistance.

I remember in one of those early Vitagraph pictures that Dorothy Kelly .... Mabel Normand, and I were to play in a group of slave girls. It was a story which took place before the Civil War, and it was called The Octoroon, and a number of Negro players were engaged for the day. Along with the colored extras, Dorothy, Mabel, and I were to be sold as slaves on the auction block, and knocked down to a sort of Simon Legree type for about fifty cents apiece.

Our pride was hurt at the small value placed on our personal charms, so we got together in a corner and deliberately decided to do everything in our power to be thrown out of the picture. We didn't dare actually refuse any parts assigned to us, but we figured if we did something that would require a retake we would be ordered home for the day, which we knew to be the punishment for wasting footage. So the three of us blackened only our faces and the front parts of our necks, and as the auction block revolved the camera registered the backs of our necks snow-white. Needless to say, we were immediately dragged off the set, bawled out in

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<sup>17</sup> Vardac, 187.

very inelegant language, and sent home that day with no pay checks.<sup>18</sup>

Norma Talmadge and her girlfriends couldn't stand the degradation of being priced at a pittance and being sold to anyone at all. They exercised their options to withdraw. It was too painful to totally give up their whiteness. They could not be paid to cover themselves completely with cork and submit even to a simulated darkness of skin. Their whiteness was much too significant and valuable to be momentarily lost. The Legree character to whom Talmadge refers is based on Bill Lacy from The White Slave, the slave owner and gambler who killed Daphne, the octoroon, without any remorse.

The era of the play's popularity, on stage and on screen, spanned the period when American entertainment was making the transition from storefront operation into a phenomenon of global significance. This was also the time when lynching, as organized campaign, reached its numerical maximum of over two hundred casualties per year in 1892 and 1893.<sup>19</sup> Postbellum lynching began in the 1860s, but escalated in number as well as in brutality during the 1890s when the first hued generation born after Emancipation came to maturity, full of fire, zeal, and determination to gain the equality mandated by law. Their efforts at self-improvement were ruthlessly opposed. Whites nostalgic for the prior hierarchical system were intent on thwarting their progress. In consequence, they acted contrary to the law as it was written and asserted the law constructed from their desire. This was the standard of law to which Boucicault refers in

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<sup>18</sup> Norma Talmadge, "Close Ups," in Balio, 98-99.

<sup>19</sup> "Lynchings reached an all-time high in 1892." Monroe Lee Billington and Roger D. Hardaway, African Americans on the Western Frontier (Niwot, Colorado: University of Colorado Press, 1998), 130.

The Octoroon. "what's the law? When the ship's abroad on the ocean, when the army is before the enemy where in thunder's the law? It is in the hearts of brave men, who can tell right from wrong and from whom justice can't be bought."<sup>20</sup> Campbell echoes Boucicault when he writes: "Law! There is a higher law -- a law of right; mercy and justice, a law written on the throne of God and in the hearts of men."<sup>21</sup> This law in the heart is partial, depending on whose heart is in control. But such was the law that held sway at the time. It was a divided law, one that applied justice according to the status of one's body. The rhetorical question that Ratts, a worker on the wharf, asks in The Octoroon. "Shall we have one law for the red skin and another for the white?" was expanded and reapplied in the affirmative at the end of the nineteenth century, when segregation became the renegotiated order of difference.<sup>22</sup> The division in the nation was made manifest in its laws.

By the late nineteenth century, most American whites, across a vast continent of difference agreed that the freed people would not be included as subjects within the nation. There were many official watersheds--the 1877 compromise that ended Reconstruction, the Supreme Court 1883 decision that judged the Civil Rights Act unconstitutional, and the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that federally sanctioned the

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<sup>20</sup> Boucicault, 33.

<sup>21</sup> Napier, 222.

<sup>22</sup> Boucicault, 32.

practise of "separate but equal"<sup>23</sup>

Film and segregation became factors in America around the same time. Their points of development and maturation coalesced. Film emerged out of the photograph and phonograph in the second half of the nineteenth century. During the same years, segregation was constructed as social policy. Segregation, which revisited and extended the separatist mentality reigning during slavery, was "the product of human choice and decision, of power and fear, of longing, even of love and hate."<sup>24</sup> Through segregation, which made the hued body taboo, what was created was a kind of secular, dispersed slavery where the hued body was subject not just to one slaveholder, whose power was held up by the communion of masters, but the hued body became communal property. It was subject to discipline by all whites in the postbellum ceremony of lynching. Through segregation, the hued were excommunicated from the shared power to which the dominant circle had access. The hued body as it was burned, tortured, and killed was the unifying spectacle that drew the circle of whiteness together. The whites who convened around the burning spectacle consumed its significance. Those who extinguished the life and livelihood of others had power in America. Those who were extinguished had no power, no wattage at all. Before 1896 in film, there was the Kinetoscope, a machine developed by Thomas Edison, which allowed only one viewer at a time to see a short, five-minute film. Multiple viewing began in 1896, the same year that the Supreme Court, with the exception of one justice, ratified the principle that the races would be better off if

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<sup>23</sup> Hale, 167.

<sup>24</sup> Hale, xi.

they did not share the same public spaces. This separation extended to movie theatres, which were racially partitioned. When let into the theatres, the hued were sent to the balcony. Segregation amputated the hued body corporate, cut it away from the public domain. As such, segregation was symbolic of lynching, of elimination expressed physically. Homer Plessy, the man who sued against segregation in the Supreme Court, was an octoroon whose race could not be read on his face. He sat in a railway car and when he announced his heritage, he was arrested. His appeal was turned down and segregation became the law of the land. That the train, emblem par excellence of the mobility of the modern age, was the site that served as setting for segregation is telling. The hued were not intended to partake fully of the fruits and pleasures of modernity. "The railroad journey anticipated more explicitly than any other technology an important facet of the experience of cinema: a person in a seat watches moving visuals through a frame that does not change position."<sup>25</sup> The hued were being cut out of the picture. White bodies and hued bodies were not to enjoy leisure together. They were not to occupy the same space at the same time. They were not to move in the same sphere. Homer Plessy was liminal like Zoe in The Octoroon, like Cato in Escape, like Lisa and Daphne in The White Slave. Everyone on the hued side of the fence--especially the marginal ones--had to be punished into a knowledge of their real status. Like Jim, Daphne's son in The White Slave, there were no loopholes for them, even if they were the children of the master. Race was treated as absolute, even if it was visually variable. The

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<sup>25</sup> Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, editors, Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 6.

barbed wire was on the fence. There was no crossing it. The ban applied to all, even "the white niggers" to whom Mr. White called attention in Escape. In the postbellum years, there was no escape from the mythic plantation. That plantation was reimagined in film as the American Eden.

With Edwin S. Porter's film trilogy of 1902-3 encompassing the West in The Great American Train Robbery, the city in The Life of an American Fireman, and the South in Uncle Tom's Cabin, the history of American movies begins. It begins with race. Porter introduced national narratives and stylistic inventions into the welter of foreign imports, documentary actualities (real and staged), cinematographic tricks, and unmotivated short scenes of comedy and violence that constituted primitive cinema. Bringing the most informed theatrical spectacle of the late nineteenth century, Uncle Tom's Cabin, into the movies marked the transition from popular theatre to motion pictures that characterized the pre-history of classic Hollywood. The most lavish and expensive film to date, and the first film to use intertitles, Uncle Tom's Cabin, was the first extended movie narrative with a black character and therefore, since African Americans were forbidden to play serious dramatic roles, the first substantial blackface film. Straddling the border between blackface and motion pictures, and undercutting Stowe's novel, Porter's one-reeler introduced the plantation myth

into American movies.<sup>26</sup>

The plantation was cast as America's site of origin, the place where the national identity was forged from the fire of catastrophe. The nineteenth century was made to live and gyrate again on stage and on screen, the American mind magnified. Race replaced slavery as the primary index of category in the dramatic and cinematic reworking of the plantation myth at the end of the nineteenth century -- after Reconstruction which ended in 1876 -- and at the beginning of the twentieth century. The real whites were separated from the simulated whites as Lisa was distinguished from Daphne in The White Slave. But the seminal work on the plantation was Uncle Tom's Cabin, which was filmed twice in 1903, and at least three more times before the silent era gave way to sound. The Edison version which Edwin Porter, the father of film narrative, directed in 1903 was "one of the longest and most expensive American movies up until that time."<sup>27</sup> Shortly after it was released by Thomas Edison, Porter's employer, a slightly shorter, significantly less expensive version was released by Lubin. Uncle Tom's Cabin was one of the most successful American films of all times. It was central in the American renegotiation of national identity during unsettled times. In its many stage and film versions, Uncle Tom's Cabin remained a perennial while white Americans were wrestling with how to reassert their whiteness, their sense of themselves as masters of their fate and of the fate of others in their charge. Their right to rule had suffered a blow in the war that pitted white brother against white brother. The nation was wounded and so was the national psyche. The

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<sup>26</sup> Rogin, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Cripps, 15.

nation had seen its flag symbolically cut into pieces, severed, when slavery ended. Repetition hammered in the significance of the message that Tom was still in his cabin and white was still much more than alright.

After being put on screen twice in 1903, Uncle Tom's Cabin was filmed again in 1909, in 1914, and in 1927. The film, like the stage version, was so popular that it dominated the early years of cinema. It was only in 1914 that an actor of hue was allowed to portray the central character of the story. Sam Lucas, a veteran vaudeville and minstrel performer, replaced the white males who had assumed the role of Tom with cork on their faces. Progress, if one could call it that, had been made. One interpretation is that Americans were sufficiently comfortable with the circumscribed spot into which the hued body had been contained through the discipline of lynching that it was no longer an affront or threat to see an actual hued body impersonating a slave. A more generous interpretation would be that, despite the prevalence of lynching which sought to suppress their ambitions, the hued were not being unilaterally pushed to the visual margins of America, and were able to stand up for themselves to the point of cinematic inclusion. The 1927 version, which also included a hued actor, James B. Lowe, as Tom, was released for a second time in 1958. That was not the last glimpse popular culture had of the American classic which was more than a hundred years old when it reappeared in 1965.<sup>28</sup> The plantation myth was hardy. It remained indispensable and transcended the barrier between silent and sound. In the American mindscape, the plantation myth ran the length of the metaphoric train track, melodramatically polarizing the privileged from the

dispossessed, the innocent from the guilty, the whippers from the whipped, the lynchers from the lynchready.

Scholars disagree about the reasons for the film's appeal. Peter Noble suspects that it was the abject status of the slaves that continued to make it a favorite with the American viewing public.

Originally a stern and sincere indictment of slavery, the novel was altered so much in its filmic transcription that the original theme became confused. The resultant movie was a sentimental tale, mostly concerned with the faithful, dog-like devotion of Uncle Tom for Little Eva, the daughter of his white master. And as this film, which was the first full-length production to exploit the theme of Negro subservience, dealt with the slave in "his proper place," it had a wide success.<sup>29</sup>

In 1905, while Porter was still working for Thomas Edison, he completed White Caps, which is set in small-town America and celebrates vigilante violence and the kind of thinking that undergirds lynching. The story in the film was based on an actual tarring and feathering incident reported in the papers at the turn-of-the century. "Porter's landmark movies of the early 1900's ... contributed greatly to the rise of a wider-based audience, eager for the recreation of popular, native stories. More importantly, Porter's films heralded two story lines which would rapidly grow to be among the most beloved.

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<sup>28</sup> Campbell, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Noble, The Negro in Films (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 31.

the Western and the Old South romance."<sup>30</sup> Just before Porter began filming White Caps, there was a lot of publicity about a play by Thomas Dixon, Jr., The Clansman, which was being rehearsed at the time. "In The Clansman, villainous blacks are sponsored by corrupt carpetbaggers, while the Klan is presented as a force for regeneration. If the Edison film avoids the overt racism of Dixon' novel, it depicts, and even accepts a pattern of alternative justice that supports it."<sup>31</sup>

The methods used to influence spectators in The "White Caps" can be compared to Griffith's approach in *The Birth of a Nation*, which was based on *The Clansman*. Porter assumed that the viewers' moral outrage at the husband's behavior would lead them to condemn the drunkard and condone his punishment. In fact, the brutal treatment of the husband usually leads present-day audiences to recoil from his fate. Griffith, anxious to convert people to his beliefs in white supremacy, did not assume shared attitudes and effectively used parallel editing to force his audience into identifying with the Klan. The Edison film maintains a psychological distance from its subject matter, not because Porter attempted to be objective but because he relied on the audiences' pre-established attitudes to elicit their reactions.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Campbell, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Musser, Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 303.

<sup>32</sup> Musser, 303.

Before moving into a discussion of the Dixon play and the film that was generated from it, let me mention a few other silent films, some by Porter and some not, on the subject of race that were made prior to and after White Caps in 1905. Before writing this dissertation, I assumed that the mentality supportive of lynching that is evident and fundamental in The Birth of a Nation began with that film in 1915. My research has shown that the Griffith film built on feeling antagonistic to the hue that was existent from the beginning of the film era. Some of the relevant film titles are Interrupted Crap Game, Prize Fight in Coon Town, A Night in Blackville, Chicken Thieves, The Gator and the Pickaninny, and A Scrap in Black and White. In Off to Bloomingdale Asylum (1902) by George Melies, the French film pioneer, a blackface clown is blown up and thus the social threat that the symbolic hue body represents is disintegrated..

A few of them burlesqued racial violence, reducing it to comic surrealism, as if this would make acts such as lynching somewhat more acceptable. One of them featured a black preacher whose feast on stolen chickens is interrupted by the shotgun blasts of a posse, while another ended with a comic dynamiting. These films presented blackface surrogates for Afro-Americans who bore a striking resemblance to later animated cartoon characters -- impervious to explosions, car crashes, and physical abuse. For white audiences, consciously or unconsciously, they provided the opportunity to act out their racial anxieties while remaining aware

that these films were not really in earnest.<sup>33</sup>

Another Porter film from 1905 with stereotyped message is The Watermelon Patch. In this short film, the thieves are "comedic counterparts to the ruthless, scheming lovers of white women in The Clansman. The Watermelon Patch begins as an absurdist comedy: a number of 'darkies' steal watermelons and flee, pursued by redneck farmers dressed in skeleton costumes."<sup>34</sup> The use of skeleton costumes refers to early Klan members who impersonated ghosts to scare superstitious former slaves.<sup>35</sup> "Losing their pursuers, the darkies reach their destination, where they dance and enjoy their watermelon until the rednecks arrive. When the whites board up the exits and seal the chimney, the darkies are soon covered with soot, another racial joke."<sup>36</sup> There is also the suggestion that a fire is about to be lit and the watermelon thieves will be roasted with their rinds.

In 1908, Porter made Ten Pickaninnies which was also based on the idea of capture on the farm. Ten scenes were introduced by the same verse, which, like the popular camp song about bottles of beer on a wall, declined in number every time a melon-eating darky was eliminated.

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<sup>33</sup> Cripps, 14.

<sup>34</sup> Musser, 312.

<sup>35</sup> "It was a favorite warning of the Ku Kluxers to have one of their number appear at the cabin of a marked negro at night and ask for a drink of water. The Klansman would apparently drink a whole bucket of water, the fluid being contained in some receptacle, rubber bag or canteen, concealed on his person, and after the enormous draft had been swallowed, he would remark to the frightened negro that 'it was the first drink he had received since he had been killed at the Battle of Shiloh.'" Winfield Jones, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (Hollywood, California: Sons of Liberty, 1969), 46.

<sup>36</sup> Musser, 312.

Ten little Darkies eating Melon fine

Farmer catches one, leaving but Nine.<sup>37</sup>

Frank Woods, who wrote the screenplay for this short film by Porter, later scouted out the story and helped to write the screenplay for The Birth of a Nation<sup>38</sup> "In all of these films, whites chasing blacks is shown to be good, clean fun. African Americans are portrayed as childlike and unsocialized. Whites, as responsible members of society, are obliged to chastise them and maintain discipline."<sup>39</sup> The chase was a feature of the nineteenth-century melodramatic stage.<sup>40</sup> When whites were the primary characters in the story, rescue was not far behind. In films where the hue were featured, rescue tarried forever before arriving. When film was looking to construct itself and its relation to the world around it, it looked to theatre. What it found in theatre was multiple. It found a vast supply of stories. It found intimations of quality at a time when it had little. It found coins for its coffers by repackaging works that were tried and proven with audiences. It found narrative structures that it could adapt to its needs. It found a predisposition to the visual on which it could expand. Because film was competitive with theatre, its form and its pretensions to legitimacy were imitated. Film derived from theatre. Such derivation is apparent in the terminology that was used in early film when the product was called the photoplay. Because film is derivative from theatre, it

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<sup>37</sup> Musser, 422.

<sup>38</sup> Musser, 422.

<sup>39</sup> Musser, 314.

<sup>40</sup> Vardac, 171.

exemplifies an instance of the Baudrillard concept that the copy or child becomes precedent over the parent or original in the realm of the spectacle.

The same discussion about derivation could be pursued relative to the different artistic offspring of Thomas Dixon, who created several narrative products that garnered a great deal of controversy and commercial success at the beginning of the twentieth century. The third generation, the film, was more successful than the second, the play, and the second was more successful than the original, which itself was the second-installment in a fictional trilogy on the Reconstruction era in the South. The first novel in the trilogy was The Leopard's Spots and the last was The Traitor. During the time that Dixon was writing his first novel, he read Stowe's classic about Southern slavery, Uncle Tom's Cabin, over and over in order to absorb the technique as well as the story. In his own writing, he transplanted Stowe's story to a later time, specifically to the Reconstruction period of Southern history which was still vibrant in his memory and was the scene of his own childhood spent in Shelby, North Carolina. Stowe's influence continued in The Clansman, which contained, in the drama and in the novel, a character based on little Harry, the son of Eliza and George Harris from Uncle Tom's Cabin. In The Clansman, the drama, Harry is all grown up and educated but he has a new name that does not reveal his earlier heritage. That name is Silas Lynch. The adult Lynch is ambitious. He is the mulatto associate of Augustus Stoneman, who was based on Thaddeus Stevens, a Reconstruction politician who lived openly with a woman of hue, and is portrayed as a post-bellum kind of abolitionist. With the aid of Stoneman, Lynch becomes Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina. Stoneman publicly espouses equality

between the races, but he does not practice what he preaches. When Lynch presents himself as a prospective son-in law, Stoneman is appalled. He will not sully his bloodline, he says, with a crew of racially mixed brats. The play ends with the apprehension of Silas Lynch who has sexually propositioned and sought to marry Elsie Stoneman, the intended of Ben Cameron, the head of the Ku Klux Klan, and the hero of the play. There are two lynchings in The Clansman. The other one is also precipitated by an attempted rape of a white woman. The culprit is Gus, a hued fiend. Such is the folly of emancipation, according to Dixon. The hued are too quick to burst their britches. Dixon studied Stowe's work not because he agreed with her ideas, but because he wanted to correct her interpretation. In Dixon's estimation, slavery was not a shame; it was the salvation of civilization.

During one of his lecturing tours, Dixon attended a dramatization of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. Angered by what seemed to him to be a great injustice toward the South, he could hardly keep from leaping to his feet and denouncing the drama as false. Finally, when the performance was over, he rose with tears in his eyes and vowed bitterly that he would someday tell the "true story" of the South. The book which resulted from this experience was The Leopard's Spots (1903). In the three decades following the publication of this novel, he published other novels telling the Southern "story." Among them were The Clansman (1905), The Traitor (1907), The Root of Evil

(1911), The Fall of a Nation (1916), and The Flaming Sword (1939).<sup>41</sup>

A major figure in Dixon's second novel is Major Stuart Dameron, the local leader of the Ku Klux Klan, who is "doubtless modeled after Dixon's uncle and childhood hero Colonel McAfee."<sup>42</sup> It is the mission of the Klan to purge the South of the noxious emancipated vermin who have infested its public corridors and clogged its political arteries. This purifying mission is one that Dixon heartily endorses. In 1890, before Dixon turned his pen to fiction, he spoke at a church in New York City where he denounced the hue as breeding much too fast for any policy of national elimination. "The negroes are born at the rate of eight hundred a day, and you cannot find ships enough on this continent to take them to Africa."<sup>43</sup>

To capitalize on and extend the success of his first and second novels, Dixon adapted The Clansman for the stage in the same year that his second novel was published. The play and the second novel had the same title. Both paid tribute to the history and heroism of the Ku Klux Klan, as Dixon perceived it, in its campaign of purging the South of its sense of defeat after the Civil War. Dixon was zealous and messianic in his pursuit of more converts to his Southern convictions. The word had to be spread to as many people as possible, across the globe if necessary. "The Clansman must be dramatized and made a living thing in the theatre," Dixon wrote in his autobiography. "The printed page

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<sup>41</sup> Raymond A. Cook, Thomas Dixon (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 51.

<sup>42</sup> Cook, 69.

<sup>43</sup> M. Karen Crowe, editor, Southern Horizons: The Autobiography of Thomas Dixon: A Critical Edition (New York University Dissertation, 1982), 447.

would be read by five million people. The play if successful would reach ten million with an emotional power ten times as great as in cold type."<sup>44</sup> Set in South Carolina, the first state to secede, The Clansman takes place in 1867, two years after the Civil War has ended and a decade after the time of The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom, The White Slave, and The Octoroon.

The play followed very closely the novel in its sensationalism, dramatic directness, and fast-paced plot. The Romantic element, showing bravery and noble virtue triumphing over evil -- largely Negroid -- forces, was calculated to appeal to the emotions of the mass mind. The panoramic actions of the Klan in the novel offered what at first seemed to be insurmountable obstacles, but it was hoped that a degree of verisimilitude could be achieved by training four horses bearing Klansmen to gallop across the stage on cue.<sup>45</sup>

Produced by the Southern Amusement Company, of which Dixon was half owner, The Clansman premiered in Norfolk, Virginia, in September 1905. On opening night, Dixon took on the job of prompter. The final dress rehearsal had been disastrous, full of missed cues and other mishaps, which was understandable since the cast was the size of an army. Dixon was concerned that the actors would once again flub their lines. He decided that he would stand in the wings and be ready to shore them up, when necessary. Actors so nervous they couldn't remember their lines was not Dixon's only concern. The end of the

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<sup>44</sup> Crowe, 383.

<sup>45</sup> Cook, 101.

play was especially difficult to manage. It featured a cavalcade of Klansmen on horseback who swoop down on a lynch victim and punish him on-stage amidst a spectacle of burning crosses. "There were four horses in Klan costume to be raced across the stage in a climax. I wondered if they would jump over the footlights instead of crossing the stage at breakneck speed. ... They were restless and one of them continually thumped the stage with his forefoot in a way that boded no good for his performance."<sup>46</sup> Dixon's trepidation was unwarranted. The play was extremely well received by its first southern audience. "The horses ran their parts perfectly, didn't kick or trample anyone to death, and the final curtain came down on a scene that set my head spinning. As I bowed to the applause I experienced the proudest moment of my life. What a tame thing a book compared to this! There I saw, felt, heard, and touched the hands of my readers and their united heart beat lifted me to the heights."<sup>47</sup> The play was so successful in Norfolk that the receipts of the first week defrayed all production costs and returned a profit of fifty thousand dollars. Obviously, Dixon had struck a chord that thrilled the sensibilities of his audiences.

Everywhere the play appeared, it created a sensation; and, as it moved through Charleston, Atlanta, Birmingham, and other Southern cities, people fought madly over seats; and policemen stood ready with fire hoses to drive back the crowds. Dixon was condemned on the one hand as "a servant of the devil" and referred to on the other as the author of "the

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<sup>46</sup> Crowe, 389-390.

<sup>47</sup> Crowe, 391.

greatest theatrical triumph in the history of the  
South."<sup>48</sup>

It was also seen in Montgomery, Alabama, in Knoxville and in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where a local editor denounced it as "a riot breeder ... designed to excite rage and race hatred."<sup>49</sup> A reviewer for *The Augusta Chronicle* wrote in 1905:

[W]hen Thomas Dixon proclaims The Clansman "a play with a purpose," and that purpose a defense of the South's attitude toward the negro, the intelligence and manhood -- but above all the womanhood -- of the South must protest. For such a play as The Clansman cannot possibly find justification either because it points a moral or solves the problem with which it attempts to deal. To deprecate such a play does not involve any lack of sympathy with the fearful struggle that tried our people's souls, more during the four years that followed the war than the war itself; nor yet a lack of appreciation for the brave and patriotic men whose deeds the play, in a way, attempts to exploit. It is merely a protest against the reopening of old wounds to no good purpose; merely for the sake of seeing them bleed; with the danger that it involves of arousing all of the old bitterness that existed when they were first inflicted. There is a spirit of cruelty and wantonness in it all that cannot appeal to a brave and human soul. ... [W]e can see in it another evidence of

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<sup>48</sup> Cook, 102.

<sup>49</sup> Cook, 103.

Thomas Dixon's craving for the lime-light -- but this time with something more substantial than the mere plaudits of the morbidly curious; for he gets their ducats as well. The sensational pulpit necessarily had its limitations; the sensational author found a still larger but yet a circumscribed field: but the wildly sensational author-playwright can pander to all classes and fairly revel in the red glare of righteous public indignation that the very wantonness and indecency of his effort arouses.<sup>50</sup>

Given the casualties still being claimed by lynching, what was disturbing not only to the hued but to a few other citizens of the South as well were the encomiums poured like oil onto the heads of the Klan which was depicted as valiant. Dixon saw only he was restoring the honor of the South which the hued besmirched by their very presence. Dixon drowned out any opposing voices with a litany of hosannas in his own honor. Not one to listen quietly to adverse publicity, Dixon had this to say about his experience of the Chattanooga performance: "If there has ever been produced in this country a play of such intense dramatic qualities, a play which holds the attention of the audience so closely, and one which excites to an almost inconceivable pitch, it has never been seen in Chattanooga. The Clansman is so intense that one feels almost exhausted after witnessing the production and it produces an excitement so real as to almost breed

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<sup>50</sup> Clipping File, The Clansman, New York Public Library, Performing Arts Division.

violence.”<sup>51</sup> The sensationalism in Dixon’s writing was excessive and extreme, violent. Intentionally so. He pushed emotionality beyond and over the brim in others and in himself. Such was his nature. His character demanded attention and so did the ones he created. He did not intend that he or his work should be overlooked. Dixon continued to wax enthusiastic about his play and its impact. There were “two thousand people in that theatre ... with me in laughter and tears, in hisses and cheers.”<sup>52</sup> The many had become one, their differences melted in an emotional bath of collectivity. They reacted as an ensemble and they responded to the same things at the same time. In unison, they thrilled to the rhythm of togetherness and experienced the exhilaration of communion. Their cohesion was fired by the symbolic incineration of the hued deviant body in the Klan furnace of the blazing cross.

In September 1906, the play was seen in Atlanta. About a week after it arrived in that city, there was a terrible racial riot. According to conservative official records, it hit the hued community hard, claiming the lives of twenty-five, “with six times that number seriously wounded.”<sup>53</sup> One of the dead was a cripple beaten to death by the crowd as he tried to hobble to safety. “This American butchery is without palliation or excuse.” Reverdy Ransom, a firebrand hued minister, declared in Boston at Faneuil Hall. “It was deliberately planned and executed. Its victims were neither suspected nor charged with a

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<sup>51</sup> Theatre Magazine, February 1906, p. 22; also in Clansman clipping file.

<sup>52</sup> Dixon, Theatre Magazine, Feb. 1906, clipping file.

<sup>53</sup> John Dittmer, Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 129.

commission of any crime. Their only crime was their color."<sup>54</sup> During the first night of the massacre which was not fully contained for four days, a mob, ten thousand strong, descended on the hued community in a murderous frenzy. Before their bacchanal of violence was sated, they had directed their rage, fists, and bullets at every dark face they saw, riddled the body of a little child for target practice, and crucified several bodies, displaying them, like trophies after a battle, on utility poles as a continued admonition to the beleaguered community.<sup>55</sup> The Clansman did not cause the riot, but it may have exacerbated racial tensions that had been building for months, helped well along by impassioned editorials in the local newspapers..

Approximately a month before the play opened in Atlanta, there had been a campaign for governor of Georgia in which Hoke Smith, the landslide winner, had played to racial fears and warned that if the ambitions of the hued were not kept in strict check, they would overrun the schools, the polls, and snatch major political office. Their evil had to be contained, by death if necessary.

A typical Smith speech would blame the Negro for the state's ills, promising that removal of blacks from politics would not only eliminate Negro officeholders, but would also curb the black man's desire for an 'intermingling' of the races, protect white womanhood, and improve race

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<sup>54</sup> Reverdy C. Ransom, The Spirit of Freedom and Justice: Orations and Speeches (Nashville, Tennessee: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1926), 118.

<sup>55</sup> Dominic J. Capece Jr. and Jack C. Knight, "Reckoning with Violence: W.E.B. Du Bois and the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot," Journal of Southern History 62.4 (November 1996):740.

relations. If whites did not achieve these ends legally, Smith predicted, violence might be necessary. Referring to a North Carolina riot which left at least twenty-five blacks dead, he said that 'we can handle them as they did in Wilmington,' where the woods were 'black with their hanging carcasses.' Smith challenged cheering audiences with 'Shall it be ballots now or bullets later?'<sup>56</sup>

Performances of The Clansman were well-advertised and extremely well-attended. On opening night, lines of eager fans ringed the block to see this heralded production. Its cast of forty, some of whom were mounted on horseback, and its crosses blazing with fire had already thrilled audiences in a number of major southern as well as northern cities. Performances of The Clansman were patronized by both races. The hued were assigned to the segregated Jim Crow balcony, which they transformed into a platform for dissent. From the balcony, they manifested their dissatisfaction with the authorial point of view and their disagreement with the white audience.

Atlanta blacks attending Thomas Dixon's racist play *The Clansman* ... cheered actors portraying blacks and expressed enthusiasm in places unanticipated by the playwright. As a black villain came to trial, cries of 'Lynch him!' from whites in the audience drew hisses and taunts from the balcony. The situation became so tense that the management kept house lights on throughout the performance and stopped soda-pop sales early to avoid a rain of bottles onto the stage and orchestra seats. Police eventually

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<sup>56</sup> Dittmer, 99-100.

responded by storming the balcony and making arrests.<sup>57</sup>

After its much-noticed and much-touted tour through the South, the company moved to the Middle West.

While the troupe continued through the West, Dixon returned to New York to help rehearse another cast for the New York opening scheduled for January, 1906. As a result of the unprecedented success of The Clansman in the South, Middle West, and West, the New York papers were filled with protests, pictures, editorials, and advertisements relating to the coming presentation. Despite the many objections offered by individual persons, *ad hoc* committees, and various organizations, the play opened on schedule on January 8 to the largest crowd ever to attend a performance at the Liberty Theatre. Unexpectedly, the New York theatergoers responded enthusiastically filling the seats at every performance, night after night.<sup>58</sup>

The critics in New York were not always sympathetic. Several considered the play overrated by its advance publicity. Frederic Edward McKay, a reviewer for The Evening Mail, described the show as a "continual howl against darkies and a glad song for southern gentlemen. Its action is enveloped in an atmosphere of dread based on the fear that the black rascals will clutch the fair women folk."<sup>59</sup> A reviewer for *The Evening*

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<sup>57</sup> Dittmer, 66-7.

<sup>58</sup> Cook, 103.

<sup>59</sup> Frederic Edward McKay, "Clansman Florid and Bombastic Melodrama," The

*Post* commented.

After weeks of preliminary hullabaloo -- started and maintained by all the advertising dodges known to a circus advance agent and a few others rather less scrupulous -- Mr. Thomas Dixon's show, The Clansman -- an epoch-making drama, according to the brazen trumpeters of the box-office -- was exhibited in the Liberty Theatre last night, before a crowd of common curiosity-seekers and noisy deadheads, and proved to be as tiresome a bit of extravagant stupidity as has ever been offered to a patient public under the comprehensive title of drama.<sup>60</sup>

Several reviewers noted the support of "professional Southerners" in the audience and one noted that "[a] finer and harder working claque or a noisier crowd of anti-negro enthusiasts has not been brought together under one Broadway roof this year."<sup>61</sup> This is the play that was much in the news during its rehearsal and served as instigating seed when Porter began conceiving his 1905 film, White Caps. The hued did not misunderstand the less-than-subtle message of the play. The playwright was inciting his audience to applaud the lynching activity of the southern Klan. The white throng was arraying its forces against the hued. In Philadelphia, where the play moved after the New York production, a disturbance erupted in the theatre on opening night and further

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Evening Mail, January 9, 1906. Review Clipping File of The Clansman. The Performing Arts Library in the New York Public Library.

<sup>60</sup> Clansman Clipping file.

<sup>61</sup> Clansman Clipping file.

performances were banned. "When The Clansman played in Philadelphia, over black protests, 3,000 blacks marched and demonstrated in front of the theater, and city officials closed the production to prevent a riot."<sup>62</sup>

From his years in the pulpit, Dixon knew how to excite the emotions of his audience, which he did quite successfully in this play that expressed as well as stimulated the racial anxieties and violent angers endemic in the nation at the time. Dixon, a former firebrand minister who knew how to enthrall audiences, had transferred his pulpit style to the page.

Author Dixon had long been accustomed to the limelight. In 1891 he had been named pastor of the Twenty-Third Street Baptist Church in New York City, and by 1900, his fiery manner was attracting more listeners than any of the city's Protestant ministers. John D. Rockefeller was so impressed that he volunteered to help fund the building of a million dollar "People's Temple" for his activities.<sup>63</sup>

On its tour through the South, Dixon took his play home to Shelby, North Carolina. In the front row sat his aged father, a Baptist minister, who had "established twenty churches, baptized more than six thousand converts, and was a pioneer in organizing societies for foreign missions."<sup>64</sup> When the performance was over, Dixon asked his father

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<sup>62</sup> Florette Henri, Black Migration: Movement North, 1900-1920 (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 228.

<sup>63</sup> Campbell, 47.

<sup>64</sup> Cook, 19.

what he thought of his play. The elder Dixon responded that his son had been extreme in his portrayal of the hued. "My only criticism is, son, I felt once or twice that you bore down a little too hard on the Negro. He wasn't to blame for the Reconstruction. Low vicious white men corrupted and misled him." The son defended himself, "I tried to make that plain." The father held to his point. "I wish you had made it a little plainer. You couldn't make it too strong."<sup>65</sup> This response came from a man who, in 1863, had refused an offer of one hundred thousand dollars in gold for the slaves his wife had inherited. Thomas Dixon, Sr. did not advocate slavery and he would not sell any slaves because he did not want to risk their mistreatment at the hands of a new owner.<sup>66</sup> It is also worth noting that Thomas Dixon, Sr., may also have fathered a hued son who generated some publicity about his paternity.<sup>67</sup> Speculation has been raised that Thomas

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<sup>65</sup> Crowe, 395.

<sup>66</sup> Cook, 21-22.

<sup>67</sup> "After the publication of The Leopard's Spots, a biracial man who lived in New York City began to claim publicly and often that he was Thomas Dixon's half brother, the son of Baptist preacher Thomas Dixon, Sr. When confronted with this allegation, Thomas, Jr., replied, 'Yes I know that darky, he is always getting himself into trouble and I have helped him a number of times. His mother was a cook in our family in NC [North Carolina]." Although African Americans circulated accounts of Dixon's purported half brother, whites buried the information. Whites' treatment of the claim reflects the conspiracy of silence that obscured biracial people of the time from their white contemporaries and from the historical record. Biracial children were almost always the progeny of white men and black women. Yet in the 1890s, respectable whites would admit to no such thing. Miscegenation presented an acute problem for the generation that came of age amid Darwinian science and the rhetoric of imperialism. Dixon filled a real cultural need for whites when he emphasized the menace of black men raping white women and predicted that a 'mongrel breed' threatened the social order. Through this fiction, he explained away the biracial people abounding in the South and erased from historical memory white men's sexual liaisons with and rape of black women. Whether in so doing he also deleted his personal memory of an intimate relationship between his

Dixon, Jr., was angered by his father's leniency toward the hued.

It seems a paradox that The Clansman was as popular in the North as in the South, but the direct, emotional appeal to both the better and worse sides of man's nature was apparently overpowering. Perhaps, too, the popularity of the play is a significant commentary on the thought that Southern viewers had no monopoly on racial bias. The play so captured the minds of the theatre-goers that for three years after the opening two companies toured the country simultaneously to sell-out crowds, creating a fortune for the author.<sup>68</sup>

Six years after The Clansman made its debut in Norfolk, it was still touring the country and had not yet lost all its sap.<sup>69</sup> According to the September 30, 1911 edition of the Morning Telegraph in Richmond, Virginia, the play had claimed the allegiance of its audiences, evidenced by the "phenomenal receipts" it earned throughout its run.<sup>70</sup> The overwhelming and sustained public approval of this play that preached the value of lynching gives an idea of how firmly entrenched were pro-lynching attitudes at that time

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father and the family cook will probably never be known." Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 68-69.

<sup>68</sup> Cook, 104.

<sup>69</sup> In Sandra Gunning's book, Race, Rape, and Lynching, there is a chapter on Dixon who, more than anyone else at the time, put forth the image of the hued male rapist. In Dixon's writing, Gunning writes, there is "a need to silence female utterance both black and white, as a means of reducing to a manageable simplicity the public focus on the criminalized black male body." (13)

<sup>70</sup> Dixon Clipping File, Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library.

in America.<sup>71</sup> Although the lynching of the hued was primarily a southern phenomenon it was reported with great fanfare in northern newspapers. It was also a factor in the West. A number of westerns include scenes of lynching, which are referred to as neck-tie parties; these frontier lynchings punished gamblers and rustlers and other outsiders, and also claimed the lives of a few women as well as members of other ethnic groups.<sup>72</sup> Some of the better known westerns that portray lynching are The Girl of the Golden West (1938), which was also made into an opera, and The Ox-Bow Incident (1943). Lynching, which had its heaviest incidence in the twenty years between 1889 and 1919, claimed a national audience for its spectacle of fire and torture.<sup>73</sup>

By the 1890s, when that first freeborn generation reached maturity, the need to control blacks took on a new urgency. Custom and etiquette no longer provided whites with adequate feelings of protection; they were no longer deemed reliable mainstays of racial supremacy. With increasing regularity, or so it seemed, especially in the towns and cities to which they were flocking, young blacks ignore the etiquette and violated the customs. "They are the worse elements in Southern society," a Nashville

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<sup>71</sup> The last entry for a production in the card catalogue at the Performing Arts Library lists a production in the Orpheum in Jersey City, New Jersey in 1912.

<sup>72</sup> "In 1870 anti-Chinese demonstrations began in California, lynchings followed, and clamor arose for Chinese exclusion, a clamor that became politically potent after the Panic of 1873." Robert Cruden, The Negro in Reconstruction (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 116.

<sup>73</sup> Paul A. Gilje, Rioting in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 103.

newspaper charged, "and if something is not done soon to put a check to their depreciations [sic], life in towns and cities will grow unbearable."<sup>74</sup>

The hue were frequently considered a disturbance wherever they happened to be.

Beginning en masse in 1890, the migration of the hue from the South to the North to escape lynching and other pogromatic forms of white violence made racial problems more than just a southern concern. "By the end of the nineteenth century, as blacks moved to cities and to the North, the level of rioting intensified throughout the nation.

Lynching of blacks persisted throughout the South, but appeared with increased frequency in the North."<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, lynching and racial riots often claimed headlines in northern papers and page after page in journals printed in the North.

Up to last evening it had been a long time since anybody but Tom Dixon had tackled the negro question in a play. Three or four years ago, Dixon wrote The Clansman and as it is still doing business out among the barnstormers he is probably glad he did it. But with the exception of Uncle Tom's Clansman [sic], nobody else has seen fit to talk about the negro upon the stage for a long, long time. Last evening, however, there was produced at the New Theatre a play called The Nigger by Edward Sheldon.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Litwack, 214.

<sup>75</sup> Gilje (Ibid), 115.

<sup>76</sup> The New York Sun, Sunday, December 5, 1909, The Nigger Clipping File, New York Performing Arts Library.

Both playwrights are concerned with the hue and how they fared after Emancipation. Dixon concentrates on the excesses that he feels were committed during Reconstruction, the years between the end of the Civil War and 1876, when a number of politically inclined members of the hue community assumed public office, on the national as well as local level. Some were elected to the Senate and Congress and there was a hue governor in Louisiana whose name was P.B.S. Pinchback.<sup>77</sup> The idea of the hue having political significance was disturbing to many. Sheldon also looks at the hue politician, but in Sheldon's case, the man who becomes governor does not realize that he is not white. Such a thought has never even presented itself as a remote possibility. Philip Morrow has the blood of the southern aristocracy in his veins. He has inherited a thousand acre plantation, whose financial standing he has improved, and graduated from a prestigious northern college. He is sheriff of the county when the play begins and he has become the top man in the state when the play ends. But he has also learned, before the curtain falls, that his grandfather became sexually involved with a quadroon slave by whom he had an octoroon son. That son was his father and so he belongs to the race that

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<sup>77</sup> Pinchback, who was born in 1837, was a product of a biracial union. His father was a southern planter and his mother, a slave, was freed shortly before Pinchback was born in Macon, Georgia. More than likely his mother was a quadroon because Pinchback was visually an octoroon, so close to white that he was able to enlist as a white soldier in the Union army. He believed in the power of money. "Wealth is the great lever that moves the earth," Pinchback said in a political speech which he delivered in Montgomery, Alabama, after the assassination of Lincoln. Pinchback put his belief into practice and amassed a considerable sum of money through his business dealings. The co-owner of a newspaper that addressed itself to a hue readership in Louisiana and a principal in several other business dealings, Pinchback was also the grandfather of the Harlem Renaissance poet and playwright, Jean Toomer. Eric Foner, Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction (New York: Oxford University

he has despised and looked down on paternalistically all his life. He finds this out when he decides to veto a Prohibition Bill. The man who has helped him gain the governor's chair is his cousin, Cliff Noyes, who owns the local distillery. Noyes pressures Morrow not to sign the bill that would ruin him financially. Morrow is a man of conviction and he refuses to buckle to Noyes's demands. Morrow and Noyes clashed for the first time when Morrow, who was sheriff at the time, tried to prevent a lynching. On that occasion, Morrow was not able to prevail. In their second confrontation, Morrow holds his own even though the personal cost is great.

The Nigger (1909) was written by a wunderkind just out of Harvard.<sup>78</sup> In the first decade of the new century, Edward Sheldon had studied with Van Wyck Brooks, William James and George Pierce Baker, who later went to Yale and became "the professional father of a whole group of American playwrights," including Philip Barry and Eugene O'Neill.<sup>79</sup> Born to wealth in Chicago, Sheldon did not write with profit as a primary

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Press, 1993), 171-2.

<sup>78</sup> It is likely that Sheldon who had written Salvation Nell (1908) was engaged in the same experimentation with the underside that intrigued other moderns for a time. Eugene O'Neill and Picasso, inspired to reorient traditional perspective by the masks from Benin which he saw at an exhibit in Paris in 1907, fall into this category. But I'm thinking specifically of Gertrude Stein who published Three Lives in 1909, the same year that Sheldon produced The Nigger. One of the novellas in Stein's literary trilogy explored the world of Melanctha, a mulatto. In a letter written while she was completing Three Lives, Stein bemoaned the inferior status of her subjects. "I have to content myself with niggers and servant girls and the foreign population generally." Ann Douglas, Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1995), 116.

<sup>79</sup> Eric Wollencott Barnes, The Man Who Lived Twice: The Biography of Edward Sheldon (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 25.

motive. He wrote out of the best kind of greed, the lust to know and smell and taste life in the corners of its infinite variety and his talent was nurtured early. "When I was a boy, I used to have a little theatre with candles for footlights, and wings and drops and grooves along which I could slide the characters," Sheldon recalled in an interview in the New York Tribune shortly after The Nigger opened. "I would go to a play and then come home and 'produce' it before my family and friends. I would stand behind the scenes and take all the parts, sliding the characters forward at the proper time, speak their lines, and then slide them off the stage. I used to do this by the hour until my family would fall asleep -- then I knew it was time to drop the curtain."<sup>80</sup> The aptitude that he had expressed and developed as a child was polished at Harvard. His curiosity for life at different times and places seemed not only insatiable but compendious. "It might be the period of the French Revolution, or of Victor Hugo or of the modern French poets, Verlaine and Baudelaire -- he had a perfect picture of the period, down to the art, the clothing, the customs, all the minutiae of life," his roommate at Harvard remembered. "He could *live* in the time of Julius Caesar or of Congreve." It was this gift for "projecting himself imaginatively into whatever he studied," that stood him in excellent stead in the theatre.<sup>81</sup>

Salvation Nell, his first play to find a producer, was written before his graduation in 1908. It took place in a world of failure, redemption, and poverty of which Sheldon knew little personally. What had inspired the play was the chance sighting of a pretty

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<sup>80</sup> Clipping file, The Nigger, Performing Arts Library.

<sup>81</sup> Barnes, 26.

face.

Once during the previous winter on a walk through a poor section of Boston, he had stopped to watch a Salvation Army meeting on a street corner. The preacher was a pretty girl who in spite of her bonnet and uniform still carried some faint suggestion of a lurid past. But what struck Ned was the thrilling sincerity with which she spoke, and the rapt interest of the bedraggled group gathered around her. Ned wondered by what route she had arrived at her present state. Out of that wonder sprang the idea of Salvation Nell, the play which a year later swept like a fresh gust through the stale atmosphere of Broadway, and carried Edward Sheldon to instant fame.<sup>82</sup>

He began to study that world and inhabited it in such a way that he made people see its truth and squalor. One of the first to believe in Sheldon's words was Minnie Maddern Fiske, a leading, intrepid actress of the time known for bucking the Syndicate and importing the work of Ibsen to America. With her husband Harrison Grey Fiske, a newspaper publisher, the unconventional actress headed her own company. It was a delightful surprise for Ned when Mrs. Fiske agreed to produce and star in Salvation Nell. The production "proved a milestone in the history of the American theatre, for it showed an awareness of bigger problems than Broadway had been willing to tackle up to that time. It showed, too, that really vital drama must take its material from everyday life and

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<sup>82</sup> Barnes, 41.

not depend on the threadbare, overworked stuff of immemorial stage convention."<sup>83</sup>

Years later, Eugene O'Neill credited Salvation Nell with inspiring him to do new work.

"Your Salvation Nell, along with the work of the Irish Players on their first trip over here, was what first opened my eyes to the existence of a real theatre as opposed to the unreal -- and to me then, hateful -- theatre of my father, in whose atmosphere I had been brought up."<sup>84</sup>

Salvation Nell was still touring with Mrs. Fiske in the lead when The Nigger, Ned Sheldon's second play, opened at the New Theatre on December 4, 1909. His agent, Alice Kauser, had not encouraged him to write it. "The nigger problem is not one that the American people want to see upon the boards."<sup>85</sup> Perhaps emboldened by the success of The Clansman, Sheldon persisted nonetheless. "[T]he more she opposed the idea, the firmer he became in his conviction that it would make a play. In fact, his mentor's disapproval seemed to act as a spur. No sooner had Salvation Nell settled down to its run than Ned started to work on the play first called Philip Morrow, but later, bluntly, The Nigger." Shortly after it was finished, the play was accepted by the New Theatre. Located near Columbus Circle, the New Theatre was one of the "earliest noncommercial theaters in America."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Barnes 53.

<sup>84</sup> Barnes, 53-54.

<sup>85</sup> Barnes, 60.

<sup>86</sup> Jack Poggi, Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 103.

The New Theatre building, a gorgeous structure with architectural echoes of the Palazzo San Sovino in Venice, was the last word in comfort and equipment. It was to be operated as a repertory theatre -- not the first nor yet the last attempt to realize this fond dream of American drama-lovers -- with a permanent company of thirty outstanding players. One third of the productions would be classics, to counteract the inherent Broadway tendency to drift to the lowest level of spectators, and the rest would be important modern drama.<sup>87</sup>

An extremely well-endowed experiment endorsed by a string of millionaires with celebrity names like John Jacob Astor, August Belmont, Otto Kahn, Henry Clay Frick, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and Henry Payne Whitney, the New Theatre represented the pinnacle of acceptability. It also marked the beginning of the independent theatre movement in America, and what an expensive beginning it was.

"Thirty wealthy men contributed \$35,000 each, a large and well-equipped theater was constructed on Central Park West at a cost of \$3,000,000, the best professional actors of the day were engaged for a repertory company, Lee Shubert was hired as business manager, and Winthrop Ames was appointed director. No money was spared for production."<sup>88</sup> The merchant princes who contributed their money to this bright and handsome artistic experiment wanted to buffer the American playwright against the commercial exigencies of Broadway. They sought to encourage creativity and raise the

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<sup>87</sup> Barnes 63.

<sup>88</sup> Poggi, 103.

national standards of dramatic art to a level commensurate with Europe. "The dedication of the New Theatre on Central Park West at 62nd Street on 6 November 1909 was an auspicious event in the social and theatrical life of New York. J. Pierpont Morgan sat in the center of the platform group flanked by such notables as Nicholas Murray Butler, Woodrow Wilson, George Pierce Baker, Willion Lyon Phelps, W.D. Howells, Thomas A. Edison, William Winter, and William Archer."<sup>89</sup> One of eleven plays that the New Theatre presented in its first season, The Nigger, along with Galsworthy's Strife, were remembered longer than the others. These plays also were the only ones that "came close to satisfying those who expected something new from the New."<sup>90</sup>

John Corbin, a critic, had read Sheldon's play and recommended that it be given a hearing in the inaugural season, along with work by Galsworthy, Maeterlinck, and Ibsen.<sup>91</sup> A reviewer who attended the opening of Sheldon's play at the palatial New Theatre which could accommodate almost three thousand people commented that "The Nigger got a more enthusiastic reception than has greeted the first performance of any play hitherto brought out at the New Theatre."<sup>92</sup> Another critic seemed impressed by the financial wherewithal of the first-night audience which was "[e]legantly gowned ... in

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<sup>89</sup> Richard Moody, America Takes the Stage: Romanticism in American Drama and Theatre, 1750-1900 (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1969), 113.

<sup>90</sup> Moody, 114-5.

<sup>91</sup> Barnes, 64.

<sup>92</sup> New York Sun, Sunday, December 5, 1909, The Nigger Clipping file, Performing Arts Library.

boxes and stalls. There was the glow of prosperity in the vulgarity of over-dress."<sup>93</sup> After the play was over, the audience applauded with such enthusiasm that the playwright was summoned in front of the curtain six times.<sup>94</sup> That such a theatre--with a conservative and extremely well-heeled clientele--would sponsor a play that dealt with lynching demonstrates how widespread was the knowledge of this mostly, but not exclusively, southern activity.

After its glittering debut, the New Theatre did not last long. Its operating expenses were too high and the doors to the New Theatre closed after the second season. The site is now occupied by an apartment building called The Century, the name of the theatre that succeeded the expensive experiment. One theatre historian described the New Theatre as "dilettantishly high-minded. .. its policy had no core of esthetic conviction. ... The repertory was varied but revealed no passionate commitment to a school or philosophy and, with only Sheldon's play to speak for America, was painfully deficient in native content. The theatre moreover was too large and acoustically defective."<sup>95</sup> The theatre may not have lasted, but The Nigger was not as quickly forgotten.

Forty years after the opening of Ned's second play *Cosmopolitan*

*Magazine* published an article entitled "The Ten Dramatic Shocks of the

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<sup>93</sup> Alan Dale, New York Journal-American, Monday, December 6, 1909; The Nigger Clipping file.

<sup>94</sup> New York Tribune, December 1909, Nigger Clipping file.

<sup>95</sup> Howard Taubman, The Making of the American Theatre (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1967), 151.

Century.” Among the plays on the list were Sappho by Alphonse Daudet with Olga Nethersole, which New Yorkers saw in 1900, Bernard Shaw’s Mrs Warren’s Profession in 1905, and Sheldon’s The Nigger, the play which (as the article stated) “nearly forty years before Sinclair Lewis’s Kingsblood Royal treated of Negro blood in a man supposedly white and of his love for a woman of pure Caucasian blood. The theme at that time was theatrically sensational and induced qualms in the audience. ... adding to the general shock was the dialogue presenting the acquiescent Southern attitude toward lynching.”<sup>96</sup>

This is the first play about lynching in this study since The Escape: or a Leap for Freedom (1858) by William Wells Brown and The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana (1859) by Dion Boucicault, to focus on the time of its creation. This contemporary concentration suggests a desire on the part of the playwright to confront the *real* and the present head-on. Brown and Boucicault offered their versions of the real as they had seen and lived it. Sheldon, however, creates an image of what he conceives to be real through the representation of the real to which he has been exposed in newspapers and magazines and through photographs, and presumably film. His knowledge of the South was not “firsthand.”<sup>97</sup> But this lack of intimate acquaintance with the specifics of life in the South did not hinder Sheldon’s understanding or his ability to tell a story. With no partisan cause to promote, Sheldon brought a fresh and daring approach to a subject that

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<sup>96</sup> Barnes, 65.

<sup>97</sup> Loren K. Ruff, Edward Sheldon (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 71.

was little appreciated by the critics, then and now. It was, however, popular with audiences, many of whom were probably drawn to it out of astonishment. It is hard to determine whether its popularity was due primarily to curiosity. Nonetheless, audiences "filled the New Theatre, not only on the opening night of the play, but every night thereafter when The Nigger appeared in the repertory. And before the season had closed, two road companies set out on tour."<sup>98</sup> Edward Sheldon was an enigma. How could this young man not yet twenty-five handle this demanding and fraught subject with such a deft and disturbing hand? The thought of it, that anyone -- even those in high, respected places -- could have a slave ancestor cut a little too close to the blood for many in the audience. It was shocking, yet perhaps a little thrilling to some, to think that such a possibility might be lurking in the corner of a musty attic closet.

Although the action takes place *Now*, the setting is still a plantation, and the nineteenth century is still the primary, inescapable mental, moral, and emotional context for what occurs in the play. The nineteenth-century past is embodied in Jinny, the quadroon mammy of indiscernible age who, like Nance in The White Slave, holds a racial secret locked tight in her memory. It is her grandson, Joe White, who is lynched for assaulting a white female. Joe's last name is not idly chosen. The sexual sin of slavery has whitened his skin. But once again, whiteness in the veins has done a hued body harm. We are on the terrain of the tragic mulatto. Simms, the butler, proclaims. "De white in him ain't done nobody no good."<sup>99</sup> Joe White confesses to rape and he is

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<sup>98</sup> Barnes, 65.

<sup>99</sup> Edward Sheldon, The Nigger (New York, Macmillan, 1915), 7.

lynched. The lynch party is led by the father of the raped girl, who dies from the brutality of the attack. If Joe White were indeed white, he would have been arrested, put in jail, and given a trial. Since he is not white, he is hunted with dogs and burned to death. We do not see the fire on-stage as we do in Dixon's The Clansman, but at the end of the first act we do see Joe White on his knees begging for his life. The audience hears his death, however. "*[F]rom quite a distance, dying down and lost amid a far-away roar of voices and savage cheers, comes a long scream of agony and terror.*"<sup>100</sup> The fate of Joe White showed what might happen to any man of hue who sexually importunes a white female. This refers as well to his cousin Philip Morrow, the man of the future, who is more than and less than what he appears to be. Sheldon masculinized the tragic mulatto theme, as Dixon had in The Clansman with the character of Silas Lynch. In the person of Philip Morrow, Sheldon gives his male tragic mulatto more integrity and more power, thus heightening his fall from grace and his tragedy. Long before there was such a thing as whiteness studies which marks the transition into whiteness for some ethnic groups--for example, the Irish--Sheldon demonstrated that the consensus, ratified by law and custom, was not to extend whiteness or privilege to the hued under any condition. Sheldon situates his play at the point of paradox in the violent exclusiveness of white supremacy. On the same day a man can wake up wrapped in the assurance of whiteness and see the security of his status fade away.

The reason for Morrow's social demotion happened very long ago, back in the 1840s. Morrow's grandfather, later killed in the Mexican War, fought with Noyes's

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<sup>100</sup> Sheldon, 99.

grandfather over the affections of Belle, a quadroon slave, Jinny's sister. The grandfather educated Belle and treated her like a lady, as was the case with Zoe in The Octoroon and Lisa in The White Slave. Silas Lynch in The Clansman was educated as well. Not only were racial distinctions being eroded biologically, they were also breaking down intellectually. The grandfather had impregnated his wife and his slave around the same time. The wife and her baby died, but the slave and her child lived. The grandfather took the child of the slave as his legitimate heir. He had no other successor. To protect the secret, he sold the mother at the slave market in New Orleans. The child grew up and inherited the plantation. No one ever knew the difference. Noyes, however, found a letter in the attic that Belle had written on June 11, 1848, the morning before she was sold, that related her version of what happened. After much prodding, Jinny corroborates the story. In Jinny, Sheldon capitalized on the "mammy craze [that] swept the ... nation between the 1890s and the 1920s."<sup>101</sup>

In The Escape, The Octoroon, The White Slave, and The Clansman, we have the same kind of transracial relations that produce mixed offspring, but Sheldon is the first playwright to offer the voice of the slave mother. Hers is a voice of forgiveness and love. Noyes verified her story with the official death records. Without the letter, no one would have uncovered the truth. Whiteness is thus not a visible attribute. It is invisible. It is hegemonic not because of what it looks like but because of what it can do. White does not legitimate anything except itself. Not to be white is to be delegitimized, without legal standing or protection, without the capacity to own or dictate the fate of others. To be

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<sup>101</sup> Hale, 98.

delegitimized is to be subject to lynching. Lynching mimics law. The accused is often given a mock trial, but the jury is already decided and so is the punishment. Lynching assumes the trappings of legality, but exists outside it. Lynching is delegitimate, and so is anyone who is lynched.

It is telling that Sheldon ends his play with a question. We know that Morrow is going to announce that he is not white. But we are not given a scene where the audience reacts to what Morrow has to say. It is quite possible that Morrow is offering himself up as a lynch victim. This is the standard *Lady or the Tiger* ending, where one outcome--love or death--is equally as possible as another. Morrow has already rejected love, because he knows that as a man of hue, he cannot marry his fiancée, Miss Georgiana Byrd, who is white. They cannot escape. They cannot go North to freedom as Glen, Melinda, and Cato did in The Escape. There is no time for a getaway. That option is not available to Georgie and Phil. Clifton Noyes is going to publish Morrow's racial identity and in a few hours it will be splashed across the front page of the evening paper. There is no time for escape. Nor is that Phil Morrow's inclination. He has been a man of integrity and he is going to continue being one. He is going to beat Noyes to the news. He will speak to the public himself. A crowd is gathering to say farewell to the Colonel and his troops before they take the train out of town. They had come to put down the race riot, sparked by drinking and punctuated by racial murder, that unsettled things for a few days.

"They've killed two mo' niggahs down by the rivah--stabbed 'em with jack knives-- ...

That makes fo'teen so fa', not countin' the wounded."<sup>102</sup> Morrow will speak to his constituency and to the colonel and his men and tell them the truth. After his speech, Morrow tells Georgie that he will resign.<sup>103</sup> He tells her that he plans to spend the rest of his life working to uplift his race. At least that's what he says to Georgie and maybe he partially believes it himself. He also partially recognizes that he faces death when he makes his speech. He tells Georgie that he was prepared to go "to that window like a criminal dragged t' the gallows-tree."<sup>104</sup>

Georgie doesn't want their engagement to end. She says she'll stand by him, her love for the man she has known since childhood is that strong. She will sacrifice everything to remain at his side. Morrow knows that he is socially dead and he does not wish to bury Georgie with him. He knows that the two of them can never be free of the same sexual proscription that caught Joe White in its grip. No man of hue in the South can have anything except unsanctioned relations with a white woman. And the price of that relation is death by lynching. Even if the crowd were to let him walk away hand-in-hand with his white lady love, segregation would separate them. In the South, they could not travel together; they could not eat or sleep together, and they could not be buried together. Their love is impossible. Morrow explains. "Georgie, theah's a black gulf

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<sup>102</sup> Sheldon, 112.

<sup>103</sup> In a short story adapted from The Nigger, Morrow returns to his office after the speech, alone. Sheldon leaves the ending open. It is up to the American people to decide. Are they going to be one people or not? Sheldon may have been hoping that the people would do the right thing. The Nigger Clipping file.

<sup>104</sup> Sheldon, 260.

between us – an’ it’s filled t’ the brim with sweat an’ hate an’ blood! We can stretch out our hands from eithah side, but they won’t meet! An’ even while we’re tryin’, don’t we heah from down theah -- miles down – comin’ up through the centuries -- the crack of a white man’s whip an’ the scream[s]”<sup>105</sup>

It was this interaction between Phil and Georgie that at least one New York critic found improbable.

In one respect the story of the play will not bear examination. It is inconceivable that any conventionally minded Southern girl could bring herself to think of marrying a “nigger.” Yet after seeing the heroine stricken with horror at the revelation of her lover’s ancestry, seeing her writhing at the touch of the man suddenly become loathsome to her, we are asked to consider the spectacle of the same girl only a few hours later complaining because her lover does not greet her with a kiss and desiring to follow him to the ends of the earth. It is too much to ask.<sup>106</sup>

In another respect, the story of the play does bear examination. The race riot which Sheldon wrote about in The Nigger was based on an actual riot that took place in Atlanta in 1906. Ray Stannard Baker, a major muckraking journalist of the time, wrote about the Atlanta riot. Sheldon used some articles that Baker had written about race as research in the writing of The Nigger. Sheldon studied two specific Baker articles, “The Negro in

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<sup>105</sup> Sheldon, 255.

<sup>106</sup> *New York Sun*, Sunday, December 5, 1909; The Nigger Clipping file.

Politics” and “An Ostracized Race in Ferment.”<sup>107</sup> Neither Baker nor Sheldon knew that during that riot a young male born in the last decade of the nineteenth century when lynching reached its all-time would make the same decision that Philip Morrow makes at the end of The Nigger. That young male was named Walter White. Like Morrow, he looked white but was not. Walter White decided during that riot that he would dedicate his life to championing his race.

Young Walter was galvanized when, during the Atlanta riot, a mob of whites approached his home with destruction blazing in their eyes. Someone in the crowd who knew the family yelled “Let’s burn it down. It’s too nice for a nigger to live in!”

In the eerie light Father turned his drawn face toward me. In a voice as quiet as though he were asking me to pass him the sugar at the breakfast table, he said, “Son, don’t shoot until the first man puts his foot on the lawn and then – don’t you miss!”

In the flickering light the mob swayed, paused, and began to flow toward us. In that instant there opened up within me a great awareness: I knew then who I was. I was a Negro, a human being with an invisible pigmentation which marked me a person to be hunted, hanged, abused, discriminated against, kept in poverty and ignorance, in order that those whose skin was white would have readily at hand a proof of their superiority, a proof patent and inclusive, accessible to the moron and the

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<sup>107</sup> Loren K. Ruff, “The Nigger,” Journal of American Drama and Theatre 2.3 (Fall 1990):49.

idiot as well as to the wise man and the genius. No matter how low a white man feel, he could always hold fast to the smug conviction that he was superior to two-thirds of the world's population, for those two-thirds were not white.

It made no difference how intelligent or talented my millions of brothers and I were, or how virtuously we lived. A curse like that of Judas was upon us, a mark of degradation fashioned with heavenly authority. There were white men who said Negroes had no souls, and who proved it by the bible. Some of these now were approaching us, intent upon burning our house.

Theirs was a world of contrasts in values: superior and inferior, profit and loss, cooperative and noncooperative, civilized and aboriginal, white and black. If you were on the wrong end of the comparison, if you were inferior; if you were noncooperative; if you were aboriginal; if you were black; then you were marked for excision, expulsion, or extinction. I was a Negro; I was therefore that part of history which opposed the good, the just, and the enlightened. I was a Persian, falling before the hordes of Alexander. I was a Carthaginian, extinguished by the Legions of Rome. I was a Frenchman at Waterloo, an Anglo-Saxon at Hastings, a Confederate at Vicksburg. I was the defeated, wherever and whenever there was a defeat.

Yet as a boy there in the darkness amid the tightening fright, I knew the

inexplicable thing -- that my skin was as white as the skin of those who were coming at me.

The mob moved toward the lawn. I tried to aim my gun, wondering what it would feel like to kill a man. Suddenly there was a volley of shots. The mob hesitated, stopped. Some friends of my father's had barricaded themselves in a two-story brick building just below our house. It was they who had fired. Some of the mobsmen, still bloodthirsty, shouted, "Let's go get the nigger." Others, afraid now for their safety, held back. Our friends, noting the hesitation, fired another volley. The mob broke and retreated up Houston Street.

In the quiet that followed I put my gun aside and tried to relax. But a tension different from anything I had ever known possessed me. I was gripped by the knowledge of my identity, and in the depths of my soul I was vaguely aware that I was glad of it. I was sick with loathing for the hatred which had flared before me that night and come so close to making me a killer; but I was glad I was not one of those who hated; I was glad I was not one of those made sick and murderous by pride. I was glad I was not one of those whose story is in the history of the world, a record of bloodshed, rapine, and pillage. I was glad my mind and spirit were part of the races that had not fully awakened, and who therefore had still before them the opportunity to write a record of virtue as a memorandum to Armageddon.

It was all just a feeling then, inarticulate and melancholy, yet reassuring in the way that death and sleep are reassuring, and I have clung to it now for nearly half a century.<sup>108</sup>

Walter White grew up to keep his word. He joined the National Association for the Advancement of Negro People (NAACP) which was founded in 1909, the same year that The Nigger opened. Because he was apparently white --like Philip Morrow. Walter White was able to travel through the South and gather evidence against those who had been involved in lynching. It was largely because of his anti-lynching efforts that the NAACP became the most important agency fighting to stop the advance of lynching.

In 1915, William Fox made The Nigger into a film. Ironically, The Nigger was the first film against which the NAACP launched a protest. Under pressure from the NAACP, the film was renamed The Governor and pulled from theatres in several cities.<sup>109</sup> It may well have been the release of The Nigger that led D.W. Griffith to begin showing The Birth of a Nation, the film version of Thomas Dixon's play, The Clansman. "In 1915, movie houses were showing a frankly racist film called The Nigger, and it was probably to cash in on the market thus created that Griffith decided to release his version of the Dixon story, which by then was finished and waiting."<sup>110</sup>

Nine years after The Clansman opened in New York, the film that it became

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<sup>108</sup> Walter White, A Man Called White (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 11-12.

<sup>109</sup> Thomas Cripps, Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Films, 1900-1942 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 66.

<sup>110</sup> Henri, 228.

showed at the same theatre.<sup>111</sup> Its success as a film far outdistanced whatever success it enjoyed as a play. The film broke all previous attendance records and made cinematic history.

[It] ran for 44 consecutive weeks at the Liberty Theater in New York City, where reserved-seat tickets were sold at the unprecedented price of \$2. Its success transformed the nature of American film production and exhibition. It marks the end of 'the lowly nickelodeon storefront theater, with its tinny honky-tonk piano and its windowless, foul-air smelliness' and introduces 'the grandeur of a great auditorium with a great orchestra and a great picture that ran for three hours and filled an entire evening with thrills and excitement in a setting of opulent luxury such as the great masses of working people had never dreamed possible for them.'<sup>112</sup>

Griffith, whose career was assured in the pantheon of the cinematic greats from that point on, relied heavily on the play version for the story that was expanded in the film. "[T]he film closely parallels Dixon's theatrical treatment borrowing heavily from the play for much of the second half of the film, filling in exposition from the novel for the earlier sections, and in general, using Dixon's material much more thoroughly than is usually believed."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Campbell, 50.

<sup>112</sup> John Belton, editor, Movies and Mass Culture (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 15.

<sup>113</sup> Jeffrey D. Martin, "Film out of theatre: D.W. Griffith, Birth of a Nation and the Melodrama The Clansman," Literature/Film Quarterly 18.2 (1990):87. [87-95]

A desire for the maximum dramatic impact seems to have been the overriding reason for many of the choices Griffith makes in his adaptation.

Griffith's understanding of dramatic structure was not entirely serendipitous. Before becoming a film director, Griffith's first love had been the stage. For many years an itinerant actor and aspiring playwright, at one point he had even acted for Dixon.<sup>114</sup>

Thanks to films such as Uncle Tom's Cabin, The Octoroon, The White Slave, The Birth of a Nation, and The Nigger, all of which were adapted from the stage, the plantation became fixed in the public imaginary. A plantation of the mind. The hued were criminals for having left the plantation/field. They were fugitives from their rightful place. They were permanent runaways who had to be brought back to justice. Lynching enacted and re-enacted the chase and capture and punishment of the recalcitrant slave, who had escaped his legitimate role. Lynching was an abstracted, pivotal scene from the Manichean melodrama of race in America. The hued were presumed guilty and the whites were presumed innocent. The hued had to be retaliated against and the whites were officially in charge of retaliation. The roles were assigned and were played out over and over again. The die was cast.

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<sup>114</sup> Martin, 93.

### Chapter Three. "The Persistence of the Past"

The past is decisive in Granny Maumee (1914) by Ridgely Torrence, a white playwright, and in Rachel (1916) by Angelina Weld Grimke, who is hued. It draws a wide circumference within which the present finds its occupation and beyond which neither the present nor the future can travel. For the hued, the past is limitation and it is reflected in language. In Granny Maumee, the characters speak in a dialect that announces their slave origins. In Rachel, the characters have shaken off the sound of bondage and inferiority. This linguistic distinction marks the difference in attitude and focus between Torrence and Grimke. Torrence is drawn to the atavistic, to the primitive, to *niggerism*, and Grimke concentrates on *negroism*, the quest to show the humanity and polish and worth of the hued. But no matter how much distance they put between themselves and slavery, the hued could not escape its effects. The youth may have gotten an education, but they were often taunted with racial snubs and slurs while on school premises and if they graduated, they could not get jobs to match their schooling. Their futures were stymied, but still they climbed. The racial regime held in place by lynching had internal as well as external consequences. It maimed the body as well as the soul. In both plays, a lynching that took place long ago vitiates the present. In Granny Maumee, the lynching happened fifty years earlier. In Rachel, the lynching occurred ten years prior to the beginning of the play. With these two plays, we note that lynching, as depicted in

the drama, is beginning to develop a history, a backlog of precedent, a tape that extends into the present and against which the contemporary moment can be measured. Lynching has become faceted, possessing a difference of perspective and a modern and pre-modern phase.

Both plays tell the story of the lynching from the point of view of the victim family, those who have had a family member or members prematurely wrenched from their midst. The focus in Granny Maumee is the mother of a son who has been lynched. In Rachel, the central character is the daughter of a father who has been taken from the home by masked men in the middle of the night. There is a double lynching in Rachel. At the same time that the father is killed for refusing to retract an incendiary editorial against the lynching of an innocent hued man in a small local newspaper that he owned, his stepson is also killed because he tried to come to the aid of his father. So Rachel loses a father and a half-brother on the same night. When this double lynching occurred, Rachel was too young to know what happened, and her mother took the surviving family, a young son and daughter, to live in the North. Rachel is thus the first lynching drama in this dissertation to be set in the North, and it charts the impact of migration, the mass exit of the hued from the South in flight from the memory of slavery and the lynching noose. Tom Loving, the son who is left alive in Rachel, can only find employment as a waiter in the North even though he was educated as an engineer. His situation is typical. "Today, we colored men and women ... are up against it. Every year, we are having a harder time of it. In the South, they make it as impossible as they can for us to get an education. ... Our one safeguard -- the ballot -- in most states, is taken away already, or is being taken

away. ... In the North, they made a pretense of liberality ... Each year, the problem to live, gets more difficult to solve."<sup>1</sup> In Granny Maumee, a process that was begun in the past is completed in the death of the mother. For the hued, the present is no better than the past, and possibly worse because hope and effort are crowned with death and defeat, demonstrating that there is no exit and no light at the end of the racial tunnel.

Modernism, a time alternately described as the Progressive Era, did not offer the hued an open door into progress or a surcease from past troubles. Instead, the white modernist artist assigned and appropriated the linguistic mask of the hued to stage his or her revolt against the status quo. In order to take advantage of the latitude that playing the other afforded, the other had to be fixed in time and place and symbolically skinned so that the white modernist writer could slip in and out of another complexion, another world, at will. The freedom of one was the fettering of the other. This constriction of movement and of voice was key in lynching and in the campaign of modernism. "[T]hree of the accepted landmarks of literary modernism in English depend on racial ventriloquism ... Conrad's *Nigger of the Narcissus*, Stein's *Melanctha*, and Eliot's *Waste Land*. ...

linguistic mimicry and racial masquerade were not just shallow fads but strategies without which modernism could not have arisen."<sup>2</sup> In this chapter which is focused on two modernist playwrights of different stripe, I will begin by discussing Granny Maumee, the last play written by a white male playwright in my study, before turning to a

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<sup>1</sup> James V. Hatch, editor. Black Theater USA: 45 Plays by Black American, 1847-1974 (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 156.

<sup>2</sup> Michael North, The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-

discussion of Rachel, the first play written by a woman of hue to address lynching. First, let me expand a bit on why I charge the modernist artist with ghettophilic piracy, otherwise known as neominstrely.

Those white American artists who went to Europe or absorbed the European influence in America at the beginning of the century are called the moderns because they added a new, expansive fillip to the often moribund, conventional art that had preceded them. Most of them were extremists, not middle-of-the-roaders. They wrote about people who found wars to fight and bulls to follow and fortunes to make. Like Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, many of these artists took chances and lived life on the edge of their seats, full of expectation. They came of age at a time when technology was detaching the present from the past, setting today free from the norms and moorings of yesterday. Electricity, movies, cars, telephones, and unbridled mobility had transformed daily life. People--those who had enough money and ambition--could go places and see things. They did not have to stay rooted in place. They could change their realities. They could become citizens of the globe. They could banish the night and dispel distance and talk to friends and relatives miles and miles away. Their worlds had gotten larger and their options had expanded. But all this expansiveness came with a price, an overabundance of choice and change which led to a desire for simplicity, something known and manageable. As much as the world had changed, it was decided that the hue were too backward to be altered by the modern. They were outside the flow, much too primitive. They were designated as the bearers of balm in the churning

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Century Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), v.

maelstrom of the modern, an antidote for the ills of industrialism. Thanks to the hue and their steady lack of sophistication, the moderns assumed that they knew where solace lived. They could then indulge in the new to their heart's content. *New* was the catchword of the times. The century was new, and the artists strove not only to keep pace, but to set a new beat, one that pulsated to the rhythms of the daring new brash and irreverent music, jazz, a gift from the hue. Modernism is often referred to as the Age of Jazz, a music of global appeal which emerged "during one of those windows of opportunity that ... occur in those brief periods when new social conditions emerge rapidly and the white power structure is slow to create appropriate control mechanisms."<sup>3</sup> Also known as the trans-atlantics, some of these vibrant moderns took it upon themselves to ascribe the proper place for the hue. Some of the hue had managed to exit through that cracked window of chance, wandering from their cabins into the cities and into the North and even traveling to Europe where they popularized jazz during the years of migration and the flight from the lynching South. Some escaped, but many remained and a stunning number of white modern artists derived their creative impetus by donning the mask of the hue, which seemed to goad and release them into fun and experimentation. "Seldom in our literary history has blackness so occupied the imaginations of white artists as during the rise of modernism."<sup>4</sup>

The moderns, whether in the urban capitals of America or Europe, enjoyed

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<sup>3</sup> Ted Vincent, Keep Cool: The Black Activists who built the Jazz Age (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 49.

frequent imaginative excursions into the huts or cabins of the hued, from whence they drew novelty, excitement, and inspiration. Gertrude Stein, who spent most of her time in Paris, put on the persona of a hued woman when she wrote in the voice of Melanctha, an American mulatto, in the central narrative of Three Lives, the literary text that is credited with launching American modernism. In Switzerland, the Dada poets whose playground was Zurich performed racially inflected poetry which they called *chants nègres* and *Negergedichte* in the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916. In Chicago, Vachel Lindsay recited iconoclastic rhythms from "The Congo" at social events. In New York, Carl Van Vechten, the white cultural critic who spent much of his leisure crawling from one Harlem bar to the next during Prohibition, entitled a novel Nigger Heaven, the colloquial term for the balcony where the hued were forced to sit in segregated American theatres. T.S. Eliot fancied the nickname of Possum, short for opossum, one of the animals associated with the hued. Ezra Pound, who lived for a long time in Italy, answered to the name of B'r'er Rabbit, the quintessential racial trickster.<sup>5</sup> In dance, which began to reflect the new permissiveness and pulsations of the age, Vernon and Irene Castle, the golden couple, were backed up by hued musicians as they mesmerized America and the world with their fox trot and Castle Walk.<sup>6</sup> James Reese Europe, the hued musician who first

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Gubar, Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 134.

<sup>6</sup> "James Reese Europe's significance to American dance is difficult to overestimate. He was 'a central figure in the [social] dance craze' that swept the United States between 1912 and 1916. Urban whites began dancing 'in new ways to new rhythms, borrowing steps from black Americans' and adapting them to their own cultural style. Such European-American dances as the schottische and the waltz were rapidly eclipsed by a series of black vernacular dances including the shimmy, Texas tommy,

astounded Paris with the sound of jazz during World War I, was the primary musician for the Castles. They wouldn't think of letting anyone else play for them.<sup>7</sup> In fine art, Gauguin and Picasso went native, using the other to brighten up their palettes and transform their conceptions, conventions, and patterns. In drama, Eugene O'Neill experimented with hued characters and hued speech in his early works, including Thirst (1916), The Moon of the Caribees (1918), The Dreamy Kid (1919), The Emperor Jones (1920), and All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923). The last-named play used race as a skill. The tensions between the married couple were inspired by the relationship between O'Neill's parents, whose names were given to the two main characters.<sup>8</sup> The Emperor Jones represented the epitome of what O'Neill had been able to achieve artistically up until that point. "The new O'Neill, the craftsman who was to revolutionize the American theatre in the 1920s, in his experimental period, emerges in The Emperor Jones."<sup>9</sup> Even before O'Neill, who is the acknowledged pioneer in modern American drama, Ridgely Torrence was in the forefront of bringing the modernist attitude and latitude toward race into the drama when

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turkey trot, and fox trot. White ballroom and cabaret exhibition dancers became twentieth-century 'dancing masters,' rigidifying, diluting, and codifying the dances to make them acceptable to white 'high society.' These hybrid dances, popularly known as 'modern dancing,' were performed to syncopated music that was a cross between ragtime and pre-jazz. Black dance music was in demand." Jacqui Malone, Steppin' on the Blues: the Visible Rhythms of African American Dance (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 142-3.

<sup>7</sup> Reid Badger, A Life in Ragtime: A Biography of James Reese Europe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 83.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1962), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Virginia Floyd, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill: A New Assessment (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1985), 134.

he chose to write Granny Maumee in the idiom of the hued.

Now, as promised, I will begin discussing the basic narrative in Torrence's one-act. Pearl, the sister who has stayed by Granny's side in Granny Maumee, asks Sapphire, the sister who has gone to the city, whether her man -- who is talked about but never seen -- has taken her to the moving pictures. That is Pearl's idea of the glitter and appeal of city life. Staying in a cabin caring for her hundred-year-old great grandmother, Pearl has a hunger for that kind of urban thrill, that release from the predictable and repetitive drudge of daily life. Sapphire doesn't answer. She has other things on her mind. She has a young son by her mystery man who may or may not have taken her to the movies. More than likely he has not. Theirs is more a private than a public affair. His name is Lightfoot and he is white. Sapphire is not. Their romance, if it can be described as one, is clandestine. Their child is mulatto, a mixed breed, a racial mongrel. Fifty years before, Lightfoot's grandfather lit a lynching fire that burned a man to death. That man was Sam, the son of Granny and the grandfather of Pearl and Sapphire and the great grandfather of the little boy from whom much is expected but from whom much may not be forthcoming. It is questionable whether he can alter the pattern of history, which is what his great great grandmother wants him to do. Sam was Granny's only son. She braved the fire to save her son and her eyes were seared shut. She has been blind from that point forward. Sam was the last male born in the family; that is, until the son that has just been born to Sapphire.

When Granny Maumee begins, Granny is directing Pearl about what to do to prepare properly for the arrival of this special child, the one who is going to make up for

the brutal loss of Sam. The right sheets have to go on the one good bed, the one that Sam bought for his mother the day he was lynched for a murder that happened while he was resting at home. Granny has been waiting in darkness for years and years for her day of recuperation, when she can touch the solid new flesh born of pure African blood that will fulfill the promise of her dead son. She knows that he will be a child undiluted, undefiled in blood. All the women in her family have kept themselves from the destroying angel, the seductive poison of miscegenation. White blood, she says, has meant ruination. It has been fire and death. It has been the "crawlin' stream er hell fer me an' my fambly as fur as I knows, an' dat's a hundred yeah."<sup>10</sup> But more than anything, it is their murderous violence that fills her mind with the spirit of revenge and feeds her desire to keep her family safe from white destruction. Granny prays for the ability to see this miraculous child before she dies. She asks Sam to intercede with God on her behalf and grant that before she dies she can see the instrument of her and her family's deliverance, their new protector. When her prayers are answered, she is astonished by what she sees. The little boy is the "wrong coloh."<sup>11</sup>

Granny questions Sapphire and finds out that the man who has impregnated her great granddaughter is the grandson of Lightfoot, the man who had a major hand in lynching her son. Sapphire tells her that young Lightfoot is coming there to see her that evening. Granny goes to work. She assembles relics from the lynching of her son fifty

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<sup>10</sup> Ridgely Torrence, Granny Maumee, The Rider of Dreams, Simon the Cyrenian: Plays for a Negro Theater (New York: Macmillan: 1917),15.

<sup>11</sup> Torrence, 20.

years ago. She gathers charred, fire-bitten faggots, the same sticks that fed the fire that ate the flesh of her son, and some links of chain that were used to hold him to the iron hitching post where he was burned. Horses were tied to the hitching post while their riders went to tend to other business in town. Burning Sam at the place where animals were held is symbolic of keeping him in place and at the same time equating him with a beast of burden. Granny wants to unhitch Sam and her descendants from that obdurate, iron post of bestiality. She burns incense that enters the nostrils of her great granddaughters and inducts them as her officiants in her ceremony of transition and revenge. Sapphire beats time with a makeshift drum made from a bowl and Pearl rattles a gourd as Granny makes an effigy of Lightfoot, fashioning the money that he has given to Sapphire into an approximation of his earthly image, into an inanimate "surrogated double."<sup>12</sup>

*She seizes the bunch of bills from the table and plucking strands of hair from her head she begins tying the money together; taking the candle from the table she holds it near the tripod until it is soft and then kneads it with the money until the whole grows into the rude semblance of a human figure. Stooping then to the hearth she takes up the two charred sticks of her son's pyre and with one of these she stabs the wax mannikin through the breast.*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Roach, Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 101.

<sup>13</sup> Torrence, 26-27.

It is Granny's intent to use her sympathetic magic to make young Lightfoot a pawn in her hands. Once she has seized control of his will and of his bodily form, making it bend to her desire as easily as does the wax figure she has created, she intends to lead him to the hitching post and burn him the way her son was burned by Lightfoot's grandfather. Through effacing Lightfoot the way that her child was effaced, she will turn history in her favor the way the lynchers turned the tide to suit them and their sense of themselves as pre-eminent, capable of doing anything at all. The face of Sam appears in the fire at this feast of revenge. Torrence pushes Sam's spirit into the cabin like a gust of wind. Sam counsels his mother that the past is gone and the way of the future is forgiveness. Lightfoot approaches the door, but Granny turns him back. "Go back, w'ite man, an' sin no mo'."<sup>14</sup> Granny is apparently appeased by the thought that she will sit together with Sam in heaven. Christianity prevails over the force of the folk. Granny has spent all her energy, and she falls lifeless.

The personification of slavery is dead, and she has not been able to harm anyone, except herself. Her spells and curses have no bite. They are no match for Christianity, the peaceful, beneficent religion that preaches that all find solace in the valley of forever, where Granny has gone. But forgiveness -- at least in the temporal dimension -- is a curious phenomenon. It is recommended for some, but not for others. Jake Willis, the father of Mamie in The Nigger, was not filled with forgiveness for Joe White. The Camerons didn't forgive Gus in The Clansman nor did Augustus Stoneman overlook the impertinence of Silas Lynch who asked for the hand of his daughter. According to

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<sup>14</sup> Torrence, 30.

Stoneman, that was a matter for lynching, not something to be overlooked. Bill Lacy did not put forth the hand of forgiveness for Lisa in The White Slave. There are some crimes that do not invite forgiveness. Murder is one of them. And so it is hard to believe that the spirit of Sam, who has been murdered in Granny Maumee, urges forgiveness. It is much easier to believe that the playwright, Ridgely Torrence, has emerged from under the mask of art and inserted himself into the play as the didactic and bracing breeze of Christian reason. Perhaps he is reflecting on the popular equation of the hue and suffering. Certainly where lynching and slavery are concerned, Christianity has been used to promote the interests of those in power rather than those without. A slave who was religious was considered a more tractable slave than those without. In The Escape, Mr. Walker, the slave trader, is glad to learn that Sam, the slave that Dr. Gaines is selling to him, has religion. "Oh, ho, you've got religion, have you? That's so much the better."<sup>15</sup>

Lynchers often wore long white -- occasionally cardinal red -- robes and pointed headgear in the style of a pontiff and burned crosses, the ultimate Christian symbol, as they descended upon their victims with the wrath of their self-ordained vengeance. But in Christian teaching, vengeance is reserved for the spiritual rather than the earthly master. The lynchers reinterpreted religious teaching to fit their behavior. Their fundamental belief was segregation, the lawful separation of one race from another. As Philip Morrow tells his former fiancée in The Nigger, the twain will ever be twain. That's what he

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<sup>15</sup> James V. Hatch, editor. Black Theater USA: 45 Plays by Black American, 1847-1974 (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 44.

knows and that's what he will live by. "Black's black, an' white's white. If yo' not one, yo' the othah. Georgie. I've always said that, an' I reckon I'll have t' stick to't now!"<sup>16</sup>

Segregation, enforced by lynching, was the backbone of the Southern system that staved off the chaos of miscegenation.

The Southern theologian James Sellers has persuasively argued that Euro-American supremacy and commitment to segregation constituted for the South 'a religion, a theology. It is, in fact, the unrepentant Southern kingdom of God.' Further: 'Segregation is a system of belief that would protect its devotees from all that looms on their horizons as 'the powers of death and destruction.' It is a way of handling the menace to salvation of one's own impulses and the perils of the world as well. It therefore becomes a holy path, complete with commandments, priests, theologians, and a plan of salvation.'<sup>17</sup>

If segregation is the Southern religion, then lynching is the mass or service, the communal ritual, that regularly refreshes and pumps the creed full of fresh new blood, keeping it vital with exciting sensations and awe-inspiring spectacle. The Klan are its priests and clerics and the hue of its population marked for sacrifice and suffering.<sup>18</sup> They were born

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<sup>16</sup> Edward Sheldon, The Nigger (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 245.

<sup>17</sup> Orlando Patterson, Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 207.

<sup>18</sup> "[C]ontemporary historians of religion remind us ... that blood sacrifice is the central ritual of all the religions of all ancient and traditional civilizations. For thousands of years, the core religious ritual from the highlands of the Andes to the valley of the Ganges was the act of sacrificial killing. The temple that housed the altar, or the raised

to feel pain, emotional and physical. And turning the other cheek was their stock and trade. Christian forgiveness was a consistent trope in popular narratives about slaves and their descendants.<sup>19</sup> Tom was forgiving. Zoe, the octoroon, was forgiving. Belle, Jinny, and Nance, the quadroons in The Nigger and The White Slave respectively, were long-suffering and forgiving. Gus and Silas Lynch in The Clansman were self-seeking, not self-abnegating and forgiving, and that was one of the major reasons why they were lynched. The stronger do not generally forgive the weaker, but the weaker are expected to forgive the stronger.

Granny Maumee performs her own personal drama of renewal and retaliation.

Within her own family, she finds the necessary tritagonists to enact a tragedy of the hearth. She incants a past reality in order to invoke a new present and future. Her ritual of reversal is deadly in its seriousness.

By de w'ip an' de rope an' de chain dat swung,

By de bloody mouf an' de bit-off tongue.

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platform or stone circle that constituted a holy place, was also an abattoir. ... [S]acrifice, including human sacrifice remains a central theme of the Jewish and Christian texts.:"  
Barbara Ehrenreich, Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997), 24.

<sup>19</sup> "The image of the Negro as natural Christian received its fullest treatment and most influential expression in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. ... When Africa awakes, she [Stowe] predicted, it would develop a rich and luxuriant civilization, 'and the negro [sic] race ... will perhaps show forth some of the latest and most magnificent revelations of human life. Certainly they will, in their gentleness, their lowly docility of heart, their aptitude to repose on a superior mind and rest on a higher power, their childlike simplicity of affection and facility of forgiveness. In all these they will exhibit the highest form of the peculiarly Christian life.'" George M. Fredrickson, The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate for Afro-American Character and Destiny (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 110-1.

By de eat-up heajt an' de spit-out gall,  
 We scream, we beg, we whoop, we squall  
 Tuh git poweh, tuh get stren'th tuh put de trick  
 on um all.<sup>20</sup>

But she is the one who is disempowered, scourged by the whip and rope and chain, her heart eaten out in sorrow, living with the gall of defeat, screaming and begging and whooping in her pain, scrambling for power. She ends up dead, not her antagonist, Lightfoot. She had no power to stop the lynching fifty years ago. She lost her vision then. She has no power to turn the trick on Lightfoot now. She loses her life instead. Her religion is ineffectual. What she officiates over is the death of the old and the birth of the new. Torrence does not specify the time when this drama takes place, nor does he specify where it occurs. We can only assume from the dialogue that Sam was killed in the South soon after the Civil War. If he were still a slave, he would not be able to buy a bed for his mother. Granny, the aged embodiment of slavery, will now be buried. But how deeply will she be buried? The young Sam is the new male spirit, born in town, a miscegenated male whose grandfather was lynched at the place where horses were tethered. The young Sam will grow up reared in the cabin of his great great grandmother and raised by a mother who gives in to the will of the white man who no longer owns her body, but for whom she labors and whose command she obeys without question. Slavery may have officially ended, but its legacy is still very much alive.

Will the slave past in whose house young Sam will be living return to haunt him

the way that another male of promise lived in a house built in the slave past? This other descendant of slavery found his future contaminated by the sins of his forefathers. The second miscegenated male to whom I refer is the young Philip Morrow in The Nigger who could not escape the hand of the past as it was written in a letter his quadroon mother sent to his white father. In Granny Maumee, we have another white father and a male child precluded from the legal status of his patrimony. But young Sam is a defenseless baby, not yet a threat to anyone. His speech is not educated. His manners are not refined. His clothes are not well-tailored and expensive. He has not attracted the devotion of a white, well-born southern belle. He does not qualify for nor is he running for political office. There is nothing about him yet, except perhaps the paleness of his skin, to offer any challenge to the presumptions of white superiority. He can be controlled, his future circumscribed by the cabin of his childhood. With the exception of Granny's voodoo ceremony, nothing in the play poses opposition to the status quo. All will continue as before, the tame admonishment of Granny that Lightfoot desist from sin notwithstanding. Lightfoot will again come to visit Sapphire in the cabin and occasionally give her money for her sexual favors and to sustain a child which he will probably never acknowledge. The boy will grow up around women, his aunt and his mother. More than likely, his mother will train him to be respectful of his father's people, but if he gets out of line and believes that his mixed blood entitles him to special attention, he will be taught otherwise in very short order. He will have little male protection, and his future is thus vulnerable. Lynching and the regime of white violence were reasserted after Emancipation in order to

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<sup>20</sup> Torrence, 27.

prune the masculinity and ambition of the hued community.

Pearl and Sapphire and Granny seem isolated in their cabin. There is no mention of neighbors, no sense of a town nearby. The city where Sapphire has gone to work for Lightfoot is at a distance, and Sapphire has become disenchanted with it; she wants to return to live in the cabin with Granny and Pearl. Their isolation renders them vulnerable, susceptible to manipulation and domination. “[S]olitude is the primary condition of total submission.”<sup>21</sup> Granny and Pearl and Sapphire make no attempt to improve their circumstances through education. They do not fight against their subjugation with the pen, which is presumed mightier than the sword. Their language is an index of their lack of education. Without ostensible skills besides youth, Pearl and Sapphire are future mammies, a role that Granny probably fulfilled at an earlier point in her life, before she was retired to her remote cabin. The Southern mammy, which was much in vogue when Torrence wrote Granny Maumee, was long-suffering and generous, beyond belief.<sup>22</sup> She drew all to her bosom. The classical symbol of the goddess with multiple breasts fits well with the mammy. She was supposed to give suck to everyone. In Granny Maumee, we focus on the mammy, the older woman, who is no longer a sexual

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<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 237.

<sup>22</sup> Between 1890 and the 1920, there was a tremendous vogue for the mammy who became an icon of class for whites. If you were rich enough to have a mammy, you were part of the in-group, those with breeding and money and a vaunted heritage. “Mammy embodied the fiction of continuity between the Old South and the new southern world, anchoring the emerging white middle class within a romanticized conception of the antebellum plantation elite.” Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940 (New York: Pantheon books, 1998), 101.

threat to the happy white home. In fact, she facilitates the functioning of that home. Of the plays studied in this dissertation, prior to Granny Maumee, the dramatic focus was on the jezebel, the alluring yellow wench. In The Escape, there is Melinda, Zoe in The Octoroon, Lisa and Daphne in The White Slave, Belle in The Nigger, and Lydia Brown, the woman at the rudder in Stoneman's home and life in The Clansman. In Granny Maumee, Sapphire is the jezebel figure, but her significance is minor compared to Granny. "[T]he Mammy is the South's most powerful symbol because she is the only one necessary and indispensable to the representation of the region's entire mythology."<sup>23</sup> The good Mammy is domestic and domesticated. Granny Maumee is a rebellious Mammy. She is not acquiescent to any white desire. She sets limits. She holds a grudge. She is a bad Mammy and must be punished. She dies but before she dies she sees the failure of her own desire. Her world cannot stand. Red, the predominant color in Granny's cabin, symbolizes blood and fire and cannibalism. Colonialism is a monster, a demon engorging the flesh of her son and the flesh of her great grand daughter and invading the body of her great great grandson.

In Granny Maumee, Torrence became the white man in the cabin. He had intruded into the home of the hued. There was no injunction to keep him out. Whites could go wherever they wanted. No home was off limits to them. That was not true for the hued. They could not protect their homes from invasion and they would not be offered even the hospitality of the white homes in which they worked. Pearl and Sapphire

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<sup>23</sup> David Levinthal, Blackface, text by Manthia Diawara (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Arena Editions, 1999), 10.

are still in Granny's cabin when the curtain falls. They have not yet progressed beyond Granny's station. They are in a known place and that known place is accessible and isolated. The white male can come and go at will. In that outlying cabin he can find a bed mate, if he chooses. He can find a nurse for his legitimate child, if that is his desire. The cabin, like the good and faithful mammy, is a cornucopia of fulfillment. This is the fraught vector of modernism. The moderns could be satisfied with their modernism because they could look to the cabin and see how far they had come. They could look to the cabin and feel good about all those who could not emerge from the cabin. They could enter the real or virtual cabin and dictate everything that happened within it; the cabin was their sphere of unchallenged ownership and authority. They could leave it whenever they chose, confident that the hued inhabitants would remain available to fill whatever request was put to them. That was their job. It was their duty to stay in place and to serve.

The second decade of the twentieth century, when Torrence began writing drama, was a time of fast-paced and radical change in the theatre. The Theatrical Syndicate, born in the 1890's, had sought to standardize theatre practice across the country. By 1915, the Syndicate had been broken. Business methods and art were not the happiest of bedfellows. The young performers and playwrights wanted something different, something more expressive. They had new visions and an abundance of energy. They focused their visions and harnessed their energy and were responsible for laying foundations that are still ideologically, if not structurally, in place. "No decade in the history of the theatre in the United States has been so crowded with theatrical activity as

the ten-year span from 1909 to 1919. No decade left such a mark on the theatre that was to follow, the theatre we know today."<sup>24</sup> The spirit of newness and reform running unleashed through the land was causing artistic and social convulsions in the rest of the society in the era of modernism. "the first truly international literary and cultural movement."<sup>25</sup> American modernism is sometimes interpreted as beginning with the 1909 publication of Stein's Three Lives and its experimentation with the vernacular of the hued. Appropriating the voice of the voiceless was a favorite pursuit for several American modernists. "Literary modernism in English, whether it be dated from The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', from Stein's Three Lives, [or] from The Waste Land ..could not have arisen without the example of dialect."<sup>26</sup>

Modernism is not a term much used for American theatre. But it shares the earmarks of modernism apparent in the other arts. European influence and a pursuit of new language, new responses, new paths, and new subjects. The analogous theatrical terms are New Movement and New Stagecraft. The first term refers to the desire on the part of young American artists early in the twentieth century to expand the scope of material addressed dramatically and to foster a more intimate and vital connection between performer and playwright and audience. The second term refers to the European

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Moody, "Theatre U.S.A., 1909-1919: The Formative Decade," in L.W. Connolly, editor, Theatrical Touring and Founding in North America (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), 113.

<sup>25</sup> Simon Gikandi, "Race and the Modernist Aesthetic" in Tim Youngs, editor, Writing and Race (London: Longman, 1997), 147.

<sup>26</sup> North, 195.

inflected practice of theatre as a total visual art, lights and scenery coalescing to offer one unified image. Regardless of the term that is used, what is significant about the time is the emphasis on newness and the eagerness to find alternatives to conventional modes and methods so as to craft a truly American drama. In 1917, the inaugural issue of *Theatre Arts Magazine* announced: "We stand for the creation of a new theatre in America ... we stand for the encouragement of all experimental groups."<sup>27</sup> In theatre, as in the other arts, there was a mania for everything new. One way that breaking away from the known was expressed was through departures from standard English. The premium on newness becomes obvious with the 1909 founding of the New Theatre and the production of Edward Sheldon's The Nigger, which was written in the dialect of the South. Further, the disturbing title pinpointed by name the fulcrum of modernist energy, the deployment of "other cultures and experiences."<sup>28</sup> Another modernist strain was evident in The Nigger.<sup>29</sup> Toward the end of the play, after Morrow--a name full of modernist connotation--has learned the secret of his history, he praises the fidelity of his

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Curtis, 118.

<sup>28</sup> Gikandi, 152?

<sup>29</sup> Sheldon is generally not thought of as a modernist. His writing, however, pointed in iconoclastic directions and he responded to the emerging beat of what was different and daring. "[N]ew forces were at work, and by degrees turned attention to the serious need for intelligent support of the stage. Among the significant dramatic projects at the turn of the century, George Pierce Baker's course in playwriting at Harvard in 1905, and the establishment of the New Theatre in Chicago in 1906, followed by the New Theatre opening in New York in 1909, gave needed impetus to creativity. Essentially notable was the presentation by New York's New Theatre, during its first season, of a strong native play, Edward Sheldon's The Nigger, first produced on December 4, 1909." Ima Honaker Herron, The Small Town in American Drama (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1969), 207-8.

octoroon grandmother. The letter that Belle had written the morning of her forced departure from the plantation was full of love for the man who took away her son and made sure that she would never ever see him again. The modernist artist sometimes took notice that there was something worthwhile to be gleaned "from cultures hitherto considered inferior."<sup>30</sup>

Many modernist writers and artists traveled a great deal and fraternized with each other abroad. The Nigger, for example, was written in Europe while Sheldon was enjoying the social company of a set centered around Emilie Hapgood, who was married to the journalist and theatre chronicler, Norman Hapgood.<sup>31</sup> Emilie Hapgood was the first Mrs. Hapgood and she had pretensions of becoming a major theatrical producer: the second Mrs. Hapgood translated the Russian writings of Stanislavsky into English. In 1914 and 1915, Emilie Hapgood ran the New York Stage Society. This enabled her to promote Robert Edmond Jones when he returned from Europe in 1914 and to produce Granny Maumee for Torrence.<sup>32</sup> The Stage Society and the New Theatre shared a goal. Both endeavored to develop the American dramatist. It matters not that the New Theatre and the New York Stage Society did not last long. It matters only that they tried to establish an American repertory and pointed the way for other theatrical experiments which did last, possibly because they found much to avoid and much to emulate in the

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<sup>30</sup> Gikandi, 151.

<sup>31</sup> Eric Wollencott Barne, The Man Who Lived Twice: The Biography of Edward Sheldon (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 62.

<sup>32</sup> Curtis, 80.

experience of the Stage Society and the New Theatre. I am referring to the little theatre movement that came to life between 1912 and 1916 and gave rise to a legion of independent theatrical groups, including the Provincetown Players, the Washington Square Players, and the Lafayette Players. The inclusion of "Players" in the names of these groups shows that some of the thrust for difference was concentrated on the acting, and on the inclusion of the voice of the actor behind the scenes. By far the most successful of them all was the Provincetown Players, a success that depended not so much on the acting, but on the felicitous merger of the playwriting and administrative skills of Eugene O'Neill and George Cram Cook. "By the second decade of the century, it was clear ... that the creative impulse in modern drama was not going to be advanced by Broadway."<sup>33</sup> Torrence understood that the race was on for a writer who could best discover and depict what was stirring in the American soul. Torrence decided that he would take a chance at that brass ring. He was fierce in his determination to find a uniquely American subject. And, with the hue as focus, he, along with Edward Sheldon, was one of the first to do so in the drama.

Ridgely Torrence belonged to a set of young artists and writers, including William Vaughn Moody and Percy MacKaye--like Edward Sheldon, alumni of George Pierce Baker's course at Harvard--who believed that the American theatre was in need of a new thrust. The time was ripe for "a great forward movement in the American drama ... all

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<sup>33</sup> Adelle Heller, "The New Theatre" in Adelle Heller and Lois Rudnick, editor, 1915, The Cultural Moment: The New Politics, the New Woman, the New Psychology, the New Art, & the New Theatre in America (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 217.

that was needed to start it on its way was a group of playwrights with imagination and something to say.”<sup>34</sup> Torrence perceived himself as part of that pioneering group of forward-thinking and forward-pushing American poets and playwrights who gravitated to Greenwich Village in the early years of the new century. They were eager to change things, and some of them did. A few gained fame. Many of them did not. Torrence was one of the ones for whom fame was a fleeting mistress.

The men and women who were his friends were sowing the seeds for great changes in the theatre that would bear fruit in the late 1910s and 1920s. Torrence’s generation set in motion a number of processes and institutions essential for that dramatic harvest. In the 1900s and 1910s as they struggled to express matters of importance to their cohort, they began experimenting with new, daring themes for plays, and they understood the potential of social drama to which European playwrights and performing companies introduced them. Torrence’s circle pushed for new venues for artistic performance, and their efforts succeeded in breaking the twenty-year hold of the Theatre Syndicate on dramatic entertainment across the nation. From university courses and little theatres to new stagecraft and stock companies, theatre people in the 1910s prepared the way for a new way of thinking about the stage in America.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Susan Curtis, The First Black Actors on the Great White Way (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 63.

<sup>35</sup> Curtis, 67.

It was the tour of the Irish Abbey Players in 1911 and 1913 that inspired Torrence to expand his exploration of American themes. He was not the only one who was galvanized by the first appearance of the Irish Players in New York in 1911.

Synge's The Playboy of the Western World caused riots when it opened in New York City. Eugene O'Neill, who saw the entire repertory, said in an interview: "It was seeing the Irish Players that gave me a glimpse of my opportunity." A year later when the Abbey Players performed in Chicago, Jig Cook and Floyd Dell were in the audience. They were much impressed by the ensemble work and acting style of the group whose plays were deeply rooted in the realism of Irish life. The Abbey's efforts to create a national theatre that had both artistic and social aims would be paralleled by the aims of the Provincetown group.<sup>36</sup>

In the plays that the Irish Players presented in New York, Torrence heard the singular and what he took to be the authentic voice of the Irish people. He was impressed by John Millington Synge's ability to create art from regional, folk elements, from "the lives and speech of the Irish of the Aran Islands."<sup>37</sup> Torrence took Synge as a model and decided to approximate Synge's efforts in America. In Ireland, however, Synge was faulted for the kind of exotic, highly improbable language that he was putting into the mouths of his characters.<sup>38</sup> "[H]e was attacked in Ireland for perpetuating the clichés of the stage

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<sup>36</sup> Heller, 221.

<sup>37</sup> Curtis, 68.

<sup>38</sup> C.L. Innes, The Devil's Own Mirror: The Irishman and the African in Modern

Irishman, in many ways a British equivalent of the black minstrel."<sup>39</sup> The American group on whom Torrence chose to concentrate were the hued, a peasant class that were still perceived to live in backward circumstances, morally as well as economically. They were fitting subjects, simple, colorful, idiosyncratic, tragic, and yet comic at the same time. They were rich wood and he was gifted sculptor. Onto them he could craft his idea of what their ideal, limited voice sounded like--an artificial construct that affected the semblance of something real--and thereby gain renown as a pioneering American artist on the order of Pygmalion. "I wanted to make the experiment, and try to contribute something, if I could, to a possible Negro drama, as vital and charming as the Irish."<sup>40</sup>

Torrence had some personal acquaintance with the hued in his hometown of Xenia, Ohio. In the nineteenth century, Xenia had been a stop on the Underground Railroad, a network of friendly homes in which runaway slaves could expect shelter and food and information about where to go next on their trek toward freedom in the northern part of the United States and in Canada.<sup>41</sup> Escape includes a scene in one such home on the Underground Railroad. Cato, Glen, and Melinda are welcomed in the home of the Neals, a Quaker family, that is extremely solicitous of them. In the postbellum years, a

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Literature (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1990), 62.

<sup>39</sup> North, 200, n.38.

<sup>40</sup> John M. Clum, Ridgely Torrence (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), 103.

<sup>41</sup> "Once the slaves had crossed the Ohio River, they were not only in free territory, but had placed that river between themselves and their pursuers. ... Because of 'its geographical location between the slave states and Canada,' ... the number of slaves escaping through Ohio was larger than in the case of other states." Charles L. Blockson, The Underground Railroad (New York: Berkley Books, 1987), 184.

fairly sizable community of the hue developed in Xenia. They put down roots there and built churches and schools and raised families in the segregated part of town. When Torrence was growing up, several hue men worked for his father and he came to accept the hue as part of the landscape. Like the earth and the timber, they were there to be used as he so chose.

When I was a boy, I saw a great deal of my colored townsmen who occupied Xenia's "East End" Xenia, by the way, is a concentrated patch of Southern flavor and tradition, having been the focal point of immigration from all the Southern states for sixty years before the Civil War.

I didn't deliberately seek the Negroes out. They were there and they were entertaining playmates. Their ways became as familiar to me as the ways of my own relatives. Their speech, their voices, the laughter, evoked an unconscious but perfectly sympathetic mimicry, so that Negro dialect became the only language not my own that I have ever learned to speak with facility and I believe with pretty complete accuracy.<sup>42</sup>

In the words, "not my own," Torrence calls attention to the linguistic chasm that was believed and proclaimed to exist between what was considered the *doggerel* of the hue and the more exalted, proper speech of the Anglo-Saxon. The social and cultural difference--the high separating fence--between the races which had been legally supported and maintained in the years of slavery became translated into linguistic terms

when slavery was no longer *de jure*. The exoticism of the hued became identified with the limited, backward tongue of the hued. These people were primal. They did not suffer or adapt themselves to the veneer of civilization. They were real and honest and elemental, even grotesque. They exuded something fundamental and essential, a species of genuine cultural ore that could be mined and manipulated for the benefit—the financial and celebrity profit—of the white artist who could find a way to unlock the repression of self through glorying in the sign of difference. That difference represented something unique and at the same time resistant. "The real attraction of the black voice ... was its technical distinction, its insurrectionary opposition to the known and familiar in language. ... the artist occupied the role of the racial outsider because he or she spoke a language opposed to the standard. Modernism ... mimicked the strategies of dialect and aspired to become a dialect itself."<sup>43</sup>

The American modernist was a latter-day minstrel. Instead of slathering the face with cork as the nineteenth century minstrel performer did and entering the specific space of America under the cover of the elemental, the modernist took over the sound of the hued. The modernist was verbally radical. The minstrel dialect that the modernist affected was a language of rebellion that sought to combat "repression and standardization."<sup>44</sup> The modernist felt inundated by the past. The weight of tradition was oppressive and had to be cleared away, eradicated. A way had to be made for his or her

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<sup>42</sup> Clum, 104.

<sup>43</sup> North, v.

<sup>44</sup> North, 27.

particular view of the world. The traffic on the minstrel and the modern road was dual lane for the mimicker and single-lane for the mimicked. The other could be repressed and standardized. In fact, that was the oeuvre of the minstrels and the moderns, repressing and standardizing others. *Do unto others as you would not have them do unto you.* Through this process, the plagiarist is maintained as monarch, the rule maker, and the plagiarized are sustained as minions, the ruled. The outsider who wants to get inside masks as the other. The survivor often dresses as the enemy other. I am thinking of Aeneas during the burning of Troy and of Cato near the end of The Escape. But this masking is catalytic. The group whose persona is plagiarized into a mask does not receive political credit or benefit from the use to which its image is put. This was the case in the Boston Tea Party, where the semblance of the other offered white European males the door into an American identity, a license for disruptive behavior, but offered no participatory role to those whose mask and markings had been appropriated. This was the case in the nineteenth century performance style known as minstrelsy which "allowed white audiences to have it both ways, to mock tradition, aristocracy, European culture by comparing them to something earthier, more natural, more 'American,' while simultaneously distancing all these qualities in a figure to which even the commonest white audience could condescend."<sup>45</sup> The minstrel representation of the American other which was used to effect change and express collective anxiety was reinvoked during the modernist era when once again the white American moderns sought to both connect with and disconnect from European cultural seniority. This kind of downward masking is

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<sup>45</sup> North, 81.

expedient, meant to serve a purpose and make a point. In and of itself the mask of national identity is both fraught with and null or zero in value. It is that ranking which is both American and yet the notch below which there is no lower. At one point in American history, that zero rung was occupied by the Native American and then in the years after 1830 when the Native American was pushed outside the territorial fold and into the nether world of the reservation, that zero value of the domestic alien was taken over by the hued who became the internal sign of difference, the mask of release that might be affixed whenever there arose a need for a return to the American origin. The value of the hued--the usable domestic alien--is continually flushed, nullified, evacuated, eliminated, lynched. Power affects the ability to disguise itself, to disavow its motives and methods. Thus, the evacuation of the other, which lynching reifies, is denied. Instead, the process is socially justified. There is no plagiarism or guilt involved, only the sanctioned workings of authority.

When first produced in 1914 by the New York Stage Society, Granny Maumee starred Dorothy Donnelly, who performed the title role in black-face. That was not unusual. The plays of the time that explored hued subjects, including Dixon's The Clansman (1905) and Sheldon's The Nigger (1909), were all performed by exclusively white casts. Even in the musical revues which, starting in the 1890s and culminating in 1921 with Shuffle Along, the hued wrote and directed and produced and headlined, the hued were under the constraint of black-face which was a visual marker of cultural subjugation. The hued may have written the book and the lyrics, conducted the orchestras, leased the theatres, and composed the music, but they were not conceived as

the real owners with a rightful entitlement to anything. Theirs was a lynchable existence: they could lay permanent claim to nothing, not even their own lives. The decision not to share credit and hegemony with the hued also comprises the political and economic aspect of lynching, which Ida B. Wells, a muckraking hued journalist who published several diatribes against lynching in the 1890s, described as its real motivation.<sup>46</sup>

Whatever the hued generated was theirs temporarily, only until its essence could be captured and others could derive commercial benefit from it. In fact, such was their creative and cultural function: to generate trends on which others could capitalize, theirs was a starter society, a seedbed for the success of others--that was the meaning of slavery.

Because they were slated as political and economic nonentities, whatever they had could be taken away with no notice or compunction at all. They possessed nothing permanently, not even their own shadows. Theirs was a "shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body."<sup>47</sup> A person without shadow is a person without impact, without significance, without life. To be shadowless is to be politically and physically reft of life, to be lynched. "In minstrelsy, a layer of blackness applied to a white face released it from law."<sup>48</sup> Outside the law was the precinct within which lynching operated. The extralegality of lynching was the license that gave it an unbounded celebratory character.

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<sup>46</sup> Hazel V. Carby, "'On the Threshold of Woman's Era': Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Thought" in Henry Louis Gates, editor, "Race," Writing, and Difference (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 307.

<sup>47</sup> Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 10.

<sup>48</sup> Morrison, 66.

Law bound the hued, but it was believed not to hold sovereignty over the whites who, in the America that they constituted as their own special domain of absolute privilege, could do whatever they chose whenever and however they were so inclined. They were the law-makers and the law-breakers: they had title to everything in America.<sup>49</sup> The hued were the only ones limited and subjected. Some of the early white musical celebrities who collected goodies from the *open* yard of the hued were the Gershwins, Irving Berlin, and Benny Goodman<sup>50</sup> (The practice continued into the second half of the twentieth century. Some later names are Elvis Presley, Mick Jagger, and Madonna.) In the larger, mainstream arena, the hued controlled little, not the fruit of their talent, not even their own images. Everything they had, their creativity and self-conception, came under the

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<sup>49</sup> “[T]he whole white part of the county taking advantage of the good weather and the good all weather roads which were their roads because their taxes and votes and the votes of their kin and connections who could bring pressure on the congressmen who had the giving away of the funds that had built them, to get quickly into town which was theirs too since it existed only by their sufferance and support to contain their jail and their courthouse, to crowd and jam and block its streets too if they saw fit: ... neither to be hurried nor checked nor dispersed nor denied since theirs was the murderer and the murdered too; theirs the affronter and the principle affronted: the white man and the bereavement of his vacancy, theirs the right not just to mere justice but vengeance too to allot or withhold.” William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (New York: Random House, 1948), 145-6.

<sup>50</sup> Although it is acknowledged that Goodman handsomely paid the hued musicians who played with his band, there is disagreement as to whether or not Goodman was guilty of artistic piracy. When the master was wealthy and kindly, some slaves ate well and wore clothes that were not threadbare. The liberality of the master may have increased the profit and comfort of the master and eased but did not end servitude. Goodman claimed that he hired hued musicians not as an open-handed gesture but simply because their talents were outstanding and thus necessary to his own success. “Goodman often denied that he was a crusader for ‘colored musicians—just a crusader for music. I needed those people because they were great musicians.’” Lewis Erenberg, *Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 82.

finger of whiteness, subject to the codes it set as obligatory. Minstrelsy legislated the degree of conformity required from the hue. There was literally no room allotted for slippage, no gap between white skin and burnt cork. That was how close the hue had to hew to the etiquette of racial domination. There could be no lapse. Death by lynching, with attendant burning, was the penalty for failing to adhere. In minstrelsy, the originality of the hue was entombed by the white male performer--and on occasion the white female performer--who celebrated the death of the spirit of those who had been emotionally and culturally conquered. Black-face was regulation for everyone, even the hue in their own performances in musical theatre, a form of entertainment in which the hue excelled--to some extent because other avenues were off-limits for them. Musical genius seemed less threatening than literary genius, probably because the first could be categorized as natural and untaught whereas the second was more indicative, so the thinking went, of discipline and keen intelligence, traits with which the hue were not supposed to be endowed. Black-face was slow to die, exerting a firm grip at least until 1929 in the musical theatre of the hue.<sup>51</sup> In film, black-face, largely practiced by white artists, lasted longer than that. In the thirties, Martha Raye went under cork in Cafe Metropole and the Marx Brothers blacked up at the end of A Day at the Races; in the forties, Bing Crosby put on black-face in Dixie and later during a celebration of Lincoln's birthday in a minstrel segment in Holiday Inn.<sup>52</sup> For hue performers in film, minstrel

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<sup>51</sup> Vincent, 17.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Rogin, Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 173, 192, 197.

characterizations also persisted. The asexual pairing of Bill Bojangles Robinson and a prepubescent Shirley Temple, popular in the thirties, can be interpreted as a solo rendition and recycling of Uncle Tom and Little Eva from Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Under the minstrel rule, the hued, even when playing or portraying themselves, were imprisoned by the palimpsest of the past and limited to the procrustean silhouettes assigned them. The minstrel mask did not operate only on the stage. Its control extended to other arts, including literature. Many writers of the Harlem Renaissance and earlier were forced to confine themselves to the language and characterizations that minstrelsy imposed. For example, Paul Laurence Dunbar who published Lyrics of Lowly Life in 1896, was praised more for his use of dialect in verse than for his serious, more standard writing. The writing of Dunbar, "like the early work of James Weldon Johnson and Claude McKay, reinforces the plantation owner and minstrel stereotype of the Negro as childlike, humorous, dependent."<sup>53</sup> The hued were rarely free of the demands of minstrelsy. On the stage, when the hued were played by others, they were removed, excised, from the representation of their own image. Whoever and whatever they were or could be was replaced in the public mind by a construction that reflected the rationalizations put forward to justify their exploitation. They were thus forced to be conspirators in their own subjugation. In the performance of minstrelsy, the hued were portrayed as human puppets, made to jump in accordance to strings held by other hands. The jumping they were expected to do gives another reading to the popularity of the refrain, *Jump Jim Crow*, which Thomas Dartmouth Rice made famous in the 1830s. *To*

*jump* was their life-long assignment. They were not allowed to question the stipulation that they *jump*, they were only allowed to do as they were told. No matter how old they became, they were perceived as cultural children, always *jumping* and perpetually irresponsible. Should they fail to *jump* in life, their bodies were made to *jump* on the lynching block.

On the stage, the hued were represented by effigies. *surrogated doubles*, of themselves, substitute performers who simulated their look and talk and behavior, and acted out the collective white perception of their ineptitude. As effigized figures, the hued have two bodies. The minstrelized body created by white conception as well as the natural bodies with which they are born. By virtue of the legal fictions required by slavery and by the dramatic fictions that found repository in minstrelsy, the hued were denied absolute control over their natural bodies. Originating at the end of the eighteenth century when anxiety was heightened about the rightness of slavery in a country that had just fought and won a war for democracy, minstrelsy persisted as a popular performance practice and became the rage on the stage in Jacksonian America when the limits of democracy were fixed as extending only to white males. Minstrelsy increased in popularity around the time of the Nat Turner Revolt. After 1831, Daddy "Jim Crow" Rice, a dancer who imitated the dress and quirky crippled stance of a servile hued male, became the most ecstatically celebrated performer in the country. The grotesque effigy that Thomas Dartmouth Rice enacted in *Jim Crow* became an icon of the deformity and worthlessness of the hued community. It is thus no surprise that the epithet, *Jim Crow*,

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<sup>53</sup> Innes, 17

was applied to segregation which extended the subhuman classification of the hued into the realm of the everyday. The minstrel mentality persisted into the twentieth century and continues today in advertising trademarks, for example, in the familiar, grinning figures of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben, the kindly, desexed, defanged, and declawed iconography of the obsequious progeny of slaves. The minstrel persona, the commodified, consumable material of hued existence, has become so much a part of the regular routine in American daily life as to be overlooked; yet it is as significant a staple as apple pie.<sup>54</sup>

Rice's presentation of *Jim Crow's* form as crippled reified the assumption that the hued body was imperfect and incapable of assuming full stature in white terms. The eccentric agility of his dance may be read as expressive of the fear that deftness in the slave had to be watched, had to be kept close at hand, closer than that, if possible -- hence, one significance of the white masking the self as hued. As a group, whites had to know everything the hued were thinking, get inside that head, inside that face, literally. Such entrenched anxiety measured the degree to which the enslaved body, emblem of the democratic fallacy, had become a public concern. Through minstrelsy, the hued were portrayed as animalistic and thus outside the realm of responsibility, incapable of fulfilling a democratic contract. Further, white men putting themselves in the place of hued bodies suggests that white men could speak for and act for the hued; there was no call for their independence. In the postbellum era, the hued whose bodies had been distorted in their effigied characterization in order to create the iconography of

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<sup>54</sup> Hale, 151-154.

minstrelsy, started to knock, in much greater numbers, on the doors of public performance. Some were admitted. Many of these were allowed to enact plantation scenes in minstrel extravaganzas that paid homage to the lazy, hazy, halcyon days of slavery. Others forced their way in and laid siege to the business side of minstrelsy. Invariably, they were pushed to less profitable regions. Two men, both of whom began their careers shortly after the Civil War, immediately come to mind. They were Charles Hicks who headed a series of minstrel companies and died in stirrups in Java in 1903 and Lew Johnson who ended his life as the manager of a Canadian theatre.<sup>55</sup> In the 1890's when lynching became the primary means of social control leveled against the emancipated, minstrelsy dipped in popularity.<sup>56</sup> Minstrelsy was taking the slow dive down when lynching was heading toward its apex.<sup>57</sup> This inverse relationship between the popularity of lynching and the protracted decline of minstrelsy could perhaps suggest that each performed a function complementary to the other. That function, if one indeed did exist, could be described as political and economic in motivation and its effect was social containment.

In the final decade of the nineteenth century and in the first decade of the twentieth, the hue began breaking away from the minstrel vise that had been tightened

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<sup>55</sup> Robert C. Toll, Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 211-214.

<sup>56</sup> I am by no means arguing that lynching caused the decline in minstrelsy at this point. I am merely pointing out that a mathematical relationship can be observed.

<sup>57</sup> "[M]instrel shows declined in the 1890s." Robert W. Snyder, The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 120.

around their necks and talents. Their energies had been focused primarily on musical comedy, and they created some stunning shows that demonstrated their talent. One of the first was A Trip to Coontown, which portrayed the hued "not as shiftless, sunny savages but as human beings capable of thought and even emotion."<sup>58</sup> Written by Bob Cole in 1897, the show opened in New York, but soon moved to Canada where it was immensely successful. "When news of the smashing success of A Trip to Coontown reached New York, Klaw & Erlanger booked the show into Jacob's Third Avenue Theatre in early 1899. Over the next several years, Cole and Johnson, Williams and Walker, and Ernest Hogan produced shows that were highly sought after by Broadway managers."<sup>59</sup> Some of the more significant musical comedy stars were Cole & Johnson, who enjoyed significant Broadway success; Will Marion Cook, who was conservatory-trained; Simon H. Dudley, who left minstrelsy and started a circuit of hued theatres which numbered twenty-three by 1914; Lottie Grady, an early dramatic star; Ernest Hogan, who wrote a famous song of the period; the Hyer Sisters, who produced and starred in musical dramas; Sam T. Jack, a producer who pioneered a chorus line of hued beauties; Sisieretta Jones, a singer who headed her own company and was proficient in opera; Sam Lucas, a minstrel star who was the first hued actor to portray Uncle Tom; Florence Mills, who delighted audiences around the world with her delicate voice; Aida Overton Walker, who appeared in musicals written by her husband; and Williams & Walker, the leading musical comedy

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<sup>58</sup> Barry Singer, Black and Blue: The Life and Lyrics of Andy Razaf (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), 42.

<sup>59</sup> Curtis, 128.

team of the era, which disbanded on the death of George Walker; Bert Williams later joined the Ziegfeld Follies. These stars generated and played to their own audiences, but they also appeared in white venues. At the same time that the hued were making long strides in musical comedy, there was the recognition that much remained to be done in legitimate theatre. Toward that end, several stock companies were formed beginning at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth.

One of the earliest of these stock companies, the Pekin Players, formed in Chicago in 1906. The impulse for the group came earlier, when young black entertainers, frustrated by the limitations of vaudeville and musical comedy, began gathering in the evenings to read serious plays aloud. Some invited friends, and the group grew to nearly thirty black men and women. Eleven of these people succeeded in persuading the manager of the Pekin Theatre to let them present plays, and, accordingly, they took the name Pekin Players. According to James Haskins, the Pekin Players principally presented "refined white comedies," some appearing in "white-face" to play the parts. Others, however, reported more variety in the productions. The author of the *Colored Actors' Union Theatrical Guide*, for instance, recorded *The Mayor of Dixie* as the company's first show and noted that the cast included Lottie Grady, Charles Gilpin, and Lena Marshall.<sup>60</sup>

Before moving on, let me note that Charles Gilpin was the original Brutus Jones in

O'Neill's The Emperor Jones. He would have also performed the role of Uncle Tom in the 1927 film version, but he took exception to the sentimentality of the portrayal and was replaced.<sup>61</sup> Gilpin had strong opinions. One of the reasons why Paul Robeson replaced him in the London production of O'Neill's play was Gilpin's outspoken dislike of some of the demeaning racial language that O'Neill used.<sup>62</sup>

The Pekin Players were preceded by Worth's All-Star Stock Company which was organized in New York in 1896. "The company was composed of twelve to fifteen performers, both men and women, and was for a period headed by Bob Cole ... He was both playwright and stage-manager and provided a series of sketches that made Worth's Museum All-Star Stock Company very popular."<sup>63</sup> Minstrelsy was perceived as an unwelcome imposition which unfairly constrained the creative options of the hued. The hued who were drawn to the stage during this time of transition applied their energies to breaking the minstrel yoke. Much of the work that they did then has not been historically recorded in great detail, and so what we know of their efforts is limited. Still, it is possible to detect the large picture and what is clear therefrom is the relentless struggle they waged to grab hold of the reins of their creative independence. The stage and the arts functioned as one of the few arenas in which they could even attempt to push forward

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<sup>60</sup> Curtis, 41.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Cripps, Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 16.

<sup>62</sup> Curtis, 216.

<sup>63</sup> James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 97-98.

into the expanse of their imaginative capability and assert their humanity. What they were fighting against was political, social and cultural death. By substituting an effigy for the reality of their lives, minstrelsy symbolized the death of the effigied figure, incapable of or prevented from representing the self. Minstrelsy turns the real body into a simulated body, thereby denying its existence separate from what has been constructed for it as a reality. It robs the real body of substance and breadth. Lynching robs the real body of substance and breath.

It could be argued that minstrelsy is still alive, under different cover. Perhaps it merely went into a latent period, withdrew into hibernation, but has re-emerged and become culturally operative once again. At a Labor Day Parade on Long Island in the summer of 1998, some white firemen put on blackface and rode through the main street of town in a float enactment of a lynching that had taken place in Texas a few months earlier. Blackface and lynching were paired in the public eye as demonstrations of white male bravado. At the end of the twentieth century, Jar Jar Binks, the dialect-spouting new-age Caliban in the 1999 film edition of Star Wars, and the dark-skinned contingent of warriors in South Park (1999) who defect from their assigned duty as front-line target practice in the war against Canada, are descended from minstrel portrayals of the hued who exemplify cowardice. The hued are rarely shown as heroic fighters or dashing lovers in public media. They are still thought of as essentially undeserving. Whenever the hued are allowed to represent themselves, they do so as imitations of sanctioned caricatures of themselves, making the obeisant curtsy and bow to the cultural dominion of whiteness. Minstrels--those white performers who alter and falsify their image with black-face--and

minstrelized performers--those hued artists forced to fit their shoes into the prints of white performers--must toe the party line and offer simulated material that is exaggerated, extreme. The magnified, mutilated image of the hued, their character assassination is a virtual lynching. The classic form of minstrelsy, the absence of the hued body from the American stage, reflects the political expendability of the hued. Minstrelsy sapped the entitlement of the hued as authorities over themselves.

Out of paper money, Granny effigizes the white male whose grandfather lit the match that incinerated her son, Sam. Her effigy substitutes for two bodies, the body of the grandfather and that of the grandson. A third body is implied. The son who transmitted breath from grandfather to grandson. The multiple body of whiteness signifies continuity and heritage, the transmission of seed and potency from one generation to its successors. The male trinity embodies all time--past, present, and future. In the family of the hued, there is a female trinity as well. Granny and her two great granddaughters, but Granny acknowledges the priority of male over female by celebrating the arrival of the first male born in the family in fifty years. Torrence does not allow the effigy that Granny manufactures in Granny Maumee to have efficacy; it does not achieve her intended result, which is the punishment and death of the descendant of the white male who lynched her son. In Cities of the Dead, Joseph Roach discusses the prefix that *effigy* and *efficacy* share; this prefix connotes "producing, bringing forth, bringing out, making."<sup>64</sup> He goes on to assert that performance can be understood as the creation of

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<sup>64</sup> Joseph Roach, Cities of the Dead: Cirum-Atlantic Performance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 36.

effigy.

*Effigy's* similarity to *performance* should be clear enough: it fills by means of surrogation a vacancy created by the absence of an original. Beyond ostensibly inanimate effigies fashioned from wood or cloth, there are more elusive but more powerful effigies fashioned from flesh. Such effigies are made by performance. They consist of a set of actions that hold open a place in memory into which many different people may step according to circumstances and occasions. I argue that performed effigies--those fabricated from human bodies and the associations they evoke--provide communities with a method of perpetuating themselves through specially nominated mediums or surrogates.<sup>65</sup>

As an effigy, an inert body that may be given life and performed *ad infinitum* into the future. Granny not only represents herself but the generations that have proceeded and will proceed from her. By the same token, as the generator of repeatable effigied performances, Torrence invests in the economy of the effigy which gives him a life that extends past the span of his corporal existence. Torrence thus has an effigied or multiple body as well. He is brought back to life whenever there is a production or a discussion of one of his plays. His body, originally of flesh, is extended through words. Granny's body, originally of words, is extended through flesh. The effigied male body that Torrence brings into his play vanquishes the life and desire of Granny. The inanimate,

paper effigy created by the hued character is weaker than the animated effigy created by the white playwright. The pagan belief of the hued is made to pale beside the Christianity of the dominant culture. One value system trounces the other. One lives and the other dies. Lynching ritualizes the oppositional relation between white and hued. White grows strong from the knowledge that the hued cannot offer strong resistance.

As a measure of authenticity and as a novelty -- an attempt to present the common people in the rural surround of their commonplace. Torrence expressed a desire to have hued actors in the cast. Perhaps he thought it would be a real treat for white audiences to see and hear genuine dialect speakers enacting the various roles. He may also have been influenced by the attitude of Lady Gregory of the Abbey Theatre who did not approve of professional actors who could be difficult, not at all malleable to the needs of the playwright. Better to cast the theatrical net into new and unspoiled waters, she advised.<sup>65</sup> Even though Torrence did make an attempt to find hued performers, his efforts can easily be interpreted as lackluster, since they appear to have lacked any serious degree of advance planning. Casting the hued may have been an afterthought, calculated to perk up the production.

[W]hen Torrence set out in 1914 to stage Granny Maumee and developed the laudable but ill-formed idea that the play should be performed by African Americans, he hardly knew where to begin to search for suitable

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<sup>65</sup> Roach, 36.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Moody, "Theatre U.S.A., 1909-1919: The Formative Decade," in L.W. Connolly, Theatrical Touring and Founding in North America (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 116.

actors. Apparently his main contact with black people -- even in New York -- had been with individuals working as servants. A letter from the famous Clef Club Orchestra leader, James Reese Europe, dated March 4, 1914, suggests that Torrence had asked Europe for some names of actresses who might be interested in the play. But the response from Europe (and perhaps the request from Torrence, as well) came too late for the Stage Society or the playwright to act on his recommendation.<sup>67</sup>

Three years after its debut at the Stage Society, Granny Maumee was finally cast with hued actors. By then, Torrence had written two more one-act plays about the hued, The Rider of Dreams and Simon the Cyrenian. All three were presented on a single bill that opened at the Garden Theatre on Maundy Thursday in April, 1917, just before America entered World War I. Robert Edmond Jones did the sets and made his directorial debut with Three Plays for a Negro Theater. Jones, a friend of Torrence and the most important scenic designer of the New Stagecraft movement, agreed that hued rather than white actors should perform the roles. Together, the playwright and the director scouted through Harlem for appropriate talent, and they agonized over the difficulties of finding anyone suitable among such ill-prepared people. Still, they managed to put together a cast that captured the attention of the critics. In so doing, they caught the same train that would be rolling down America's cultural tracks in the next few years. "The new voice that American culture acquired in the 1920's, the decade of jazz, stage musicals, talking pictures, and aesthetic modernism, was very largely a black

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<sup>67</sup> Curtis, 74.

one. In music, on stage, and in film, white artists dubbed in a black voice and often wore, as Jolson did, a black mask. Because this mask, and the voice that issued from it, already embodied white America's quite various feelings about nature and convention, it became an integral part of the cultural and technical innovation of the 1920's."<sup>68</sup>

James Weldon Johnson, a cultural critic and poet as well as novelist, was a member of the musical comedy team of Cole & Johnson, and an executive with the NAACP -- the one who brought Walter White from Atlanta to New York. Johnson considered the 1917 production of Three Plays for a Negro Theater unprecedented in the history of hued theatre in America.

April 5, 1917 is the date of the most important single event in the entire history of the Negro in the American theatre; for it marks the beginning of a new era. On that date, a performance of three dramatic plays was given by the Coloured Players at the Garden Theatre in Madison Square Garden, New York, and the stereotyped traditions regarding the Negro's histrionic limitations were smashed. It was the first time anywhere in the United States for Negro actors in the dramatic theatre to command the serious attention of the critics and of the general press and public.<sup>69</sup>

One reason Johnson was so taken with and ecstatic about the production of Torrence's plays was that, in his lifetime, he was able to witness what he interpreted as a palpable example of theatrical achievement on an immense scale. This is what so many

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<sup>68</sup> North, 7-8.

<sup>69</sup> Johnson, 175.

performers of hue had been directing themselves toward ever since emancipation, a public and performed manifestation of the social intimacy obtaining between white and hued. Dramatic actors of hue--not those trading in the tried but often decried talents of singing and dancing--had finally broken through the obdurate barriers that had kept them publicly stymied and invisible, except by proxy, on America's main, legitimate stage. They were finally getting a chance not only to appear but to shine on Broadway. In Johnson's mind, these plays represented an equal collaboration between white and hued, one hand firmly and warmly clasped in the other. Racial equity--perhaps even the dismissal of segregation--was just on the horizon. The Great White Way had been integrated, and Johnson took this as an undeniable sign of racial progress.

But there is more than one way to measure advancement. A year before the production of these three plays by Torrence, first at the Garden and then at the Garrick at the beginning of America's participation in the Great War, there was another play, initially produced in the nation's capital, that signaled a giant and independent move forward for the hued in American theatre. The playwright was hued; so was the fine company of actors as well as the director.<sup>70</sup> The audience was also primarily hued. This play, entitled Rachel, represented a move toward narrative independence, dramatically expressed, and a move away from dramatic dependence--a parroting of words written by others and a wearing of masks and attitudes generated and controlled by others. First produced in 1916, Rachel did not posture itself as just one more supplication or bow for

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<sup>70</sup> Gloria T. Hull, Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 119.

acceptance from the established white community. It did not seek to tell a story that would massage white egos and soothe white fears, a story full of a subservience that would scurry and crouch into the role of dutiful and adoring slave; instead, the story it told was heartfelt and grounded within the historical tradition and community of the hued. The story it told was one of resistance by men who used their pens to editorialize against the illegality of lynching and of a woman--a great granddaughter of Lysistrata--who declared a permanent moratorium on marriage and used her body to deny another lynching victim to the system--the mouth of Mammon. As expressed by their literary delegates, the hued had mustered the capability to voice a collective no to white animosity and consumption of their individual bodies as well as their body politic. Just as *new* was the catchword for American white modernists, *new* was gaining fast currency among the hued. But these two versions of *new* were quite different. For the white modernist artist, *new* represented a new generation coming into literary power and determining as well as demonstrating the means of mastering, through narrative and rhetorical means, the subject classes. For the hued, the *new* referred to those among the hued who perceived themselves as different from the slave generation that accepted the reins of domination without murmur. There was a *new* spirit among the hued, one that said we are a *new* people, these are *new* times, and we deserve a *new* order because we have worked and will continue to work to assure its endurance.

Rachel was produced in a school auditorium in the capital of the nation and that production erupted out of and manifested the incipient stirrings of change brought about by the rise of a literate class, a shift from the mentality of the enslaved to the mentality of

the entitled. The play was produced several years after the author enjoyed critical attention for a poem, "El Beso," published in 1909 in the Boston Evening Transcript. An editor of that paper described the poem as exemplary and added that "any of the greater poets might have been proud to add such a flower to the modern English anthology."<sup>71</sup> "El Beso," as its title implies, was about the expression of feeling between two people. As such, the poem departed from the given pattern of hued writing, which did not usually explore the intimate workings of passion and love. For the hued, the subject of love was explosive; it implied unpredictability, free will and humanity. Even at the end of the twentieth century, romantic courtships between hued men and women are rarely portrayed on stage or screen in white-authored productions. During slavery, love, as an independent growth, was discouraged; coupling was legislated according to the chattel demands and needs of the slaveholder. Not only was the poem adventurous in subject matter, it also took liberties with form. "Grimke's poem ... shows an atypically free view of poetry itself, a diminished concern for producing verse that looked like poetry according to the most conservative models." The old ways were losing favor and the bold and untried were taking root. The author of Rachel belongs to that cadre of hued writer who was "moving away from traditional literary assimilationism and toward a more independent approach to creative work."<sup>72</sup> The 1916 production of Rachel, whose site was removed from the theatrical mainstream, demonstrates that a story about the hued told by

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<sup>71</sup> Hull, 113.

<sup>72</sup> Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 202.

one of its own for the consumption and enlightenment of a promiscuous audience would not find ready viewing in conventional sites. In writing the following, W.E.B. DuBois could have added schools to the list of production venues for hued theatre. "If it is a Negro play that will interest us and depict our life, experience and humor, it can not be sold to the ordinary theatrical producer, but it can be produced in our churches and lodges, and halls."<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless such a viewing, wherever it occurred, was necessary and desirable as an alternative marker of racial progress and autonomy. I am adapting the use of the term *promiscuous* from its nineteenth century connotation of a mixing of genders to now refer to a mixing of races, with the preponderance of number on the side of the hued. Such *promiscuous* mixing was what disturbed opponents of the hued who believed that a mixing wherein the hued could express and impress their desire was dangerous. But just such a *promiscuous* gathering was decisive for the purpose that Rachel achieved in front of an audience that represented a greater diversity of the American people. The 1916 production of Rachel in the American seat of government represents the founding moment of the hued American theatre in its modern incarnation. What are the characteristics that I am attaching to this much-used term, *modern*? There are three, the first of which is chronological. The twentieth century is the first one the hued have begun legally cleared of the status of slaves. Second, the female playwright of hue comes to voice--particularly on the issue of lynching--and becomes more numerous in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Third, a literate class capable of and willing to do battle with the separatist policies of the white political order emerges in the

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Hatch, 135.

twentieth century. Women, both hued and white, took the initiative in generating a campaign for literacy among the hued. The ascendance of the female playwright of hue who takes on the fight against lynching demonstrates that no group in the hued community is exempt from or untouched by the violence of oppression. Could it be any more ironic that a group, feminized and emasculated in general political assessment, discovers its most potent dramatic opponent in women of hue, a gentle schoolmarm class that goes to narrative war on behalf of its fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, and pupils. For some reason, men of hue did not respond dramatically to the threat and horrors of lynching until after 1920, when the statistical heyday of lynching had passed. Male writers of hue did, however, come out against lynching prior to 1920 in the novel, a more solitary form, in terms of reception, than the drama which is appreciated in consensus.<sup>74</sup>

Rachel was written by a woman named Angelina Weld Grimke, the first female playwright of hue to have a play professionally produced in America. Almost one hundred years prior to Rachel, the historical record tells us, another play by a dramatist of hue was produced twice in the antebellum North, with the last noted performance in 1823.<sup>75</sup> That play was The Drama of King Shotaway and it was written by a man named

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<sup>74</sup> A number of hued male writers employed lynching as a significant trope in their novels. Some of the more prominent ones are: James Baldwin, William Wells Brown, Charles Chestnutt, Ralph Ellison, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, and Richard Wright. "The male writers who perpetuate this tradition of ritual violence were more directly tied to realistic fiction than are the women writers." Trudier Harris, Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynchings and Burning Rituals (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 192.

<sup>75</sup> George C.D. Odell, Annals of the New York Stage, Volume III (New York: AMS Press, 1970), 70-1.

William Alexander Brown who also managed a dramatic company and then built a theatre for the hued on Mercer Street in Greenwich Village in 1822.<sup>76</sup> That theatre, the African Theatre, was destroyed by white male violence shortly after its opening, and a copy of Shotaway, which was produced there, has not yet been found and probably never will be. Ostensibly about an Indian uprising on a Caribbean island at the end of the eighteenth century, Shotaway paradigmatically pointed to the successful revolt of the Haitians against their European colonizers which had been much in the news in the decade leading up to its production.<sup>77</sup> With The Escape, by William Wells Brown, Shotaway shares a political mandate of independence and hued agency.<sup>78</sup> As far as we know, the canonical arc of foundational dramatic texts written and performed by the hued in America includes only three names, William Alexander Brown, William Wells Brown, and Angelina Weld Grimke.<sup>79</sup> These three names represent a constellation of important

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<sup>76</sup> George A. Thompson, Jr., A Documentary History of the African Theatre (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 92.

<sup>77</sup> Thompson, 88.

<sup>78</sup> “The Drama of King Shotaway [was] the first African American play known to have been written strictly for political purposes.” Samuel A. Hay, African American Theatre: A Historical and Critical Analysis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>79</sup> There is a record of another possible early playwright named William Cooper Nell who was affiliated with a Boston drama group called the Histrionic Club. This club was active around the time that William Wells Brown was writing and performing his plays in the east. The group presented an exhibition performance of six dramatic scenes and sketches at Chapman Hall in Boston in 1858. At that time, the club had been in existence for about ten years. No plays by Nell have yet been discovered. It is clear, however, that there was dramatic activity among the hued both before and after the Civil War. Bernard L. Peterson, The African American Theatre Directory: A Comprehensive Guide to Early Black Theatre Organizations, Companies, Theatres, and Performing

and pivotal cities in hued history. New York, the hub of the free hued population in antebellum America, Boston, the center of abolitionist activity, and the District of Columbia, the latter of which is as much southern as northern and thus emblematic of the geographical inroads that the hued had achieved. By the beginning of the twentieth century; they had established themselves firmly in the heart of the country. The significance of the city of Washington is further foregrounded by the fact that it was the first place where, in 1862, the hued were emancipated and following the Civil War, first enfranchised in 1867.<sup>80</sup> Rachel, the only one in the founding trinity written after emancipation, revisits and extends the political mandate of Grimke's two male elders. The mandate that Grimke revisits and moves forward in another key, inflected by the female, is the mandate of protest written by the hued hand. Her play breaks with the expected stereotypes and reflects a new spirit in hued writing, one that does not, metaphorically, put on the clothes of the master as Cato did in The Escape but rather uses the tools of modern technology to outfit itself as it chooses. Mrs. Loving, the mother in Rachel, makes her living as a seamstress. Because of segregation, hued women as well as men often did not like to venture into department stores; nor were they welcome there. As a result, many of the hued were able to make a living by catering to the needs of their own group. This separate industry gave them a measure of independence and a platform on which to develop their own interests and negotiate a distinct perspective. Grimke does

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Groups (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), 96-7.

<sup>80</sup> Eric Foner, A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877 (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 120.

not write in dialect and she does not portray her heroine, Rachel, as a woman who is caught in the sexual tentacles of a white male who does not love her. Rachel lives within and loves her own people, thus the family last name of Loving.

Rachel made its debut in Washington in a venue that had a history of service to the hued. "[T]he literal place of performance or exhibition ... plays a role in the cultural recognition of theatre or art ... the physical site and the material apparatus of theatre function within a social semiotic matrix and that site and apparatus signify social place as they mark social places."<sup>81</sup> Rachel was performed in a public school which, unlike Howard University at the time, had an auditorium as well as a unique history (which Howard also possessed). The performance of Rachel in a school pinpoints the centrality of the school in the life of the hued. It is no accident that three of the hued women playwrights who write lynching dramas before 1920 are teachers: Grimke is one of them and the other two will be treated in the next chapter. Especially after universal freedom was legislated, the hued were a people passionate about learning and eager for others to learn about them. They were zealous about eradicating the stigma and dependency with which many of them had been branded during slavery. Like Mrs. Loving in Rachel, who sews clothes for a living, they understood the necessity of making their own way in and through the world, the significance of fashioning an alternative mode.

Perhaps the most striking illustration of the freedmen's quest for self-improvement was their seeming unquenchable thirst for education. ...

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<sup>81</sup> Loren Kruger, The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 12.

Access to education for themselves and their children was ... central to the meaning of freedom. ... Urban blacks took immediate steps to set up schools, sometimes holding classes temporarily in abandoned warehouses, billiards rooms, or, in New Orleans and Savannah, former slave markets. In rural areas, Freedmen's Bureau officials repeatedly expressed surprise at discovering classes organized by blacks already meeting in churches, basements, or private homes. And everywhere there were children teaching their parents the alphabet at home, laborers on lunch breaks "poring over the elementary pages." ... Throughout the South, blacks in 1865 and 1866 raised money to purchase land, build schoolhouses, and pay teachers' salaries. Some communities voluntarily taxed themselves; in others black schools charged tuition, while allowing a number of the poorest families to enroll their children free of charge. Black artisans donated their labor to construct schoolhouses, and black families offered room and board to teachers to supplement their salaries. By 1870, blacks had expended over \$1 million on education, a fact that long remained a point of collective pride.<sup>82</sup>

The quest for learning had begun before Emancipation, however. "Although the teaching of slaves and free Negroes to read and write was strictly forbidden by law in the slave states, thousands of slaves and free Negroes actually became literate. .... In 1850, according to the census returns, there were 68 free Negroes attending school in

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<sup>82</sup> Foner, 42-43.

Charleston, 53 in Mobile, 1,008

in New Orleans, and 1,453 in Baltimore.”<sup>83</sup> Even before the onset of the Civil War, a literary public had begun to build among the hued. Evidence of this reading and writing class is manifest in the founding of the first hued newspaper in New York City in 1827, shortly after a white mob destroyed the African Theatre. Dare I use the term lynching to refer to the killing of dramatic prospects for the hued in New York roughly fifty years after the American Revolution? The same elements were present as in later years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when lynching became a campaign to keep the hued mired in subservience and dependence. In New York in the 1820s, the free population among the hued was sufficient to sway elections. This power was threatening and needed to be cut down. Journalism contributed greatly to its crippling.<sup>84</sup> Journalism also factors in Rachel, since one of the people lynched in that play was an editor who was pulled from his home, with his stepson, because he would not stop castigating the lawlessness of the lynch mob in the South. This editor, who was Rachel’s father, did not

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<sup>83</sup> John Hope Franklin, “Reconstruction and the Negro” in Harold M. Hyman, New Frontiers of the American Reconstruction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966), 65.

<sup>84</sup> Mordecai Noah, sheriff of New York City and sometime playwright, edited an important antebellum New York newspaper, The National Advocate, for which he also occasionally wrote theatrical reviews. When the African Grove mounted a production of Richard III that rivaled a production at the Park Theatre in which Junius Julius Booth was scheduled to appear, Noah denounced the hued actors at the Grove in print. By describing the hued actors as “imitative inmates of the kitchen and pantries,” Noah implied that their rightful occupation was tending the stove and dancing domestic attendance on their social betters. He was outraged at their audacity to aspire to artistic, social, and political equity. In retaliation, he used his pen repeatedly to poison and curtail the theatrical future of the African Grove. Hay, 6-8.

go gently with the masked men. He fought back not only with his pen, but also with his gun. Before they captured him, he took up his revolver and shot into their midst. Four white men fell. The behavior of this self-respecting editor shows the spirit of retaliation that was growing in the hued at the time; they were not unilaterally submitting to the violence visited on them.<sup>85</sup> The educated hued class was clearly a problem. This cadre of the hued who could read and write, supplemented by those who received schooling in the aftermath of the Civil War, did not fit the illiterate stereotype which the white modernist artist celebrated. In fact, it might have been the tension which the advance of such a class generated that motivated writers such as Stein and Eliot and Torrence to depict them as barely able to use the English language. Just as lynching sought to prune the rapid--and, in the minds of the lynchers, wayward--growth of an emerging class, many of the white modernist artists endeavored to keep the hued static inside a depiction of their illiteracy, which, by 1900, no longer applied to the majority of the hued. Ten years after the twentieth century began, seventy percent of the hued could read and write.<sup>86</sup> Many in this emergent hued class, often referred to as striving, sought to show that, linguistically speaking, there was negligible difference between them and their white counterparts. Grimke, whose writing in this play has been faulted for its Victorian decorum, is included in this category.

The school was the cornerstone if not cathedral of the hued community, the place

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<sup>85</sup> Hatch, 148.

<sup>86</sup> Carole Marks, Farewell--We're Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 76.

where its public life was centered and where it found dramatic consonance between its public and private aims. The school was communal fortress whose protective walls had to be defended from attack. "The opposition to Negro education in the South was at first bitter, and showed itself in ashes, insult, and blood; for the South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro. And the South was not wholly wrong; for education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent."<sup>87</sup> The school was also the sphere where the female increasingly had influence and range, where the hued could weave the warp and weft of their own civilization and culture. On the other hand, the school as setting signified the perception of the dominant community that the hued were a people much in need of instruction, a boon often aggressively denied them. The Myrtilla Miner School where, in 1916, Rachel was first produced for two days at the beginning of March was a case in point. Miner, a white woman from upstate New York who conceived the idea in antebellum America that the slaves were deserving of education, was persecuted, forced to move her school from place to place, and once it was established suffered its being set on fire while she was within. But still she persisted even though the cost for her was an early death. In the early years when she was contemplating the founding of her school, she was discouraged by none other than Frederick Douglas who said, "I marvel all the more at the thought, the zeal, the faith, and the courage of Myrtilla Miner in daring to be the pioneer of such a movement for education here, in the District of Columbia, the very citadel of slavery, the place most zealously watched and guarded by the slave power, and

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<sup>87</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (New York: Penguin, 1995), 71.

where humane tendencies were most speedily detected and sternly opposed."<sup>88</sup> In 1853, two years after the school was founded, Miner decided to launch a fund-raising campaign to purchase land and a building to give permanency to her dream. "One fourth of the sum of \$4,000 was contributed by Harriet Beecher Stowe from her earnings from Uncle Tom's Cabin."<sup>89</sup>

In the post-emancipation period, the freed were as busy as ants. It was their status that had been most radically changed in the last century. This change released an enormous amount of energy, and they expressed this energy politically and artistically. They expended their time and effort in finding lost family members, in learning to read and write, in founding towns where they could live together and create community, which had been denied them during slavery. "In the late nineteenth century, as they were beaten and cheated and eventually legislated out of politics, the freedpeople turned to other, less limited avenues for the enactment of their liberty — to advancement in the church, in business, in the arts, and in education."<sup>90</sup> They were a people on the go and on the cultural make. Part of the movement was simply an expression of thwarted capacity. When slavery was ongoing, moving from place to place without white authority was forbidden. Now that the freed, technically, had no one to whom they had to answer except themselves, many were filled with wanderlust. They walked on the dusty roads

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<sup>88</sup> Ellen M. O'Connor, Myrtilla Miner: A Memoir (New York: Arno Press, 1969), v.

<sup>89</sup> O'Connor, vi.

<sup>90</sup> Hale, 19-20.

until they could no longer put one foot in front of the other. Then they rested and walked some more. Many were looking for a place to settle; others were looking for a beloved face. Families had been broken up on the auction block, and now that the auction block was no more, husbands went looking for wives, mothers and fathers searched for sons and daughters, and siblings called out for siblings. Some found that both place and missing person were necessary before they could establish a starting point. When the connection had been made to a place or a person or both, what they had to make was a new sense of themselves. These were new times and they were new, free people with a huge task at hand. They had to consolidate themselves. They had to strengthen their families and create institutions and master the written word, and they set about these multiple tasks with fervor. They were reassembling Osiris, their communal body which had been split by slavery and rent further by lynching. Much of the moving about was directed, focused, organized.

Within the first year following the close of the war Negroes in the North and South met in conventions to consider their common problems. These are the months that many historians have described as months of wandering and drifting on the part of the freedmen. Many of them did drift--from place to place-- to "test" their freedom. Others, however, did not drift. Instead, they met in convention at Alexandria, Norfolk, Raleigh, Savannah, Charleston, Vicksburg, Nashville, and Cleveland to give attention to the problems they faced. The deliberations were orderly and

dignified, and they were carefully recorded.<sup>91</sup>

Those who were educated prior to Emancipation kept careful and even eloquent notes. Many of the hue were self-respecting and serious about themselves as a community. They invested in their self-improvement. "In early Reconstruction, blacks created literally thousands of --- organizations; a partial list includes burial societies, debating clubs, Masonic lodges, fire companies, drama societies, trade associations, temperance clubs, and equal rights leagues."<sup>92</sup> They were proud of their growing independence. They were citizens and this was no piddling matter; they were more than willing to assume whatever responsibility this entailed. Their freedom was a blessing and they endeavored to make good on what they had been given. However, their efforts were met not with encouragement, but with violence. Their determination to stand tall as men and women was not welcomed by many in the white community. Instead, their boot-strapping was frequently interpreted as an affront and met "with a wave of violence that raged almost unchecked in large parts of the postwar South. In the vast majority of the cases freedmen were the victims and whites the aggressors."<sup>93</sup> The violence of lynching, which began in the 1860s, escalated over the decades. In 1892 and 1893, lynching claimed over two hundred victims a year.<sup>94</sup> One by one, the states disenfranchised the hue in the 1890s.

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<sup>91</sup> Franklin, 67.

<sup>92</sup> Foner, 42.

<sup>93</sup> Foner, 52.

<sup>94</sup> There may be an economic base to the increased antagonism against the hue. There was a financial panic in 1893 that was foreseen in America for several years, beginning with the failure in 1890 of the world's leading bank, which was located in

In 1896, segregation was ratified by the federal government. When the vote was taken away, art was healing salve. Into art and education, the hued poured their souls. Through art, they reinvented themselves and their connection to each other. In art, especially in literary art, they articulated the pain of being cut off from the main body of America and they expressed the joy of entering the new century in a better state than the previous four centuries. They danced and sang and acted and painted and wrote. Through education, they learned to read their Bibles and read the classics. They were determined to catch up with and possibly overtake lost time. More and more of them learned to write with rhetorical skill and use the pen to champion a separate identity. From all this effort, there came a "flowering of a small but active postslavery generation of African American male and female writers intent upon making their political and artistic mark on the American literary scene."<sup>95</sup>

Angelina Weld Grimke was one of these writers. Grimke was born into a family that had an honored and provocative history dating back to the abolitionist era. Her great

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England, Baring Brothers. Banks in America began to fail in the summer of 1893. "Before the summer was out 141 national banks had failed, and hundreds more state banks, private banks, savings banks, and loan, trust, or mortgage companies soon followed them into oblivion. ... During 1893 companies crashed with terrifying frequency. By year's end nearly sixteen thousand businesses had gone belly-up, the worst-ever toll in U.S. history. Among the felled firms were institutions that controlled over a third of the nation's rail system. J.P. Morgan and his fellow financiers worked mightily and profitably, reorganizing failed lines and bringing them under banker control. Virtually every bankrupt road east of the Mississippi was eventually 'Morganized,' and by decade's end most of the country's trackage would be combined into six huge systems controlled by Wall Street." Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, editors, Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1185-6.

<sup>95</sup> Sandra Gunning, Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

aunts, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, were members of a wealthy South Carolina family of French Huguenot descent. The slave-owning Grimkes had a home in Charleston and a plantation in the country to which they retired during the stifling months of summer. Both sisters were sensitive to the displays of physical cruelty which were commonplace in the plantation era. In 1796, when Sarah was four years old, "she witnessed the whipping of a slave woman. She rushed out of the house, sobbing. A half hour later her nurse found her on one of the wharves, trying to convince a captain to take her away to someplace where such things did not happen."<sup>96</sup> In 1829, when Angelina was twenty-four, she made the following entry in her diary.

I have been suffering for the last two days on account of H[enry]'s boy having run away, because he threatened to whip him. O. who can paint the horrors of slavery & yet so hard is the natural heart that I am continually told that their situation is very good, much better than that of their owners. How strange that anyone should believe such an absurdity or try to make others credit it. No wonder poor John ran away at the threat of a flogging, when H has told me more than once that when he [H] last whipped him, he felt it physically for one week afterwards--so I dont know how the boy must have felt. Indeed, that night was a night of agony for me, for it was not only dreadful to hear him beating him, but the oaths & curses he uttered went like daggers to my heart, & this was done too in the house of

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<sup>96</sup> Gerda Lerner, The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Woman's Rights and Abolition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 17.

one who is regarded as a light in the Church.<sup>97</sup>

The Grimke sisters were early feminists who preached and wrote against the evils of slavery. Angelina was one of the most renowned abolitionist speakers of her day. In her thirties, Angelina married Thomas Dwight Weld, a leading abolitionist orator and professor of divinity who had been a spellbinding speaker until he strained his voice beyond repair at the age of thirty-three. Making the pen his tool of eloquence, Weld, with the help of his wife and sister-in-law, compiled a book, American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses. This tome, which culled articles from southern newspapers for the period 1837-1839, was originally published in 1839.

Weld's epochal indictment of slavery proved its cruelties exceeded those "inflicted by men upon brutes." The gentle scholar wrote, "It is impossible for cattle to excite in men such tempests of fury as men excite in each other." ... Dwight Lowell Dumond, authority on abolitionist literature, has called American Slavery As It Is "the greatest of the anti-slavery pamphlets; in all probability the most crushing indictment of any institution ever written."<sup>98</sup>

Harriet Beecher Stowe found American Slavery As It Is a source for detail when she was writing her novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin.<sup>99</sup> Much of the cruelty depicted in the Stowe novel

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<sup>97</sup> Larry Ceplair, editor, The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimke: Selected Writings, 1835-1839 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 17.

<sup>98</sup> Timothy Dwight Weld, American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses (New York: Arno Press, 1969). Preface by William Loren Katz, 1-2.

<sup>99</sup> Joan D. Hedrick, Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life (New York: Oxford

and later in the play was not fanciful, but was based on what was ongoing during slavery.

Approximately thirty years after publishing American Slavery, the three members of the Grimke-Weld household were called upon to practice the racial tolerance that they preached, and they acquitted themselves admirably. In 1868, Angelina and Sarah read a newspaper account about the stellar academic achievements of two young men of hue at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Their last name was Grimke and the sisters wondered if these young men could be related to them. Angelina began writing to them and discovered that indeed they were nephews, the sons of their younger brother Henry, the same one who had been so violent toward a male slave named John, beating him so brutally that the exertion pained Henry for a week. By a slave woman named Nancy Weston, Henry Grimke produced three sons. The two older sons, Archibald Henry Grimke and Francis James Grimke, were the two young men whose academic records were praised in print. The youngest son was at home in South Carolina with the mother. Thomas Dwight Weld and his wife and sister-in-law welcomed these two young men into their home and accepted them as members of the family. After Lincoln, Francis became a lawyer and then pursued a divinity degree at Princeton. Archibald attended Harvard, with the assistance of his great aunt, and became a lawyer. In Boston, he fell in love with a white woman named Sarah Stanley, a writer, and had a child by her. That child, a quadroon, was Angelina Weld Grimke, who was born in 1880, the year after Angelina Grimke died. Archibald Grimke named his daughter in honor of his aunt who had been so kind to him. The marriage between Sarah Stanley and Archibald Grimke lasted only a

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University Press, 1994), 230.

short time. After leaving her husband, Sarah Stanley Grimke went home to her parents in Detroit. She kept her daughter for several years, but when the time approached that Angelina would realize that she was not of the same race as her mother, Sarah Stanley put little Angelina, nicknamed "Nana," on a train and sent her back east to her father. Sarah Stanley never saw her daughter again, although she did correspond with her by mail. Before her death in 1898, which was probably a suicide by poison, Stanley published two books on the occult, a subject on which she also lectured. More of her writings were published posthumously in 1900 under the title Esoteric Writings. Stanley died in San Diego where she had gone to lecture.<sup>100</sup> When she was growing up, Angelina spent a lot of time in the Weld home. One of her first poems, written when she was thirteen, was a tribute to Theodore Dwight Weld on his ninetieth birthday.<sup>101</sup> In Weld's will, money was left for Angelina's education, which everyone in the family considered a priority. "When her father was in Santo Domingo from 1894 to 1898 a United States consul, practically every letter he wrote her was filled with exhortations to be good, study hard, be a lady, make him proud of her, and so on."<sup>102</sup> Angelina Weld Grimke was well-educated, attending several of the best academies in Massachusetts. In 1902, she graduated from a Boston normal school, which later became affiliated with Wellesley.<sup>103</sup> Shortly after

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<sup>100</sup> Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., Archibald Grimke: Portrait of a Black Independent (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 40.

<sup>101</sup> Hull, 109-110.

<sup>102</sup> Hull, 110.

<sup>103</sup> Hull, 115.

commencement, Angelina began her teaching career in Washington, D.C., where her uncle Francis was pastor of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in the Northwest section of the city and where her father would later move. The Grimke brothers “truly carried on the work to which the Grimke sisters and Theodore Weld had dedicated their lives.”<sup>104</sup>

Angelina Weld Grimke belonged to a family that prized not only academic but literary achievement. Her great aunts and great uncle were writers and so was her father who authored two biographies, one of Charles Sumner and the other of William Lloyd Garrison, both written in the 1890's. Starting when she was a teenager, Angelina Weld Grimke demonstrated that she had talent as a writer. In her maturity, she continued to write plays, poetry, and short stories, a number of which have been anthologized. She was writing before and during the time known as the Harlem Renaissance, and her work cannot be understood outside of that temporal context. The term Harlem Renaissance is geographically limiting since the artistic geiger counter registered activity in other metropolitan areas, for example in Chicago and in D.C. But during this golden era which ended with the Depression and whose beginning point is disputed--whether 1917 or 1919 or even at the beginning of the twenties--writers and artists of hue shook the ground with their unprecedented outpouring of creative activity. The Harlem Renaissance was the name given in the 1950s to the hued counterpart of American modernism. While white modernist writers and artists were concentrated on the native and savage and uncivilized

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<sup>104</sup> Gerda Lerner, The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 365.

speaker of dialect, otherwise known as *niggerism*, the modernist writers and artists of hue were divided into two tents within the camp of *Negroism*, which was focused on highlighting the humanity of the hue. Some decided that the way to victory was through numbers and they sought to express the folk element; others judged that strategy was the more important advantage and they were drawn to the class that spoke with nary a trace of dialect in their speech; they felt that this class showed the race from its better profile. This split was reflected in educational philosophy of the time, the industrial versus the academic strains. Booker T. Washington, the spokesman for industrial education, caught white attention in 1895 when he delivered a speech in Atlanta that seemed to endorse segregation: Washington argued that the races should be as separate as the fingers of the hand yet joined in sympathetic service. At his school, Tuskegee Institute, Washington trained students to take up manual trades. W.E.B. DuBois, who earned his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1896, represented the forces of academic inclusion. DuBois also wrote much about the arts; he was the one who put into formulation what Angelina Weld Grimke had achieved in practise, the initiation of a theatre for and by and about the hue. DuBois preached the value of higher education and the duty of the talented tenth, those hue who could be described as privileged, to speak for and uplift the hue masses. Angelina Weld Grimke and her family belonged to the latter group. In her initial career choice, however, Grimke at first elected to teach at an industrial high school; later, she discovered that she was not well suited to such an environment and began preparing herself for a change. For six consecutive summers beginning in 1904,

Grimke took English courses during the summer at Harvard, her father's alma mater.<sup>105</sup> During this period, she began teaching in the English Department at M Street School, which later became Dunbar High School, named after the poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar. At the time, Dunbar was the nation's leading academic high school for the hued. Its exemplary curriculum included Latin and Greek. Anna Julia Cooper, a classics scholar, was principal when Grimke went to the M Street School.<sup>106</sup> Cooper, who wrote her dissertation in French, earned her doctorate from the Sorbonne in 1925.<sup>107</sup>

Nine years after Grimke began teaching at Dunbar High School, Rachel was produced under the auspices of the NAACP. There is a relationship between the film directed by D.W. Griffith, The Birth of a Nation (1915), and the production of Rachel, which went on to have two more productions. Both took place in 1917, the first one in April at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York and the second in May in Cambridge, Massachusetts.<sup>108</sup> When the Griffith film was first released, the hued community protested the film's demeaning characterizations. The film depicted the hued as costumed

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<sup>105</sup> Hull, 116.

<sup>106</sup> Hull, 116.

<sup>107</sup> "Dunbar's faculty ... included Anna Julia Cooper, Radcliffe's Eva Dykes, Smith College's Otelia Cromwell, and Mary Burrill who taught English, as did Angelina Grimke. Others had graduated from institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Amherst, and the University of Michigan. ... Dunbar's curriculum was unparalleled in other schools for Negroes, and was on a par with that offered by most of the country's finest (virtually all-white) preparatory academies." Adele Logan Alexander, Homelands and Waterways: The American Journey of the Bond Family, 1846-1926 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 462.

<sup>108</sup> Reference Hull.

apes who did not merit full and equal partnership in the American Republic. Several different agencies began to consider how to fight fire with fire. The people at Tuskegee wanted to create a film; so did the NAACP and a recently formed small film outfit in Los Angeles by the name of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company. Of the three, Tuskegee finally pulled ahead. After Booker T. Washington died in 1915, Emmett Scott, Washington's replacement at Tuskegee, pushed the film forward. Many hands spoiled the pot and wrecked the stew. The Birth of a Race was disastrous when it opened in 1918.<sup>109</sup> By 1916, the NAACP had realized that their plans to mount a film response were not to be realized, so the NAACP turned to the drama as a way to counteract the blatant stereotypes in The Birth of a Nation. The Washington D.C. chapter of the NAACP created a Drama Committee which sponsored a contest. This contest and the discussions fostered by it revealed a dual set of theatrical prescriptives, roughly translated into art for art's sake versus art for the sake of politics.

To counteract the negative import of the film, the NAACP decided to sponsor a contest and produce the winning drama, hoping to capture public attention. Rachel was selected. Physically displaced from the South and removed from opportunities in the North, the Loving family in Rachel lived in reduced, second-class circumstances in the North. They existed within a double bind, emblematic not only of a racial double consciousness but also of the modernist condition, caught between a dying past and a future aborning. Rachel Loving, the educated daughter, refused to produce another black child as fodder for a disdainful society. In her critique that recast the American dream as

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<sup>109</sup> Cripps, 74-75.

nightmare, Grimke explored how a modern madonna, suffering social constraint, could choose to contain the future inside her body.

The Drama Committee was spearheaded by W.E.B. DuBois, the Harvard-educated editor of *The Crisis*, house organ of the NAACP, and Archibald Grimke, father of the playwright, biracial nephew of the abolitionist Grimke Sisters, and NAACP vice-president. The newest member of the committee was Alain Locke, a Harvard and Oxford-trained Rhodes scholar who later emerged as the most important arts critic of the Harlem Renaissance. Other members included Ernest Everett Just, a biologist who received his doctorate from the University of Chicago; Anna Julia Cooper, a scholar and activist for the cause of women who was principal of Dunbar High School for a time; and Montgomery Gregory, who became head of the Howard Players at Howard University, considered the hued version of Harvard. Despite opposition from Locke, who wanted to encourage a folk tradition rather than a platform of protest, the committee opted to use theatre as a propaganda, as a weapon in the war or campaign of images that was being waged in the media between white and the hued.

The selection of this play occasioned a great deal of discussion about what should and should not constitute hued theatre. Rachel and the controversy surrounding it represents a rule-generating moment in hued theatre. What was at issue was a struggle between the theatrical ideal as expressed by DuBois, an ideal of theatre as subordinate to the struggle for racial acceptance, an ideal to which the Committee adhered, and the theatrical ideal of hued writing celebrating the uniqueness of hued life independent of any political agenda which was pursued by Alain Locke as well as Montgomery Gregory. Out

of this struggle came the basic dichotomous line that hued theatre would weave itself around in the ensuing years of the twentieth century, a trajectory whose double axis was and remains the “proper” relation to a white audience and the “proper” emphases of the “true” hued theatre. This conundrum is still unsettled today. Rachel represents several milestones. Produced in 1916, under the aegis of the NAACP, it was heralded as the first literary play by a hued writer of either gender to be staged in the United States.<sup>110</sup> Further it featured a hued director and hued actors performing all the roles, which satisfied DuBois’s guidelines, published several years later, for a theatre controlled by and presented for the consumption of a hued audience rather than to fulfill the strait-jacket expectation of white conception. The production of Grimke’s play thus established hued theatre as a separate entity, outside the exclusive custodianship of Euro-Americans, and

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<sup>110</sup> Pauline Hopkins, a late nineteenth-century novelist, wrote a musical that was staged earlier than Rachel. Escape was also staged in the sense that it was performed on a variety of stages in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the antebellum era, as already noted in this dissertation, The Drama of King Shotaway was staged in New York, but the script of that play, which may have been improvisational, has been lost. What sets Rachel apart from its forebears is its positioning in the context of legitimate theatre and its association with an organization that offered it protective shelter, so that its occurrence left more than a shadowy trace. The 1916 production of Rachel brought together the major elements derived from the theatrical legacy of the nineteenth century that were still prominent in the thrust of hued theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century. Grimke, like Hopkins, was a woman. And women had become synonymous with the hued in the sense that the hued were perceived as a feminine or lesser race. Like William Wells Brown, Grimke was influenced by the abolitionist program. The hued playwright who wanted to separate from the minstrel phenomenon was never simply expressing a desire to be amused and to offer up one’s body as an amusement for others. The legitimate hued theatre had committed itself, since the 1820s and The Drama of King Shotaway by William Alexander Brown, to commenting on the tragic situation in which the hued were situated socially and politically. Grimke, like William Alexander Brown, had political intent in her writing. Grimke is thus viewed as the symbolic mother, the progenitrix, of hued theatre in the twentieth century.

announced the hued playwright as a person able to give voice to a sovereign identity.

Rachel, written by a woman, marks a transition from the attitude that darkies on stage are buffoons, low characters, undeserving of any moment of dignity. Pivotal in hued theatre's move from strict entertainment to using the stage to pursue social and political agendae, Rachel and the debate surrounding it gave birth to the modern hued theatre in the United States.

## Chapter Four, "Gender Raises Its Ire"

*All things rise out of the chaos, modern society among the rest.<sup>1</sup>*

Sam Hose was a thin man of average height who struggled to learn to read and write and worked hard to take care of his ailing mother and retarded brother. When his mother got well enough for him to travel, he left her in the care of his sister, who had recently married, and went in search of a better job. After working for approximately a year, he asked his employer for time and money to visit his ailing mother. His employer refused. Hose and his employer quarreled. The next day, his employer, whose name was Cranford, sought Hose out and threatened him with a gun. Hose had an axe in his hand at the time and when Cranford kept antagonizing him, he flung the axe at Cranford, who was struck, mortally, in the head. Hose had killed in self-defense, but he was in the South and his skin was not white. He understood that his life was in danger, so he headed for his mother's house, the only place of security that he knew. Amid much fanfare, a posse was formed. Apprehending Hose took on such significance that the inhabitants of one

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<sup>1</sup> Francois Guizot, Historical Essays and Lectures. Edited and with an Introduction by Stanley Mellon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 347.

town closed up shop and set off in pursuit of the scoundrel. Ten days later, the lynching posse captured Hose, and he was lynched in Newman, Georgia in 1899.<sup>2</sup> The *New York Tribune* covered the lynching.

In the presence of nearly 2000 people, who sent aloft yells of defiance and shouts of joy, Sam Hose was burned at the stake in a public road. Before the torch was applied to the pyre, the Negro was deprived of his ears, fingers, and other portions of his body with surprising fortitude. Before the body was cool, it was cut to pieces, the bones were crushed into small bits and even the tree upon which the wretch met his fate was torn up and disposed of as souvenirs.

The Negro's heart was cut in small pieces, as was his liver. Those unable to obtain the ghastly relics directly, paid more fortunate possessors extravagant sums for them. Small pieces of bone went for 25 cents and a bit of liver, crisply cooked, for 10 cents.<sup>3</sup>

Before his body was cooked and the severed and split pieces were distributed and sold, the crowd rent and sundered the meaning of his life. Before he was consumed by fire and the spectacle of his agony consumed by the eager throng, the crowd anticipated his tortured demise. Before he was made into a commodity for purchase, the lineaments of Hose's life were erased and redrawn in the religiously read columns of the local

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<sup>2</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 34, 83-84.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Orlando Patterson, Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 194-195.

newspapers. Hose was minstrelized; that is, he was represented not according to the authority of his own knowledge but as others perceived him to be. When he was finally surrounded and captured, it was claimed that he had disguised his bright miscegenated skin with an application of blackface and was on his way to a dance. In another newspaper account, the posse bade him wear blackface.

Either way white readers could find amusement in the picture of a black man in blackface as images of blacked-up black minstrels performing the cakewalk merged with the very different form of entertainment in which Hose would soon star. In this early spectacle lynching, it seemed, the minstrel act bridged the distance between the faithful, laughing slave and the "black beast rapist." Before he could be the beast, Hose played a more familiar role, the joking black fool.<sup>4</sup>

The community improvised a series of masks for Hose, ones that comported with the roles they had determined for him in their drama of denouncement and expulsion. Hose was vilified and recast as a monster, a reprehensible being who deserved to be horrendously sacrificed, with no compunction whatsoever. He was contemptible and low, a person of no redeemable value. With the help of Mrs. Cranford who swore that Hose had savaged her, the papers played fast and loose with his character and stripped him of his humanity. The crowd was not lynching Hose qua Sam Hose. The crowd was lynching the imagined figure that had been projected into arch visibility on the screens of

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<sup>4</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940 (New York: Pantheon books, 1998), 212.

their minds. Hose had ceased to exist as himself; he had been eviscerated and effigized, transformed into pure sign. "The spectacle ... is the heart of the unrealism of the real society. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle ... is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made ... and its corollary consumption."<sup>5</sup> Hose was given up to the sign-making industry of the media and his sentencing was a *fait accompli* before he set his first footstep on the path to his mother's house. The lynchers cut up and cremated his body, but his life was also mangled, and mutilated in the cogs of the spectacle machine. The written preceded the act, the written was made act. The written was transmuted into fact.

The Hose lynching completed the transition of lynching from a primarily private and covert punishment into mammoth open-air spectacle, the kind that drew thousands of hungry spectators and specialized in offering torture as public delectation and amusement.<sup>6</sup> Lynching as spectacle was a crowd pleaser that incited the masses to unparalleled pitches of delight and fascination. What was being celebrated, ecstatically--even orgiastically--enjoyed, was the deflection of harm from their particular door and its deposit at the threshold of another who was socially designated and vulnerable, powerless enough to take it on as a burden.<sup>7</sup> From outlying regions, people were drawn to convene at these sights of grotesque suffering which were reported regularly in the journals of the

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<sup>5</sup> Guy DeBord, Society of the Spectacle (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Hale, 209.

<sup>7</sup> "[I]n some societies whole categories of human beings are systematically reserved for sacrificial purposes in order to protect other categories." Rene Girard, Violence and the Sacred (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 10.

day. Account after account of extralegal executions garishly filled newspaper headlines in the North and South, day after day and week after week, before and during the reign of lynching from 1890 to 1940. The people at attendance at these events were transfixed at the scene of punishment. They were held there as though by magnets, often unable to budge until the death was done. In one instance in 1912, the wood supply ran low before the body was fully consumed during the lynching of Dan Davis, who was being killed for trying to rape a woman. The spectators privileged to stand close to the conflagration were faced with a dilemma. "None of the men or boys were willing to miss an incident of the torture. All feared something of more than usual interest might happen, and it would be embarrassing to admit later on of not having seen it on account of being absent after more wood. Something had to be done, however, and a few men by the edge of the crowd, ran after more dry-goods boxes, and by reason of this 'public-service' gained standing room in the inner circle after having delivered the fuel."<sup>8</sup> The few who deprived themselves of immediate visual excitement in order to benefit the whole earned a transfer from periphery to center, and were treated to a better berth at the entertainment. Etymologically, entertainment originally meant "a *holding-in-place*, a *containment*."<sup>9</sup> In lynching after lynching, people were riveted in their shoes. They were hypnotized, narcotized with the sight and smell of omnipotence over the hue. They were thoroughly entertained.

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<sup>8</sup> Patterson, 195-196.

<sup>9</sup> Dana B. Polan, "'Above All Else to Make You See': Cinema and the Ideology of Spectacle" in Jonathan Arac, editor, Postmodernism and Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), 56.

Each spectacle of lynching drew together a mix of classes and residents from a variety of towns, concentrating them in one spot. The lure of the spectacle of administered death in which they could all participate, pulled them from their various warrens, transporting them out of themselves and into an exalted sense of power and communion. This concentration of people transformed lynching from a rural pastime into a metropolitan style entertainment, satisfying to the multitudes across a variety of borders that included divisions of age and gender and place. Even though lynchings were generally staged in open, frontier areas, those in attendance at the lynching came from town and city. Those who could not attend because of lack of proximity--for example, those in the North--could share in the event through the publication of photographs and the written representation of a successive wave of lynchings in pamphlets and in the morning papers. Because of the lynching, a corps of spectators were drawn together and they could contemplate and find satisfaction in the extent of their own immensity. The gathering of so many bodies together, actual and virtual, converted lynching into an urban form, turned it into a municipal phenomenon that elided individual difference and merged frontier, town, and city, North and South. "Not the act of tracing boundaries, but their cancellation or negation is the constitutive act of the city."<sup>10</sup> Lynching was an exercise of congress, of nation: everyone who had the same attitude toward the hue were united by the spectacle of seeing the same sacrifice at the same time or within the same interval of

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<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life [Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen] (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 85.

time.<sup>11</sup> In account after account, the spectators pressed their differences away and thronged around the stage where the suffering of the ostracized was on display. Disregarding intramural asymmetries, they packed themselves together thickly as people have a tendency to do in cities. In the case of lynching, the spectators wanted to get as close as humanly possible to the source of their visual and emotional pleasure. As Rousseau argued, there was something not just appealing but downright exhilarating and compelling about alfresco entertainment; it was conducive to the creation of pure--unwavering--national conviction and solidarity. Rousseau believed out in the fresh air, away from the contamination of the cities, and surrounded by the oxygenated breath of trees, the spirit of a people was cleansed. According to Rousseau, when situated in nature, the theatrical became wholesome, in the sense of creating a whole out of the various and sundry, scattered parts of a heterogeneous population. Through mutual enjoyment, seen and felt, theatre homogenizes a people. "It is in the open air, under the sky, that you ought to gather and give yourselves to the sweet sentiment of your happiness."<sup>12</sup> There is nothing more unifying, more bonding, than engaging in excitement together. Watching the pyrotechnics and slow roasting the dickens out of the *nittle ligger* was satisfying diversion for the whole family, women and children very

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<sup>11</sup> "The ability to mass the resources needed for a spectacle reflects the values of a city or nation." Bernard Beckerman, "Spectacle in the Theatre," Theatre Survey 25.1 (May 1984):10.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre. Translated and with an introduction by Allan Bloom (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 125.

much included.<sup>13</sup> According to H.L. Mencken, a wit and acerbic cultural critic in the early part of the twentieth century, lynching as entertainment was analogous to the "merry-go-round, the theatre, the symphony orchestra, and other diversions common to larger communities."<sup>14</sup>

Before the twentieth century had begun, lynching had already started its climb up the ladder of entertainment value. Thanks to film which, we saw in an earlier chapter, made its American debut in the same year as segregation, the spectacle, the concentration of simulated magnificence and power, was taking hold at the same time that a significant portion of the country was spatially partitioning itself along racial lines. This division of territory suggests a crisis of definition. More and more immigrants were flooding the country and threatening to overwhelm the prior definition of *American*. Did these newcomers merit the privileges and protections of whiteness? In the case of Italians in Louisiana, the answer was a resounding *No*. The scale of attention that lynching received changed from local to international after the lynching of eleven Italians in New Orleans in 1891. Lynching was no longer a backwater event, but a public enactment of collective will and discipline engaging and commanding widespread notice. The middle phase in the modernization--and dramatization--of lynching was reached in 1893 in Paris, Texas, when Henry Smith was lynched. Smith, who was mentally underdeveloped, had killed a teenage girl and was charged with molesting her sexually, although the latter turned out to

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<sup>13</sup> Satisfaction was the emotion most evident in photographs of the faces of those who assembled at the lynching site. Editorial in The New York Times, March 16, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Mencken quoted in Walter White, Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge

be untrue.<sup>15</sup> The newspapers were filled with revolting details of how this brutal beast had sexually torn and lacerated his virginal victim. For that lynching, charter trains were hired to bring spectators to the festive sights, which included the parading of Smith to the scaffold in the manner of a monarch. According to an eyewitness, a crowd of over ten thousand people met the train that brought Smith back from Arkansas, where he had escaped.

The Negro was placed upon a carnival float in mockery of a king upon his throne, and, followed by an immense crowd, was escorted through the city so that all might see the most inhuman monster known in current history ...

His clothes were torn off piecemeal and scattered to the crowd, people catching the shreds and putting them away as mementos. The child's father, her brother, and two uncles then gathered about the Negro as he lay fastened to the torture platform and thrust hot irons into his quivering flesh. It was horrible--the man dying by slow torture in the midst of smoke from his own burning flesh. Every groan from the fiend, every contortion of his body was cheered by the thickly packed crowd of 10,000 persons, the mass of beings 600 yards in diameter, the scaffold being the center. After burning the feet and legs, the hot irons--plenty of fresh ones being at hand— were rolled up and down Smith's stomach, back and arms.

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Lynch (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1929), 9.

<sup>15</sup> "Although the child had not been sexually molested, a local clergyman, Bishop Haygood, fueled the growing hysteria with lurid tales of how the child had been 'taken by her heels and torn asunder in the mad wantonness of gorilla ferocity.'" Patterson, 193.

Then the eyes were burned out and irons were thrust down his throat ... the crowd piled all kinds of combustible stuff around the scaffold, poured oil on it and set it afire. The Negro rolled and tossed out of the mass, only to be pushed back by the people nearest him. He tossed out again and was roped and pulled back.<sup>16</sup>

The carnival atmosphere was palpable in the topsy-turvy throning of the dispossessed who was immediately pestered and pulled from his unsteady perch. The lesson also was clear enough. The sacrificial pain of the victim spelled the pleasure of the onlookers. *Better him than us. We are privileged; he is not. We are Americans and free; he is not.* The populace was being appeased with someone else's suffering and blood. Smith was the tragic goat on whose stripped back the community could pile its sins and then watch them go up in smoke. The lynching of Smith was further theatricalized by the publication and dissemination of a special narrative souvenir pamphlet. Those who did not see the event could read about it and share the experience, despite their absence. The written word, primarily in the newspaper but also in the surviving bulletin, bestowed a sense of presence.

Lynching was no longer a small, contained affair that affected only those in the immediate vicinity of the killing. If lynching were intended as instruction, and it was, then the grade of its teaching moved, as one century died and another began, from elementary to university level. In becoming modern, lynching expanded its geographical and emotional territory. Whether actually or vicariously, the American consensus had

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<sup>16</sup> Patterson, 193-194.

tasted lynching and many had developed an appetite for it that was fed by media and technological developments.<sup>17</sup> The modern phase in this new-fangled alfresco theatre of human horrors matured with the lynching of Sam Hose, which used the latest advances in communication to assemble an audience.

Easy access to train and telegraph lines ensured that the lynching of Hose would be an 'event' not just in the rural Georgia Piedmont but in the self-proclaimed capital of the New South as well. The Hose murder, then, added a key innovation: local and regional newspapers took over the publicity, promotion, and sale of the event and began the development of a standardized, sensationalized narrative pattern that would dominate reporting of spectacle lynching through the 1940s.<sup>18</sup>

After the lynching of Hose, which included a mad scramble for bodily parts, an elderly white man who had participated in the press of the throng said, "God bless every man that had a hand in this."<sup>19</sup> He had no doubt that God was the friend of the lynchers, and would reward them for their good and honorable work in setting this man afire, making sure that

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<sup>17</sup> The 1893 lynching of Henry Smith set a precedent, and from that point forward lynchings were perceived more and more as events for which one traveled to see en masse. After 1893, railroad companies would "arrange special trains to transport spectators and lynchers to previously announced lynching sites. On some occasions these trains were actually advertised in local papers; with railroad passenger service, even small towns could turn out large crowds. Even after automobiles cut into the railroads' 'lynch carnival' business, ... 'modern trainmen, schooled in the doctrine of service,' helped 'in an informative way' by relaying news of upcoming lynchings to train passengers and townspeople 'all along the rail lines.'" Hale, 207.

<sup>18</sup> Hale, 210.

<sup>19</sup> Hale, 213.

the villain tasted and was eaten up by the fires of damnation before his death. The man and his companions were crusaders and Hose was the vanquished infidel. The collective guilt had been projected onto the singular victim. It took a while, however, before the fight was burned out of this particular infidel. Hose was "battling in the flames with the wildest superhuman energy ... he was twisting around the tree, now biting at the back of the pine, jumping and springing and twisting and fighting for every inch of life, kicking the embers with his dangling legs, blood vessels bursting, eyes protruding, but not a word, not a tear, but, oh God, the horror of his face."<sup>20</sup> The resolve that had allowed Hose to persevere until he could read and write and the sense of obligation that had tied him to his mother with filial devotion were clear in the way he fought death.<sup>21</sup> This was no emotional weakling. This was a man who would protect his right to life and justice from anyone who threatened it and that is what he did when Cranford, his former employer,

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<sup>20</sup> Hale, 213.

<sup>21</sup> It is true that in order to sell more papers, reporters may have intensified the manner of Hose's death. If intensification does inform the story of how Hose died, what is foregrounded is the general appetite for the religious aura that accompanied the reporting of this event, the association of Hose with the tree around which he was sacrificed. There was obviously a market for the story to be embellished in this way, a need to have the victim fight, without avail but with ferocity, against the inevitable and horrendous death. This underscores the eagerness of many of those who witnessed the lynching event to theatricalize the imposed ritual of death. The way the story was reproduced for contemporary as well as future consumers of the macabre death indicts the tellers of the story rather than the victim of the deed. This account, often reported, has become apocryphal. More than one recent book relies upon this version of Hose's death. For example, Grace Elizabeth Hale, in *Making Whiteness* (1998), and Orlando Patterson, in *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (1999), pay a great deal of attention to the lynching of Sam Hose. The death of Hose, whose body parts were turned into relics, some of which were preserved in formaldehyde and displayed in a local Georgia grocery store for years, symbolized the dramatized components of lynching as they existed at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

brandished a gun in his face. But self-respect was not permitted a man of hue. He could only be a reprobate, a rapist. Hose was charged with raping the wife after he had killed the husband. When caught ten days after the crime, Hose admitted killing his former boss, but denied the rape. No matter. The community had its man and they were not about to let him be tried. They had already decided his sentence and carried it out on a Sunday afternoon shortly after church services were disbanded. That way the worshipers would not have to go home and change into their Sunday best for the festivities.

A group that kills together in the sight of a quorum of witnesses becomes the core of a national consciousness united in a communion of blood and sacrifice. There is no turning back from murder. It is an irreversible action. The members of the collusive group share culpability and tell dramatic stories that absolve each other of guilt. They are good old boys and they are protecting their families and communities, and especially their womenfolk, from danger. The lynchers are knights of justice saving their nation from chaos and ruin and preserving civilization for their children, whom they indoctrinate through inclusion in the circle of gawkers at the feast of annihilation. They congratulate themselves on their victory in a laudable fight against the dastardly demon of darkness. Their hands were not aggressors in the doing of the deed. It was the lecherous demon of darkness who made them do it; otherwise they would have stayed home tilling their fields and tending the fires in their hearth, they say. The demon of darkness is the personification of guilt, not they. Not they who planned and performed the killing. Not they who saw and sanctioned it. Not they who unsexed the body while it was still alive and could feel and suffer the slicing and defilement. Not they who rifled through the pile

of ashes for charred relics of the incinerated body, and for the accouterments thereto, the rope and chain and branch. Those implicated by virtue of their hands and those involved by virtue of their eyes and ears justify what has been committed in the name of the spiritual and temporal father. They speak as though God is on their side, one of their cohorts, looking on in rapt and benign approval. The self-exonerators write epic narratives, some of them metamorphosed into film, that turn the commission of the oft-repeated sin of Cain into magnified national truth. Their inequity is transformed into grand righteousness, their shame into glory. All invented, and inverted. "The truth is, history ... is the *essence of deception*, key to all that blinds us, all that helps us live in time."<sup>22</sup>

In the modern world where borders are geographically and emotionally porous and rarely contain the entirety of a person's life as resolutely as they once did, truth includes a range of perspectives. It is no longer a fixed needle or steeple which all can see and before which all will genuflect in obeisance and perform other gestures of abject devotion. At one point in the archives of history, truth was considered sacred, and its provenance was the church. But then commercialism fought the church and won, and truth became the handmaid of those with economic and temporal power. Its face and name multiplied. For a while, truth sat on a throne, but then the throne was toppled. In the modern, metropolitan world of crowded skylines on which the signature of power is boldly inscribed for the eye to read, truth is localized. It is determined by where one

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<sup>22</sup> E.M. Cioran, *Drawn and Quartered*. Translated from the French by Richard Howard (New York: Arcade Press, 1998), 5.

stands, by what can be viewed within the frame or on the stage of one's experiential reference, by what one buys, by what claims value in the currency of desire. Truth in daily trade operates within a human scale. It is limited and lived, it is registered on and by the body. And it is created by the body. One example of truth's bodily genesis is that, in many cases, truth is written into being. It is perceived, and can be invented. Truth presupposes a congruence between what happened and what is represented as having happened, but who determines the proper relation between event and the recording of that event remains a fraught question. One mind, considered the equal of another, puts emphasis where another finds irrelevance. The variability of truth suggests that a monoreality no longer prevails, but is replaced by a polyreality. Truth is fractured, and one truth sometimes combats another.

There is a battle 'for the truth, or at least 'around truth'--it being understood ... by truth that I do not mean 'the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted,' but, rather the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the 'true', it being understood also that it's not a matter of a battle 'on behalf' of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays.<sup>23</sup>

The plays about lynching in this study do not all promote the same truth, the guiding principle of our beliefs and actions. For its proponents, lynching is righteous wrath

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<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in Lawrence Cahoon, editor, From Modernism to Postmodernism (Malden: Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996),

punishing an unspeakable outrage against the feminized white body of the American nation. To its denouncers, lynching performs the unjustified devaluation and dismemberment of a people, raping them of their entitlement to an unmolested present and an undefiled future. To its critics, lynching is a brutal act that brands the lyncher as criminal. For its apologists, lynching manifests the just prerogative of political power, which is the decree that capital sentencing is within the nimbus of its dictate. Truth is power; it is constructed by power. Those who have access to power and its instruments can disseminate what they decide is truth and the truth they peddle will be the truth that is believed and the truth that is enshrined and transmitted to posterity. But in the burgeoning of power in other communities--for example in the segregated enclaves of the hued and in the suffragist and settlement house circles of women--other truths rise up to offer contradiction and quarrel to the canonical truth, which is patriarchal. Truth is no longer singular, it is more and more faceted, multiple. The fanning out or partitioning of truth implies a fragmenting or sharing of power. Lynching dramatizes a negative response to any redistribution of privilege and power. But the urgency for and frequency of lynching implies that entrenched power must have experienced some sharp discomfort and perhaps even pangs of disintegration due to contrary onslaught. "[L]ynch mobs executed their victims two or three times a week."<sup>24</sup> The forces of power must have sensed challenge; otherwise, lynching, which is a strengthening of the communal center

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<sup>24</sup> Kirk W. Fuoss, "Lynching Performances, Theatres of Violence," Text and Performance Quarterly 19.1 (January 1999):2.

and a response to a sociopolitical crisis, would not be so virulent or so necessary. The subsidence or death of universal truth is analogous to the death of the father, perceived as the source of absolute and final authority. The king, the father, the sun, and the word are stand-ins for one another.<sup>25</sup> They share attributes. All wield generative power. All are perceived as central and ordering principles in their particular realms of influence.

To a degree, the Smith and Hose lynchings were engineered by the manipulation of truth enacted by power.<sup>26</sup> These lynchings charged rape where none existed. These lynchings claimed to respond, in part, to acts of murder that, in one case, was provoked and unpremeditated, and in the other, was carried out by someone who did not have control of all of his faculties. As the Germans would say, Smith did not possess all the cups in his cupboard.<sup>27</sup> And some of the ones that remained were cracked. He was thus not fully responsible for his actions. If Smith and Hose had been granted the privilege of

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<sup>25</sup> Derrida quoted in Andrew J. McKenna, Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 29.

<sup>26</sup> Newspapers ...decried the acts [lynchings] in general terms, but justified them in the end as dictated by the circumstances. 'A single day rarely passes that a case of lynching is not flashed over the wires and the cause is almost the same in each instance, the rape of a white woman or child by a big, burly negro,' reported the *Nashville Banner* in 1881. 'It is rape and hang. As often as it is done, that often will a devil swing off into eternity.' The next year the newspaper issued an almost identical warning, saying that Negroes could expect hanging, 'swift and sure' for raping or attempting to rape white women. In similar fashion the *Atlanta Constitution* gave much attention to alleged attacks by blacks against white women, practically all of which were followed by lynchings. After noting the attempt of a 'yellow scoundrel' to outrage a lady near Atlanta, the editor observed that 'this sort of crime is becoming entirely too prevalent and the best cure for it is lynch law.'" Howard N. Rabinowitz, Race Relations in the Urban South 1865-1900 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 53-4.

<sup>27</sup> The pertinent phrase in German is *nicht alle Tassen im Schrank haben*.

trial, it is likely that neither one of them would have been judged guilty of first-degree murder. There were exonerating conditions in each case. But the privilege of lenient interpretation was not something that was generally extended to the hued. Quite the contrary. The lynching party cared not a whit for innocence or guilt. They were interested in the fiction of truth that had been generated in their minds and in their media. Guilt was not necessary for a lynching to occur. Guilt was an excuse and so was rape on occasion.

Although Smith and Hose had killed, it was not the crime of murder that claimed the greatest amount of journalistic ink. Rather, what generated the most vociferous outcry and garnered more public attention were the charges of rape that were attached to both of them. Those were the charges that were trumpeted in the press. The Smith and Hose lynchings were committed under the banner of the sexual honor of the southern white woman. According to reporters and self-styled experts on the matter, Smith had not only sexually abused his female victim after her death, but had also supposedly rent the tenderness of her pre-pubescent body. "The slightest hint, the most groundless accusation, can circulate with vertiginous speed and is transformed into irrefutable proof."<sup>28</sup> The rumor spread that Hose had violated Cranford's wife in the presence of her dying husband. Rumors about Hose proliferated with the flow of journalistic ink. "Previously unexplained murders, rapes, and thefts from all corners of the state began to be identified as the work of Hose, and his inconspicuous life as a farmhand was recast as

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<sup>28</sup> Girard, 79.

a life of brutal crimes and wandering.”<sup>29</sup> It turned out that neither Smith nor Hose were rapists. But truth was not the issue. Certainty and truth are not synonymous. The public squall of lynching was lashed into fury by stories of rape. In scenario after scenario of lynching, rape was *de rigueur* in the narrative that was released to the public via the press and word-of-mouth.<sup>30</sup> Rumors of rape inspired unmeasured responses. Rebecca Felton, a southern journalist and activist, later senator, thought that lynching hundreds of hued males a day, five every hour, was small recompense for the sexual threat that they represented. In 1897, she said, “if it takes lynching to protect women’s dearest possession from drunken, ravening beasts, then I say lynch a thousand a week.”<sup>31</sup> A thoroughly political personality, Felton was feeling the pulse of her constituency, which was largely female and desirous of the good graces of the southern male establishment. A script of imminent rape was written and ingrained in the collective white mind. That script mandated two opposing camps and pitted one against the other. The two antagonistic parties were the Predator/Pervert and the Punisher. That script made the hued male into a marauding, perverted rapist and a rapist he was whether or not he had committed the crime. If he hadn’t done it yet, he would do it. Rape was in his genes. He

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<sup>29</sup> Brundage, 83.

<sup>30</sup> The connection between lynching and the rape of white women was so persistent and pervasive that well into the second half of the twentieth century when Susan Brownmiller was doing research at the Schomburg Center, a librarian there said that information on rape was available only under the category of lynching. Bettina Aptheker, Woman’s Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex, and Class in American History (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 53.

<sup>31</sup> Hale, 109.

was bad to the bone and had to be punished for what he was perceived to have done. So dastardly was his characterization that there was no room for doubting his guilt. Rape did sometimes occur, but it did not occur every time it was charged. The fiction behind the belief had become legend and the legend had been transmuted into truth. Rape was the fiction that many men as well as the women in the South relied upon to hide from themselves the knowledge that their actions were brutal and bloodthirsty rather than motivated by honor. The alacrity with which the alarm of rape was sounded highlighted the vulnerability of the white community to attack. If rape, with the hued male as dominant sexual party, was not the biggest bugaboo in the southern mind, why was rape the unilateral hue and cry of the lynching party? The fear of rape loomed so large in the public imagination that it blocked out all other possibilities. Further, the charge of rape did not acknowledge fault on the part of the lynchers. The victim was the transgressor, not they. The charge of rape was the old fallacy of one wrong put forward in explanation for the commission of a second and greater wrong, extinguished in significance by the precipitating, but relatively minor, wrongdoing.

Tracy Mygatt is believed to be the first white female playwright to write a lynching drama.<sup>32</sup> The Noose was produced in April 1919 at the Neighborhood Playhouse on Grand Street in Manhattan, part of the little theatre movement--often

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<sup>32</sup> The Noose is listed as the first lynching drama by a white American woman in the second appendix to Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens, editors, Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 412.

centered in the poorer communities-- in which women seemed to be extremely active.<sup>33</sup> The Neighborhood Playhouse was a project run by two daughters from a wealthy family. The Lewisohn sisters were committed to theatre as social praxis. It was through the little theatre movement that many women who had been silenced raised their voice. Thanks to the little theatre movement, which had a track record of confronting the platitudes, plays like The Noose found their way to the stage.<sup>34</sup> In The Noose, one of three plays by women which will be discussed in this chapter, Mygatt questioned the defense of rape as motivation for lynching. The person who challenges the sexual politics of lynching is Margaret Clay, who has been married for eleven years to Houston Clay, a lawyer and aspiring politician. Margaret has been out of town for a month visiting maternal relatives in Virginia. The reason for her temporary separation from her husband is not given in the play. Perhaps she is just lonesome for her mother. Perhaps some more serious estrangement has occurred between husband and wife. At any rate, Margaret, on the recommendation of her mother, decides to surprise her husband and daughter by returning home a day earlier than expected. She comes back on Christmas Eve rather than on the holiday itself. When she arrives in the house, her husband and daughter are not at home. Without much warmth, she is greeted by her mother-in-law, Mrs. Clay, and also by Pete Johnson, the eighteen-year-old hued servant, who is obviously disturbed by something.

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<sup>33</sup> Doris Fox Bernadette, The Neighborhood Players in Grand Street, Volume I (New York: New York University Dissertation, 1949), 279.

<sup>34</sup> Alice Lewisohn Crowley, The Neighborhood Players: Leaves from a Theatre Scrapbook. Introduction by Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1959), xv.

He asks for permission to spend the night in the attic. At first, Margaret thinks he wants to stay in order to be on hand because Christmas is the next day and he can get an early start on his work. Then, Margaret sees and hears an excited parade of people, some on bicycles and others on foot, rushing past the window. *“At the same time, a shower of sparks is flung up against the dark evening sky, and the room, catching the reflection of the conflagration, burns an angry red. As full realization sweeps upon her, Margaret clutches at a chair for support.”*<sup>35</sup> Pete rushes to console Margaret who is beside herself with disbelief. How could a lynching happen in this town, she wonders. She berates Pete for not having stopped the lynching, then realizes the futility of such a recommendation. He belongs to a people who incur death if they offer opposition to the status quo. But she can act. She can also prevail upon her husband to act. Pete has to restrain her from rushing out of the house to put a halt to the lynching. It’s already over, Pete tells her. When he went upstairs to fetch the bible that Mrs. Clay had requested, he heard the victim scream. That scream may have been caused by the ritual castration, often the penalty when rape is the charge. Or the cry of agony may have escaped the throat when the first tongues of fire greedily licked at and began to devour bare flesh. The lynching had progressed too far for anyone to stop it.

Margaret has a special family history that is antagonistic to lynching. She is proud of that history and does her best to live up to its legacy. Her grandfather was once sheriff in this town and he tried to protect a hued man in his custody from being lynched. He was not able to do so and Margaret’s mother, then a young girl, saw the mob, with fire

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<sup>35</sup> Tracy D. Mygatt, “The Noose,” *Drama*, XX (November, 1929):43.

and murder in their eyes, take hold of the victim. She never forgot the horror and neither did her father. Margaret's grandfather, who has become, in Margaret's assessment, the epitome of caring and benevolent southern manhood. He is the tallest figure within her horizon, the one hero among the craven many who will stand for the right. The family moved away after that lynching and there was much opposition in the family to Margaret marrying Houston Clay because he lived in the town with the horrid history. Margaret believes that her husband is innocent of the sins of his birthplace and, moreover, he has the same kind of humanitarian and fair-minded ideals as her grandfather. She learns, however, that he does not. In the heat of disagreement, Margaret discovers that Clay has always thought that her grandfather was foolhardy. "Oh, I know it developed that the nigger was innocent--but to try to save him *before* he knew--why that was purest *ex post facto*--and, sentimental! Guilty or innocent, the principle was the same."<sup>36</sup> For Clay, lynching is integral to the ritual that separates white men and hued. It is the physical obligation of white men to discipline their wayward children, and that includes the hued as well as white women. The white male rules his roost and his roost is all he surveys. Besides, Clay is a pragmatic man who has his sights set on political office. He will not take an unpopular stand. He will not buck the tide. It is clear that a chasm of difference separates husband and wife. For the wife, the husband is not the paragon who deserves to be admired and obeyed. He offers no standard that the wife wishes to be close to or emulate. His measure falls short.

When Margaret fathoms the magnitude of her error, she confronts her husband

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<sup>36</sup> Mygatt, 44.

who justifies his part in the lynching that has just taken place on Pine Hill in Warino, Georgia, on Christmas Eve. Clay invokes rape in such a way to suggest that it is the most heinous crime there is and nothing is too terrible a punishment for such an infraction.

Clay:           Well, any man would have done it! Great heavens,  
Margaret, don't you understand what the brute had done?

Margaret:     I reckon I understand. ... And who taught them that? Who stole their wives and daughters and after they had used them, sold them on the block like cattle? Answer me that Houston! Answer me that!<sup>37</sup>

Mygatt calls Clay to account for the bifurcated standard by which more white men than can be counted on the fingers of the hand not only exonerate each other but expect the kind of sexual misconduct that spells the torture and death of hued males. Dating back to the antebellum era, the sexual antics of many southern white men has not been so exemplary that they stand on *terra firma* when they charge others with besmirching fair womanhood and consider that a monument behind which to hide their racial animosities. In leveling this objection, Mygatt puts white and hued womanhood on the same level-- both entitled to protection. This is a radical statement of gender solidarity, and one widely at odds with accepted thinking which relegated hued womanhood to the ranks of those who could not be sullied. It was assumed that the hued woman had no virtue to protect, and thus she was fair game for anyone who had a carnal hankering. “[T]he racist discourse that fostered the black rapist myth also subsumed black women, as members of

the bestial race, under a twin myth as 'sexual savages.'" incapable of being raped.<sup>37</sup> That kind of attitude was specious, according to Mygatt. The significance of rape as a motivation for lynching had been challenged before, but primarily by hued writers such as Ida B. Wells Barnett and Walter White. White women activists generally were supportive of the idea that lynching was justified as a response to rape, but Mygatt made a public avowal of her difference of opinion. The sexual behavior of generation after generation of white males had too often infringed and made porous the standards that they required, she charged. Such infringement called into question the validity of their objection to violating the sanctity of the female prerogative over her own body when that comportment is identical to what they have lived. Something is at work here other than a concern for the honor of women. This is a question of cultural imperialism. Miscegenation is an excusable peccadillo when the white male is the aggressor but a matter for extinction when the initiating male is hued. A discrepant standard is enforced, *I can do what I please but I will kill you if you dare to do as I do*. Mygatt suggests that at least some of the men who lynch should practice what they demand from others and refrain from debauching hued women whenever the whim so directs. According to Margaret, certainly the majority of the mulattoes in the South were not created by the rape of white women, but by the condoned rape of hued women.

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<sup>37</sup> Mygatt, 45.

<sup>38</sup> Tommy Lott, *The Invention of Race: Black Culture and the Politics of Representation* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 33.

The other two plays broached in this chapter are by women of hue, and neither of them expresses an overt interest in rape, *per se*. Their concern is war, domestic and international. War, however—especially when the victorious side forces its will upon the subjugated—can be described as political rape. In Mine Eyes Have Seen (1918) by Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Aftermath (1919) by Mary Burrill, the paterfamilias has been lynched. Mine Eyes is set in the North, and the southern home from which the family has been estranged, because of the lynching, is idealized as a garden. Aftermath is set in the South, and Burrill does not depict that environment as an untrammelled Eden. In fact, a monstrous snake is slithering unchecked through the weeds of that garden, and the many-headed serpent is the lynching posse. Both plays question whether the hued soldier should fight on behalf of a country where lynching is a southern sport. *Why be killed for a country that does not live up to its mandate as a fatherland?* Mine Eyes argues that, despite the suffering the hued have undergone in America, they should fight on their country's behalf. Dunbar-Nelson debates the question of whether or not it is right for the hued soldier to spend his blood to buy full citizenship for his people, and then weighs in on the patriotic side. Aftermath depicts a hued soldier who has returned from fighting to discover that his father was lynched in his absence. Burrill is not so sanguine about the gratitude and acceptance that the hued soldier will gain for his bravery. These plays demonstrate the jousting of one version of truth with another. The patriotic rhetoric--note the derivation from *pater*, Latin for father--demands that all able-bodied men that have benefited from its national munificence uphold its philosophy. But the hued were asking what happens when the national philosophy is antagonistic to the life of those it asks to

serve, literally to give their life on its behalf? Does a nation that demeans a people incur obligations from those it despises and from those whose deaths on native soil it does not extract retribution for? Dying *in* a native country is a very different proposition than dying *for* a native country. In the wars of the nation, there was debate about whether to arm the hued to fight. The first World War was no exception. With arms, the hued might decide their enemy was at home rather than abroad. With arms, the hued might be inspired to retaliate. With arms, the hued soldier might begin to think of himself as a man and a citizen.

There are no husbands--at least none who are alive--and no fathers in either Mine Eyes or Aftermath. In the hued world hounded by lynchers, a husband is a luxury. So is a father. The white community, site of privilege, boasts husbands and fathers. But their prerogatives are being examined in The Noose, where the husband loses favor and is brought down from his top-level perch in the eyes of his wife. Houston Clay is also a father. He has made sure that Jeanie, his daughter by Margaret, gets a good viewing position from which to absorb the lesson of privileged white exception inherent in the lynching ceremony over which he presides. Houston tells his wife, "[W]ith all these new-fangled Yankee ideas goin' about, we can't train her too early to ... be a true daughter of the South."<sup>39</sup> Of course, he is indirectly accusing his wife of having Yankee feelings and of being a traitor to the southern belief system. Their conflict over the advisability of lynching reveals the lack of fundamental agreement in this marriage. The truth that Houston Clay lives--that lynching is right and proper--is at odds with the truth that

Margaret Clay believes--no circumstance justifies the lawless killing of another human being. The wife opposes the husband and takes away the child, rendering her own judgment that he is ineffective as a father. In so doing, she sets up an alternative authority to his, thereby severing her independence from the yoke of marriage. We must not forget that during the time that The Noose was first produced, women were agitating in large numbers and asserting their autonomy from men. They were claiming their right to think and act on their own. A year after The Noose was staged, women won their battle to achieve the vote, but this victory did not include hued women in the South, and those in the North were discouraged from exercising their expanded political power.<sup>40</sup>

The Noose is the only play of the three whose title makes an explicit reference to lynching, and it is the only one that treats lynching as spectacle. It was also in the vanguard of works by white women that took an oppositional public stand relative to lynching. "It was not until the 1930s that white women in the South finally rose to attack the rape-lynching mythology."<sup>41</sup> The other two plays, Mine Eyes Have Seen and Aftermath, both written by hued women, are concerned with what is going on inside the hued community. Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Mary Burrill concentrate their efforts on showing the ways in which the hued have attempted to improve their lives and assert their

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<sup>39</sup> Mygatt, 44.

<sup>40</sup> "When woman suffrage was finally passed, Black women by the thousands went to register to vote. Within a few days literacy tests, civil-service type examinations, proof of birth, and a myriad of other devices were invented to prevent Black women from registering." Aptheker, 76.

<sup>41</sup> Aptheker, 63.

economic and emotional independence, but the majority of their efforts are arbitrarily met with obstruction. In Mine Eyes, the father is lynched for no apparent reason. The suggestion is that his crime is providing too much of a middle-class existence for his family. That is the prerogative of white males and he has transgressed against the southern commandment that only white males should prosper. In Aftermath, the father is lynched because he has disagreed with the determination of price set by a white male who is purchasing cotton from him.

The hued were moving away from the fields and into the cities, northern and southern, and altering the usual equilibrium that obtained. More and more of the hued, male as well as female, had jobs and earned their daily bread with the sweat of their independent exertions. Many of them felt that they could strike out on their own and no longer needed to observe the white man's dictums. Slavery was past. But more than a few whites took the status of ruling over the hued as indispensable to their self-conception. The bedrock of white conviction was the belief that the worst, most grungy white was better than the best, most refined of the hued. They refused to renegotiate the notion of themselves as the natural lords and rulers over the hued. So they escalated the fight and used new tools. The hued, however, had alternative ideas about what constituted their rights and they were persistent in remonstrating for them. This was threatening to the class determined to hold onto its rein of mastery, a class that was itself experiencing some uncertainty in financial matters. This is clear in Houston Clay's case. He apologizes for not being able to be more generous at Christmas. "Outside the big Atlanta suit, I haven't tried a case out of Warino these four months. Only wish I had!

There'd be more money for your Christmas stockin's--yours and Jeanie's."<sup>42</sup> The lynching changes his financial prospects. He is rewarded for his key--executing--role in the lynching by being put forward by the political boss as the next governor of the state. The patronage of that party chief comes to the lynching after Clay has already left. He arrives on a mule. This mule seems anachronistic at a time when the telephone is the means of calling neighbors to a lynching. But the mule is symbolic. It represents the persistence of the old South and its role in the making of the New South. The New South refers to the post-Reconstruction South, which is also called the Redemption, and that is the time when white supremacy was reasserted.

But white supremacy isn't looking very good in this play. After Margaret has told Clay that she is leaving him, Warren Fite and Arthur Henderson, the two men who called him and told him about the capture of the rapist, decide to pay Clay a visit. Both of them are drunk, Fite much more than Henderson. Pete is terrified that they have come to lynch him. After the last lynching--the one that Margaret's grandfather tried to stop--the mob was still hungry for hued blood. They went on a rampage and lynched every male of hue they could find. At first, Clay is disdainful of Pete's entreaties for help, but then he realizes that he just might lose a worker and would have to spend time replacing him. So he bids his mother take Pete upstairs to safety. From outside, Fite calls: "Lemme in! Got any more damn niggers? 'Plenty tar left--plenty--!"<sup>43</sup> Pete and Mrs. Clay have just gone upstairs when Fite smashes a window and gains entrance. Henderson is not far behind.

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<sup>42</sup> Mygatt, 44.

<sup>43</sup> Mygatt, 46.

Fite excuses his drunken condition by saying that he is upset because of the rape of the young girl who had worked in his cotton mill ever since she was six years old. His grief over the injustice done to his young employee exonerates his excess, he believes. The labor of children at such an early age indicates the degree of poverty and illiteracy in some white southern communities at the time. Not all whites were wealthy, and the foisting of guilt on those outside the ethnic borders of whiteness stemmed many of the tensions that erupted within and between the internal echelons of difference.<sup>44</sup> Whatever economic disparities divided them, they all shared the privilege of whiteness; they could all lynch the hued with impunity; they could all pride themselves on being better off than that despised and disadvantaged population. Such a focused gaze overlooked a multitude of inequities. Little white girls were exploited and so were little white boys and white women and white men who did not belong to the class holding the economic reins, as did Fite. Those in charge could indulge whatever whims and fantasies pleased them. They occupied an untouchable zone. They could sin and have others pay the price. They could enjoy and enrich themselves on the backs of others. Now that her assumed virginity has been publicly despoiled, Fite muses over his prepubescent employee, "Shweet lil fingersh—"<sup>45</sup> The tenderness with which he fondles her memory makes us wonder

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<sup>44</sup> The ethnic borders of whiteness have been construed differently at different times. In the 1915 lynching of Leo Frank, the story of which, at the end of the twentieth century, was made into a musical directed by Harold Prince, Jews were symbolically cast outside the protective precinct of whiteness. In a 1958 film, *The Defiant Ones*, Tony Curtis makes clear the equation of whiteness and immunity from lynching when he says with absolute conviction, "You can't lynch me. I'm white."

<sup>45</sup> Mygatt, 46.

whether he was the one who raped her. It would not be the first--or last--time that the onus of guilt was erroneously placed on hued shoulders. It could be said that Fite was raping her economically by profiting from her under-age toil. Fite may have a sexual predilection for little girls. He becomes very interested when little Jeanie Clay is mentioned. Again he refers to her sweetness; he likes his cherubim unspoiled.

Henderson brings the news that Clay has been anointed as the next governor and his role in the lynching was what convinced George McCormick, the party boss, to deem him deserving of state office. Momentarily, Clay is torn between his love of his wife who wants him to publicly repent for what he has done and his desire for public office. The public, not the private, role wins. Clay is diminished in the eyes of his wife and is separated from his daughter, but he is exalted in public estimation.

When Houston Clay first greeted Margaret after her return from Virginia, he refused to treat her as an adult and objectified her. He talked baby talk to Margaret, called her a child, and described her in third person, neutral terms. "Why, I reckon its little head must have been addled with its long trip on the choo-choo train! Come, doll baby, let it rest here--"<sup>46</sup> The relation between husband and wife in the Clay household and in many households around the country at that time was similar to the relation between father and child. The man had power and was a citizen, and the woman was under his dominion. It was this infantilization that enabled some white women--a precious few--to acknowledge a connection between themselves and the hued. Both were perceived as dependents. When Margaret dissolved her commitment to a man whose

morality and behavior she did not approve: she was claiming her independence and loosening her traditional connection to the home. This pulling away from the accepted role of the woman inside the home is also present in Rachel. All four of the early lynching dramas in this study that were written by women feature a leave-taking of some kind. In The Noose, Margaret leaves her marriage and the Deep South, where her roots have been. In Mine Eyes, the children have been forced to leave the South, which is the place where their parents were traumatized by racism. The father was lynched, their home was burned, and their mother died of sorrow. In Aftermath, John Thornton has left home to go to war. But it is in Rachel where there is most serious disruption between home and woman. Rachel separates herself from the expected duties of a woman, and because of the lynching of the father, Rachel's mother has to take on the role of mother and provider. Rachel does not *per se* reject motherhood--she adopts a little boy--but she does decide not to exercise her biological option to procreate new life.

Rachel (1916) is the first of the lynching dramas examined in this dissertation to locate itself physically outside of the plantation South. The play acknowledges the symbolic ancestral home of the hued within a cameo of the temporally distant but still emotionally close and potent memory of a double southern lynching that ripped apart the integrity of a family and precipitated the surviving members' separation from the land of their birth. The Lovings may have been born south of the Mason Dixon line, but they could not breathe easily and prosper in its rarefied, trauma-ridden air. They were far from alone in finding the air in Dixie lacking benign qualities. The initial trickle northward of

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<sup>46</sup> Mygatt, 44.

the hue began shortly after emancipation, but the numbers remained fairly small until the second decade of the twentieth century, when the pilgrimage from penury to a promise of prosperity, known as the Great Migration, began. By 1915, the hue were transferring themselves, en masse, to a new terrain, one where farming was not the primary occupation and where public education was not routinely withheld from the hue after high school. "No high schools, no protection for life, and the revival of the Ku Klux Klan are the three reasons given for the wholesale desertion of the State of Georgia by over 5,000 families last summer' ran an item in the *Chicago Defender* in October 1921."<sup>47</sup>

The *Defender*, a hue newspaper believed to be the organ of strategy for the migration, served as clearinghouse for a people on the move. It also provided a script to the hue, and according to this script, the hue positioned themselves for new roles in a new setting. The hue editors and journalists who wrote for newspapers--including Rachel's father--participated in a rescripting of hue possibility. One such journalist, Ida B. Wells, motivated the residents of Memphis to stage a financial withdrawal and desert that city in the aftermath of a particularly heinous and cold-blooded lynching of three hue businessmen in 1892. These three hard-working men owned a grocery which hue customers favored over a nearby white-owned establishment. Wells, formerly a teacher, wrote for and co-owned a Memphis paper, the Memphis Free Speech, which was the only hue paper in the city, and she used its pages to promote pride and rejection of subjugated status. A lynch mob descended on the paper and when it was discovered that Wells was

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<sup>47</sup> Carole Marks, Farewell--We're Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 77.

nowhere to be found--she had taken a trip to Philadelphia and shortly thereafter relocated to New York--her presses were demolished. In an article printed in the summer of 1892 in the New York Age, Wells wrote that lynching was "[a]n excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property, and thus keep the race terrorized and 'keep the nigger down.'"<sup>48</sup> Mr. Loving, Rachel's father, was as outspoken and determined to fight on behalf of the race, but he was not lucky enough to be absent when the lynchers came to call. The newspaper, that same medium which, in different hands, advertised and promoted lynchings, also functioned as a platform for the institutionalization of hued dissent and mobilization. The hued press took on much of the communicative and unifying aspects of the talking drum, synchronizing the thought and rousing the action of its readership.

The *Defender* also assumed a religious character, giving the hued faith in a temporal afterlife in the North. It pointed the way to the Promised Land, and urged the hued not to tarry in crossing the River Jordan, to be vigilant about taking that decisive step forward into the fullness of freedom. Hegel noted that the ceremony of religiously reading a paper replaced morning prayers.<sup>49</sup> Especially for the hued, but for others as well, the newspaper, in addition to exerting a pedagogical effect--exciting enthusiasm for learning--was a kind of secular bible. Newspapers adhered to a regular schedule and so they could be counted on and believed in. What was written in the newspaper was

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<sup>48</sup> Aptheker, 67.

<sup>49</sup> Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflectons on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1991), 35.

perceived of as truth; the words emblazoned on newsprint and the experiences reported therein allowed hued readers to commiserate and realize that they were not suffering and achieving alone. They belonged to a community of like-minded people. *In the beginning was the word*. By spreading the word, the *Defender*, and other hued newspapers, reduced the isolation and marginalization to which the hued were prey and linked the dispersed masses into a more integral whole. The press was part of a network of power connections--like the NAACP, the Urban League, the church, and the stage--that disseminated information which allowed the hued to fight the paternalism of domination. "Slavery was, most of all, a paternal institution."<sup>50</sup> The community of social children fought the parental, authoritarian--sometimes despotic--community with their fingers, minds, and bodies, and every other tool they could muster.

Set in a neat and orderly apartment in the urban North--a testament to the ability of the hued to generate their own authority and maintain their own order--the locale of Grimke's play reflects the shift that has taken place in hued life. Legally liberated, they have exercised their right to be mobile. They have now situated themselves in a psychological state of expectation. They have moved closer to their understanding of freedom, which is the chance to progress toward a better future. This is the dawning of the modern phase in their journey toward citizenship, a trip that was forced into detour after detour through white fear. And still they kept moving. Rachel takes a look at the massive geographical repositioning and reordering of the hued that escalated to mammoth proportion shortly after the onset of the twentieth century, and pronounces it less than

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<sup>50</sup> LeRoi Jones, Blues People (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1995), 54.

ideal. The progress did not match expectation, but nonetheless it could still be described as separation from more life-threatening circumstances. From the fire into the frying pan, the heat does abate: even though it still glows, the intensity is reduced. Despite its giant scale, however, this relocation was not disorderly. Quite the contrary, it both required and symbolized a huge effort, a concerted mobilization, to get the hued house into better order. The house had to be secured, safeguarded against threats to its ability to stand on a foundation of longevity. The house was cleaned and aired out and placed on rollers, made ready for a long and necessary transplantation. The house had to find a different block, discover a separate corner. Moving created a new reality, and the new was the transformation of the hued from a primarily passive and dependent caste to a self-directed, striving class, from a southern agriculturally-based people to a modern, urbanized people capable of frequent and instantaneous adjustment to change. The migration reflected the refusal of the hued to be circumscribed by the borders of the circumstances into which they were born. They were saying farewell to their fate, and creating new possibilities for themselves.

In the North, the hued were called upon to live in an environment completely different from the one they had left behind--apartment dwelling and hard, cold cement streets were foreign to them. So was the rapid pace of change, the constant distractions of city life that could make a person lose focus in no time. But, for the most part, they managed to find their footing, as tenuous as it might have been, in the moving mercantile rivers of the North. In the South, where the lifestyle was slower paced and more settled, Mr. Loving had worked extremely hard, and, despite the odds, had achieved status and

even some measure of financial comfort. He edited and published a small newspaper, part of a post-emancipation surge of hued newspapers that took on the job of advocacy for the rights of the marginalized.<sup>51</sup> Several in the literate class that consolidated after the Civil War managed to distinguish themselves. Like the antebellum writers and abolitionists such as William Wells Brown, Samuel Cornish, William and Ellen Craft, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs, the postbellum activists of hue--the aforementioned Ida B. Wells, along with Booker T. Washington, Mary Church Terrell, T. Thomas Fortune, Charles Chestnutt, and Robert Abbott--to cite only a few--laid down the bedrock for a growing entrepreneurial and intellectual cadre among the hued. The outspoken challenge that Mr. Loving presented to the prerogatives of white supremacy--and perhaps his success--cost him his livelihood and his head. The specific provocation for his untimely death was his intrepid denouncing of the lynching of an innocent man of hue. Because he would not withdraw his denouncement, would not write that he had mistakenly accused those who had knowingly committed murder, he and his stepson were lynched, hung from a tree in their own yard. Southern oaks and magnolias sprouted blood-red fruit, a reality popularized much later in song by Billie Holiday in 1939.<sup>52</sup>

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit*

*Blood on the leaves, blood at the root*

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<sup>51</sup> "Between 1865 and 1900, over 1,200 Black newspapers were established, about 70 percent of them in the South." Manning Marable, How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 145.

<sup>52</sup> The lyrics were written by a northern white school teacher who was not intimate with lynching practice and probably chose "poplar," not an especially sturdy tree, for poetic reasons.

*Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze*  
*Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees*  
*Pastoral scenes of the gallant South*  
*The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth*  
*Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh*  
*Then the sudden smell of burning flesh*  
*Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck*  
*For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck*  
*For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop*  
*Here is a strange and bitter crop.*<sup>53</sup>

The hue turned to art as a public forum of protest. Free speech was not a right easily accorded to the hue; in fact, there were few citizenship rights to which the southern populace ceded hue entitlement. Even after emancipation, the hue were still treated as chattel, as twigs to be broken and pushed about wherever and whenever someone whose complexion was white was in a snapping and shoving mood.

The parents of John Strong, Rachel Loving's suitor, belonged to the same professional class as the Lovings. The achieving class among the hue was the especial target of segregation, which functioned as a daily rubric of difference designating the white side of the racial equation as superior and subordinating those who were hue. "The dreams of racism actually have their origin in ideologies of *class*, rather than in

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<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Angela Y. Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 181.

those of nation; above all in claims to divinity among rulers and to 'blue' or 'white' blood and 'breeding among aristocracies.'"<sup>54</sup> The barrier was up against the move of the hued from the ranks of the rock bottom, destitute class, where it was assumed they rightfully belonged. Hued on the trampling floor and whites on top was the preternatural socially ordained gospel. For the hued to achieve social status was anathema. Their progression had to be checked. If they were allowed to continue to make inroads, it was assumed, the hierarchy of the South might topple. "Whites created the culture of segregation in large part to counter black success, to make a myth of absolute racial difference, to stop the rising."<sup>55</sup> But still the native ability of a few managed to find outlet. John's father was a doctor in the South and when he died, Mrs. Strong and her son came North to secure a better education for John. Like Mrs. Loving, Mrs. Strong directed the fortunes of the family in the absence of a husband and father. John Strong graduated from college, but was unable to find work other than as a waiter. From time to time, his white schoolmates would come to the restaurant where he worked and he watched as each year they grew more and more prosperous and less and less congenial toward him. Mrs. Lane, a prospective neighbor to the Lovings, belonged to a poorer class than either the Strongs or the Lovings in the South. She and her husband came North to educate their daughter, Ethel, even though they recognized that doing so verged on uselessness, given the trials that she would face in the classroom and the cement wall that would greet her once she

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<sup>54</sup> Anderson, 149.

<sup>55</sup> Hale, 21.

finished her studies.<sup>56</sup> Still, they staked everything they had for a chance at the brass ring of upward mobility for their daughter. After two weeks in a northern school, Ethel's ambition and her sense of self were crushed from the experience of going to school with white children. The regular diet of Ethel's white classmates consisted of demeaning her verbally as the white teacher hovered nearby, her eyes of authority filled with approval and encouragement for what they were doing.

There was only one lane for all, for those who were loving and for those who were strong, and the capacity of that lane was attenuated. Many of those who embarked on the lane that led out of the South and away from the past were disposed to part from the old ways of always putting whites on a higher level, and according them unquestioning respect in all things, a regard which the behavior of the latter did not always merit. But whether or not they were deserving, their skins were pale. This absence of pigmentation was the mark of ultimate privilege--the sign of the conqueror who could be and do anything at all. And such latitude of power had to be worshiped, or else an earthly hell was incurred. In the South, lynching was most often visited on those who failed to pay proper deference to the virtues and powers of whiteness. The rubric of whiteness was honored among the hued, many of whom set up internal rankings based on complexion. Those whose skin tones approximated the pallor of the master class were considered of a

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<sup>56</sup> “[B]lack northern women retained a deep and abiding faith in the value of formal education. Although they failed to receive the financial rewards commensurate with their schooling, black northerners sent their children to classes in the same proportions as white parents. By 1930 black women forty-five years and younger were literate to the same degree as northern white women and black men their age.” Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from

higher caste than their darker siblings. The hue mimicked the discriminatory patterns that the master class had initiated. In addition, the hue recognized that, unrelated to color, there were differences of talent and disposition between them. They were not all identical. They were distinct and individual. But most whites, unless it served their purposes, saw the hue as an undifferentiated aggregate. One was the same as the other, and they were all limited and lowly. The designations that had been settled on them in the South were retained in the North. They occupied the least favored ranks of northern society. It mattered little how one behaved, what one did, what one's father had done in the previous generation, or what one's son or daughter would do in the next decade. There was only one class and it was marginal. "[P]revious level of education and skill made little or no difference to the migrating population. ... migrants were used to supply an urban-based industrial labor reserve, filling undesirable jobs that whites left in a tight labor market."<sup>57</sup> Everyone was crowded onto and leveled on that same lane, and its trajectory led to the Jim Crow house on Second-Class Row.<sup>58</sup> The title of Edward Sheldon's play was applicable to all who were hue. No matter what one had accomplished or how far one had gone in school, that was the moniker summing up the extent of achievement.

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Slavery to the Present (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 193.

<sup>57</sup> Marks, 169.

<sup>58</sup> "The Jim Crow laws were the white South's attempts to limit the new citizen's presence and rights in the mainstream of society, and they were extremely effective." LeRoi Jones, 55-56.

The Lovings, the Strongs, and the Lanes all participated in the Great Migration, the hued version of the Trail of Tears that took them from the politics of segregation and incineration and led them North where their houses were not invaded by violent white mobs in the middle of the night. In the North, life may have been less idyllic than they had imagined, but their lives were not in physical jeopardy on a daily basis. Hued women could vote in the North. Hued parents could get jobs that kept the roof patched and their stomachs from grumbling, and they could see their children educationally progress beyond the levels that they had attained. They had some entree into the American fantasy of each generation building on what the previous generation had done. They could move forward, perhaps at a snail's pace, but they were not held captive in their tracks. They might endure segregation on occasion, for example, when they went to the theatre; but they were not forced to sit at the back of the northern bus or forced to stand whenever a white person embarked and could not find a seat. They could raise their sons and daughters with the expectation that they would not be burned to death as an exercise in fun for an assembled crowd.

Deciding upon and acting out their priorities--saying no to disenfranchisement and forced segregation and victimization in the South--gave the hued clout in their own minds. The Great Migration, the collective vote that their feet cast against the South, was initiated by the first generation born after emancipation.<sup>59</sup> They were the ones who were resistant to learning the old, intricate codes of accommodation, euphemistic equivalent

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<sup>59</sup> Malaika Adero, Up South: Stories, Studies, and Letters of This Century's Black Migrations (New York: The New Press, 1993), vii..

for utter subservience.<sup>60</sup> They were the ones who staged the revolt against stereotype that cracked the minstrel masks of domination, causing them to teeter like so many Humpty Dumpties lined up on a wall, and forcing white modernist writers to reinvent seemingly more open but actually more stringent means of shoring up the racial fault lines. They did not always follow the rule that a hued man must step into the gutter and give absolute freeway to any white male approaching on the street. They did not always follow the rule that they should doff the hat and cast down the eye so as not to suggest any possibility of parity between white and hued. They were the ones who went away to college and came home to give the young the joy of knowledge. They were the ones who fought for their right to a fair shake. They were the ones whose belief in the American dream was most staunch. They thought that if they could make it to the rock on which the dream was founded, they could smite it and make it release its generous fountain.

[T]o apprehend how fully and unalterably American the American Negro truly is [is] to detect with a sufficiently perspicacious eye the deeper currents of passion that metamorphosed into marching orders the fondest dream of the Southern black and energized his feet when he willed himself to forsake the South and travel north. He wanted in that most candid

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<sup>60</sup> "The etiquette of race evolved as a complicated set of rules and customs designed in part to 'place' individuals in a racial and class hierarchy that would retain its fixity regardless of the tensions and pressures swirling in and about the South. It bound whites together, though not equally and it relegated blacks to a permanent status of inferiority." Stanley Lieberson; quoted in Adero, ix. In addition, the hued accepted these hierarchical divisions, based on skin color, into the workings of their own communities and discriminated against each other. Those who were lighter were often assumed to have more privilege and worth than those who were darker.

expression of himself, one thing only, to enjoy America. He did not want to make the values he had come to cherish in a country native to him for those of any other nationality or culture. He merely wanted to make come true for himself what he believed he could see had already come true for virtually all other Americans, particularly in the respect paid to their dignity as persons and in the access allowed them to seek political and economic well-being, among their fellow Americans. To speak in terms unequivocal, yet most accurate for him, he wanted to be more completely and more unrestrictedly American.<sup>61</sup>

These optimistic young dreamers were often singled out as troublesome and pyred on the southern scaffold of lynching. And so the ones that managed to survive swelled the ranks of those who left the South in droves. The Great Migration continued from 1915 to at least 1940, and some historians claim that it lasted as long as 1960.<sup>62</sup> To translate the migration statistics into numbers whose magnitude can be understood in hourly terms, more than 20 hued departed the South every hour on the hour, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for the two year period between 1916 and 1918. "They left at an average rate of over 16,000 per month, 500 per day."<sup>63</sup> Their impetus for instituting and carrying through a crash course in modernism, was at least fivefold. Three of the reasons

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<sup>61</sup> Blyden Jackson, "Introduction: A Street of Dreams," in Alferdteen Harrison, Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), xiii.

<sup>62</sup> Harrison, vii.

<sup>63</sup> Marks, 1.

arose from the negatives of the situation in which they found themselves in the South and two. jobs and education, were occasioned by their expectation of the bounty they would find in their northern destinations. In addition to disenfranchisement and segregation which have already been mentioned. there is another factor not yet noted. The southern treatment of hued women was still appalling. Many of them were held in quasi-bondage even after emancipation. In Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, Jacqueline Jones mentions how hued women had very little control over their leisure time. If they were found idle, they were required to do laundry for any white family who made the request. "[A]ny of the white people could send for any Negro woman to come and do the family washing at 75 cents to \$1.00 a day. If she sent word she could not come she had to send an excuse why she could not come. They were never allowed to stay at home as long as they were able to go. Had to take whatever they paid you for your work."<sup>64</sup> But beyond issues of personal autonomy and dignity, the hued were literally running away from the South to save their lives. They were fleeing pending starvation and destitution brought about by the failure of cotton in several successive years--their means of livelihood had utterly collapsed--and they were escaping the holocaust of lynching that raged around them in the South and claimed at least two casualties a week. "[F]or fifty years we have lynched two Negroes a week and we have kept this up right through the war."<sup>65</sup>

This provocation of lynching was the one that Grimke emphasized in Rachel. Mrs. Loving left the South when her husband and stepson were killed by a lynching

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<sup>64</sup> Jones, 157.

<sup>65</sup> W.E. B. DuBois, "Returning Soldiers," The Crisis 18.1 (May 1919):14.

posse. In various ways, each of the three women playwrights whose lynching dramas, one set in the North and the other two set in the South, are studied in this chapter corroborates the findings of Grimke. In Mine Eyes Have Seen (1918), Alice Dunbar-Nelson writes about a hued family that has been forced to leave the South because of a lynching. In Aftermath, by Mary Burrill; the soldier, John Thornton, has migrated from the scene of his birth in South Carolina and has responded to the call to fight for democracy in Europe. He returns home to find that his father has been lynched in his absence. The father's offense was disputing a price that he thought was unfair. The play ends with the suggestion that the two Johnson sons will be lynched also as they go forth, guns in hand, to seek justice for the lawless death of their father. Left alone, the older and the younger women will have to fend for themselves. More than likely, the grandmother will not want to leave the South. But once the grandmother is buried, the granddaughter will probably head North, unwilling to continue to live in the land where the blood of her father and brothers was spilled. Some scholarly research has tended not to consider lynching pivotal as a motivation for the flight from the South.<sup>66</sup> By leaving the South, the hued were not just running from the bad, they were running toward the good. They were seeking stability and even prosperity in industrial centers such as Detroit, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York and they wanted to give their children a better level of skill and better social and political prospects than they had known. In a word, they were motivated by hope; it is no surprise that the decor in the

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<sup>66</sup> Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, "Rethinking the Role of Racial Violence in the Great Migration" in Alferdteen Harrison, Black Exodus: The Great Migration from

Loving apartment in Rachel is predominantly green. The hued lived on hope.

Before 1920, between a quarter and a half million--maybe even as many as a million--of the hued waved farewell to the South and oriented themselves, body and soul, to the North.<sup>67</sup>

The numbers alone represent a potent expression of dissatisfaction. The hued were tired of the mistreatment that was their regular fare in the South and they were lured by the call of northern jobs. Millie Thornton may have been among them and so were Dan and Chris and Lucy, the three young transplanted adults in Mine Eyes.

The Department of Labor reported that in eighteen months of 1916-17 the migration was variously estimated at 200,000 to 700,000. Abraham Epstein, in his 1918 study of migrants in Pittsburgh, gave the figure for 1916 alone as somewhere between 300,000 to 700,000, but he did not have the benefit of the 1920 census. Baker said 400,000 had gone North by 1917, and DuBois estimated somewhat more conservatively 250,000 by the summer of that year. Whatever the exact figures, 1916 and the two years that followed brought the northward Negro movement to its peak.<sup>68</sup>

Nineteen sixteen was a lean year. The crop had failed that year and the year before that.

There was nothing but destitution wherever one looked. In the North, commerce

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the American South (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991),:20-35.

<sup>67</sup> David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 20.

<sup>68</sup> Florette Henri, Black Migration: Movement North, 1900-1920 (Garden City, New York: Andor Press, 1975), 51.

beckoned. The Great War had begun in 1914 in Europe, slowing the number of white immigrants to a virtual trickle; the demand for workers to stoke the engines of industry had to be filled somehow. Many of the hued who had been sharecropping did not have the train fare for the trip North, but they did not let that stop them from making the move. Some had their passage paid by waiting employers in the North and others activated the most economical and only reliable means of transportation they knew, their feet. So determined were they to make it out of the rotting cotton and lynching fields of the South and find themselves in the North and what they envisioned as the Promised Land, the place where they could soothe their parched throats with milk and fill their groaning bellies with manna.

But there were few lavish banquets awaiting these prodigal sons and daughters on their arrival in the Canaan of the North. Many had to work harder than they had ever done before. Those who had received their train tickets from companies and factories were virtual slaves of industry, indentured to the sponsoring company or factory. Many of the vaunted jobs turned out to be back-breaking and mind-numbing. And in some cases, the pay was so low that they could not refuse overtime. Still, they applied themselves as best they could and filled the orders that war demanded. They "helped build ships and mine coal and run railroads."<sup>69</sup> When it came time to rest, however, there was little in sight. Their housing was generally far from luxurious, and they could not supplement their incomes from their yards. They could not grow their own fresh

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<sup>69</sup> Milton Meltzer, editor, The Black Americans: A History in Their Own Words, 1619-1983 (New York: Harper Trophy, 1987), 185.

vegetables or keep livestock in their cement gardens. In his autobiography, The Big Sea, Langston Hughes, the most famous poet of the Harlem Renaissance, recalled what it was like to live in Cleveland in the swarming, almost shanty-like atmosphere in the neighborhoods where the hued found makeshift but extremely expensive lodging. In 1916, Hughes was a high school student in Cleveland, where his stepfather worked a round of soul-deadening jobs and his mother had to augment the family income through domestic service because of the high rents.

It was difficult to find a place to live. We always lived during my high school years either in an attic or a basement, and paid quite a lot for such inconvenient quarters. White people on the east side of the city were moving out of their frame houses and renting them to Negroes at double and triple the rate they could receive from others ... But Negroes were coming in in a great dark tide from the South, and they had to have some place to live. Sheds and garages and store fronts were turned into living quarters. As always, the white neighborhoods resented Negroes moving closer and closer--but when the whites did give way, they gave way at very profitable rentals. The landlords and the banks made it difficult for them to buy houses, so they had to pay the exorbitant rents required.<sup>70</sup>

As in the South, the hued were destabilized economically. Their financial fate was to enrich others, never themselves. As on the farms and plantations of the South, they were the tenants, not the owners.

Another key ingredient in maintaining their communal disequilibrium was lack of educational advancement. Many of the hued displaced themselves for a chance at improved education. Sometimes, this decision paid off, as in the case of Langston Hughes. But Hughes was an exception. Generally, the greater educational opportunities in the North availed them little, as Grimke shows in Rachel. Still, education remained the focus of considerable attention, in the North as well as in the South. It was believed that through the transforming power of education, the hued could uplift themselves. They could affect their own social redemption. The three hued women writers whose plays are featured in this study were teachers at the high school level, and their plays were written for their students as well as to educate the populace at large. Two of them taught in the nation's capital, and the third taught in Baltimore, Maryland. Many women as well as men of hue were committed to the educational improvement of the race.

This is evident in Within Our Gates (1919), the oldest hued film of feature-length to survive. Directed by Oscar Micheaux, Gates shows how serious was the educational deprivation, particularly in the South, among the hued after Emancipation and the degree of motivation among the hued both North and South to end or at least reduce that deprivation. Gates is also a film about lynching. It is curious--but then again not so surprising given the frequency and outrageousness of lynching--that many of the first efforts of hued artists address themselves to lynching. Escape, the first surviving play by a hued writer, is the first American play to acknowledge the existence of lynching. Rachel, the first play by a hued woman playwright, is concerned with lynching. And

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<sup>70</sup> Meltzer, 161.

lynching was a subject which the first hued auteur commented upon in film. Gates presents a southern flashback that culminates in the lynching of a husband and wife, the first artistic acknowledgment that the horror and fiendishness of lynching were not limited to the hued male, but extended to hued women and children. The young son of the lynched couple managed to escape by horseback. Micheaux pairs lynching and rape, with a twist. The sexual victim is not white and the sexual transgressor, who is the father of the intended victim, is not hued, nor is he lynched. In Gates, the adopted father of Sylvia Landry, the main character (who is played by Evelyn Preer, a leading actress with a Harlem stock company, the Lafayette Players), is lynched along with his wife. He is charged, erroneously, with murdering a white man with whom he quarreled over the end-of-year-settlement. He believed that he had turned in a good cotton crop and was due a profit, but he was told that he was in even greater debt than before.

A similar confrontation over the price of cotton occurred in Aftermath (1919). Millie Thornton, John's sister, recounted why their father was killed. His crime was not accepting the word of a white man without quarrel and daring to defend himself physically. "He got in a row wid Mister Withrow 'bout the price of cotton--an' he called dad a liar an' struck him--an' dad he up an struck him back."<sup>71</sup> These squabbles over cotton are not as innocuous as they seem. In 1918, the price of cotton rose substantially. "This rise in price has made it difficult to keep the Negroes in debt, and, therefore, they have become restive in their demands for itemized settlements."<sup>72</sup> Restiveness was

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<sup>71</sup> Perkins and Stephens, 65.

<sup>72</sup> The Crisis, 19.2 (December 1919):57.

disruptive, and any sign of dissatisfaction was quelled with violence. More often than not, the accounts that the hued sharecropper kept did not tally with the books of the white landowner. The hued farmer thought that with the higher prices for cotton and the high yield he had produced, he could finally rid himself of his financial obligations, but the white landowner let him know that he was far from free of his indebtedness, and he was still as disadvantaged as ever, if not more so. The picture was bleak in the South, and when the dust from a flurry of promises settled, not much better in the North. Still, there was the perceived option of bettering oneself in the North and by means of war, which always shifts things socially. War has changed the self-conception of John Thornton in Aftermath. He has also become comfortable with and respectful of guns, which he is adept at using thanks to the training he received in the military. Shortly after he returns home from France, he places his two pistols--one of which belongs to his lieutenant--on the mantel where the Bible used to lay. The gun is John's new Bible. He comes back to the South with fire and brimstone in his heart, but his fervor is for the kind of freedom he can achieve for himself and his family by means of his own acquaintance with violence. Let me add that he does not seek occasions for violence, but he is more than ready to confront those who first struck with aggression when he or his family has been wronged. He is no longer committed to turning the other cheek so that it can be beaten or annihilated. His overseas education was too thorough. In the trenches, he witnessed the theatre of violence up close and uncomfortable, and he has learned his lessons, whatever the cost.

Many of the hued began to think that war offered the chance to purchase social

and political acceptance. If they fought for their country and risked shedding their blood, then they would earn parity with other American citizens. Death and the threat of death were great levelers. This was not the time to turn their backs on the country, no matter what their personal difficulties. If they took on their share of the military responsibility, then they would be owed and could collect the coin of the realm, just like other Americans. That was the belief expressed in Dunbar-Nelson's Mine Eyes Have Seen. In that play, three children, who are now over the age of consent, have been orphaned by southern atrocities. Their father was lynched and their mother died of grief. One son, Dan, is crippled and so is the daughter, whose name is Lucy. Chris, who is younger than Dan, is physically unimpaired, and he is the support of the threesome. Shortly after the play begins, we learn that Chris has been drafted. At first, the family wonders how it will survive. Dan urges his younger brother to do his duty, and says that he will not be an excuse for any irresponsible attitude on the part of Chris. He tells Chris,

Our men have always gone. ... They went in 1776 ... and saved the day, too, many a time. Ours was the first blood shed on the altar of National liberty. We went in 1812, on land and sea. Our men were through the struggles of 1861 — ... they helped work out their own salvation. And they were there in 1898-- ... And they were at Carrizal. ... I'm *proud*. And, you, too Chris, smouldering in youthful wrath, you too, are proud to be numbered with the darker ones, soon to come into their inheritance.<sup>73</sup>

While Dan is talking, neighbors have come in to the tenement apartment. An Irish

woman has come to call and so has a young Jewish man from Russia. Comparisons are being made between the situation of the hued and that of the Irish and the Jew. Dunbar-Nelson believes that just like other ethnic groups, the hued can qualify for inclusion if they pick up the banner of war and carry it to victory, as they have done in the past. Julia, Chris's girlfriend, joins the chorus encouraging Chris to pick up arms. As Julia talks, the air fills with the strains of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." A military band is playing the hymn, and its notes are infectious. All want to join the parade that has taken over the streets. Chris and his siblings acknowledge the hegemony of the American state, its right to demand their fealty and their obligation to respond favorably, even enthusiastically, to that demand, regardless of whatever wrongs they feel have been committed against them in the state of America. So with eyes shining and head held high, Chris marches off to join the military fray. We do not know if Chris was awarded a medal for outstanding bravery, like John Thornton. We do not know if Chris lost blood which seeped into and enriched the soil of Europe. We do not know if Dan and Lucy found some way to support themselves while Chris fought for the rights of foreigners. We do not know if Chris returned home with his limbs intact. But if he did escape being crippled or killed in France, it is possible that he was greeted with a lyncher's noose back in America.

Lynching ... was on the rise in the war period, with an estimated thirty-eight in 1917, forty-eight in 1918, and more than seventy in 1919. By summer 1919 members of the administration were becoming seriously alarmed, although not apparently at the violence being done to blacks as

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<sup>73</sup> Hatch, 176.

much as at the possibility that black unrest might disrupt the war effort.

On 26 July 1918 Wilson at last issued a proclamation condemning lynching and mob violence as undemocratic but saying nothing about the discrimination that lay at the root of the problem.<sup>74</sup>

Many of the lynch victims were hued veterans, some of whom were still wearing their military uniforms when they were killed by American mobs. The increase in the incidence of lynching after World War I reflected the widespread fear among whites that the aggressiveness, skill, and enhanced sense of self that the hued soldier had gained in the war would unfit him for the etiquette of segregation in America.

The two points of view expressed in the plays by Burrill and Dunbar-Nelson about whether or not the hued soldier should participate in the war represent the poles of divergence in the perspective of the hued. Some were committed to the country, right or wrong. Others believed that the country did not deserve the support of the hued populace. The play by Burrill shows the latter position, and the one by Dunbar-Nelson the former. Early in the European war, W.E.B. DuBois, the leading intellectual of hue at the time, did not believe that the hued should risk their lives to gain freedom for others, a freedom and slate of rights they could not claim for themselves. Joel Spingarn, who was on the board at the NAACP, was one of a number of whites who urged him to change his position and not incur the wrath of the government that wanted hued soldiers on European

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<sup>74</sup> Frederick A. Clements, The Presidency of Woodrow Wilson (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1992), 160.

battlefields.<sup>75</sup> Persuaded, DuBois began to urge his readers in The Crisis to support the war. Roughly three quarters of a million hued men answered the nation's call.<sup>76</sup> They served in segregated camps and many were determined to prove themselves worthy and won medals, as did John Thornton. According to John Hope Franklin, however, the war made the division between hued and white more visible and more entrenched. "If anything the military operations which aimed to save the world for democracy merely fixed more permanently the racial separation in the United States."<sup>77</sup>

Through these dramas written by women and the first films created by Micheaux and other cinematographers of hue who predate Micheaux, the hued began to think of themselves and project themselves as a group with a separate identity and a separate outlook. They realized, like John Thornton, that their survival and their sense of self-worth was best managed by their own hands, not by the hands of those who had enslaved them and were committed to their everlasting subservience. These dramas written by women against lynching serve as manifestoes of gender as well as racial difference. The

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<sup>75</sup> "Spingam 'wanted me and my people not merely as a matter of policy, but in recognition of a fact, to join wholeheartedly in the war," Du Bois wrote in *Dusk of Dawn*. "It was due to his influence and advice that I became during the World War nearer to feeling myself a real and full American than ever before or since.' Du Bois was convinced that America's involvement would become a 'fight for democracy including colored people and not merely for war investments.' He also believed that any 'passive resistance' by the NAACP against the war 'would have fallen flat and perhaps slaughtered the American Negro body and soul.'" Manning Marable, W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 96.

<sup>76</sup> Hatch, 137.

<sup>77</sup> John Hope Franklin, Race and History: Selected Essays, 1938-1988 (Baton Rouge: La. St. UP, 1992), 144.

hued understood that it was the history of lynching that set them apart, distinguished them from most Americans, who were not the wholesale targets of lynching, at least not as a group. As visualized mass activity, lynching is a form of drama, collective behavior intended to be seen and contemplated. Lynching is a ritual that is akin to alfresco theatre. As such, drama (as well as film) is an appropriate form in which to battle against and call attention to the cruelties of lynching. Dramas of protest against lynching written by the hued, together with the participation of some women, represented in lynching drama by Tracy Mygatt, were integral in a cultural fight against the practice of lynching. These dramas cannot be separated from the anti-lynching crusade that was initiated by Ida B. Wells Barnett and continually waged by the NAACP.

### Conclusion: *American Creed*

In the six decades of its inception, lynching drama registered and manifested the pulse of American sentiment on a social practice that constituted and continues to constitute a deep malaise and wound, a jagged gash, in the professed democratic values of the nation. At the beginning of the twenty-first century as awareness increases about the legacy of lynching, people are beginning to pose questions. *How could we not have known about this bloody history? Why was this hidden from us?* The record was there all along in the performing and visual arts as well as in libraries and memory, in basements and attics, even as it was downplayed in history, but few people paid any attention to the archives. The history was too shameful. Some did not find lynching shameful at all. Rather, for them, it was a not unwelcome duty to be performed for the security of the society. Others were horrified at the human toll of lynching, its annals of exploitative cruelty.

From an early point in the history of lynching in America, dramas have provided testimony as close as possible to the timbre of forgotten, silenced voices as they commented upon and represented this spectacle of violent self-definition and boundary drawing, inclusion and expulsion. The transfer from event to dramatic portrayal or from life and strife to page and stage offered evidence of ever expanding social meaning relative to lynching. Treating lynching dramatically reduces some of the messiness and disorder of its spontaneous settings and repositions it for easier scrutiny of the mind and eye. To write a play is to create a congress of textual bodies that, it is hoped, will not be as perishable as the single corporal body of the

playwright. To write a play is to extend and incorporate one's personal power beyond the confines of one's specific space and time. Under the auspices of the literary, dramas about lynching can be seen and studied as written imitation. In lynching drama, lynching as political and social praxis has been memorialized and reproduced, perceived as sufficiently significant to be presented for repeated public attendance and attention. One unique aspect of lynching drama is the composite, complementary quality that it brings to the tradition of American drama. Lynching dramas include the position of those in the class of the lyncher as well as of those in the class of the lynched. Lynching drama thus features a call and response relation that reveals both sides of the American democratic coin, its superego and its id.

Lynching as ritual spectacle designated membership in the sacred circle of citizenship. This spectacle of national belonging and demarcation possesses ancient roots that go back before the Roman Coliseum and the extravagant spectacles of sovereignty presented there. The Bacchae, written by Euripides in 406 B.C., depicts a death and dismemberment exacted in revenge for dishonor. That is the bare bones narrative in the spectacle of American lynching. In lynching, dismemberment and death are the wages for dishonoring the etiquette of racial custom. Symbolically, the dismemberment and death of lynching represented the cathartic severing of the hue from the American body politic. In The Bacchae, the head of Pentheus, pulled from his body by his mother, is paraded on a stake.<sup>1</sup> Agave, the mother of Pentheus, does not realize what she has done. Enthralled by her god-induced frenzy, she believes she

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<sup>1</sup> Decapitation was often the fate of captives and other subdued people, whether internal or external to the regime. In the French Revolution, the king and his queen lost their heads. Before that, so did several of the wives of Henry VIII. Decapitation signified powerlessness.

has killed a lion, separating limb from limb with her bare hands, aided by other female revelers.

In the American ceremony of lynching, which is usually staged in nature as are the Bacchic rituals, the lynchers become obsessed with the desire to mangle the body and claim relics, which they then display as Agave displayed the head of Pentheus. The killing that takes place in lynching can be termed familial, like the killing of Pentheus by Agave, his mother. On at least three levels, the hued are offspring of the American system. First, they were plucked by slavers and hatched as dependent creatures on the ships that took them from the continent of their birth to the continent of their permanent indenture. Second, throughout their American sojourn, the hued have been depicted in popular imagery as childlike and immature, in need of supervision. Third, they were often the literal children of white fathers, a process that began on the Atlantic crossing. Their blood and the blood of those who lynched them were often the same.

The sacrifice of Pentheus was centered in the dramatic rite of the priapic fertility god, Dionysus. The liturgy of Greek devotion was tantamount to the creed of state. That is a primary reason why Dionysus punishes Pentheus. By denying his godhead, Pentheus, the cousin of Dionysus, is challenging the sovereignty of Dionysus. Worship of the god takes precedence over the rights of the ruler. The king is mortal. The god is everlasting, and immortality is also the desire of the state. Greek religious festivals which were held regularly in honor of various members of the divine pantheon (Athena, Demeter, Apollo, and Dionysus, for example) included dramatic presentations as liturgical features. These festivals often united the whole

community in public worship, which is the case in Thebes when Dionysus is in divine attendance. There are only a few holdouts, and they are punished for their abstention. Like Greek religious rites, open-air lynching festivals, which were regularly held, gave vent to and reaffirmed the fundamental beliefs of a people, those deeply ingrained and held beliefs for which they would kill. Lynching functioned as state rite and creed. It was the ceremony out of which a sense of universal mission and consensus emerged. Lynching was American mass. It drew people together in celebratory unity around a symbolic sacrificed body. One group was broken up symbolically, dismembered, in order for the other group to perceive itself as whole.

The corpus of early lynching drama has created a catalog of responses to the American ritual of lynching in much the same way that The Bacchae by Euripides left a record of a popular religious rite. The Greek rite was centered on sparagmos, the ritual rending of the flesh of the *pharmakos*, or sacrificial victim, which was pivotal in Greek and other early religious practice as well as in subsequent religious behavior and belief. The *pharmakos* is “killed to strengthen the others.”<sup>2</sup> The Festival of Osiris, part of the Abydos Passion Play, featured “a dramatic re-enactment of the death and resurrection of Osiris held out of doors for the mass of the people.”<sup>3</sup> Seth killed his brother Osiris and cut his body into pieces, which he scattered. In Christian practice, the body of the sacrificed god is apportioned and shared with the communicants. It is from the corporal matter of that sacred body that the order of the

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<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 148.

<sup>3</sup> A. Rosalie David, Religious Ritual at Abydos (Warminster, England: Acris & Philips, 1973), 290.

Christian cosmos is constructed and continued. When Deucalion and Pyrrha, the classical version of Noah and his wife, were left with the task of repopulating the world anew after the flood, they were advised to create a new race of beings from the bones of Mother Earth.

There is a disturbing image in the 1998 film Beloved, based on the novel by Toni Morrison. Sethe is lying fastened on her back and two white men, one at each breast, are sucking her milk. Sethe has recently given birth and is lactating. In this scene, the hued female body nourishes white masculinity. That image symbolizes the role of the hued in America. Their generative function is subordinated and diverted to the mission of sustaining others who are considered socially dominant over them and thus fully entitled to whatever they may possess, even the fluids running through their bodies. Designated as permanent, primitive vassals, their role is to be used and consumed, even at the cost of and detriment to their own children and families. In this perspective, Morrison is aligned with Angelina Weld Grimke, the author of the play Rachel, who also considers the effect of America's racial policies and attitudes on hued children. At an early age, they can be pulverized and churned in the belly of the white racial nemesis often described as *persons unknown*.<sup>4</sup> By shrouding

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<sup>4</sup> Being anonymous can function as an amulet. Power claims the privilege of having its face and form hidden. Seeing the fullness of the divinity is often a death sentence in classical myth. Semele, the mother of Dionysus, was incinerated when she saw the face of Zeus. Actaeon, a relative of Pentheus, is pulled apart by stags for having seen the disrobed Artemis. Pentheus was caught spying on the mystery of the Dionysian rites and was felled from his tree, and then dismembered. Like many lynch victims, Pentheus had a fatal rendezvous with a tree, ancient symbol of life and fertility or reproduction.

This disavowal of identity and responsibility also reminds me of Odysseus in the cave of the Cyclops. Odysseus and his men penetrated the cave, enjoyed its shelter, and ate the food of Polyphemus. When the single-eyed giant returned and began to eat his uninvited visitors two by two, Odysseus, scuttled beneath the

themselves with anonymity, the racial potentates can remove themselves from the sphere of reprisals. They can act without being acted upon; they can punish without being punished; they can ascend to the status of gods and evade the reach of cause and effect.

Both Morrison and Grimke, one writing about slavery and the other about the post-slavery regime of segregation, came to a similar conclusion. Living under the pall of white racial injustice can be a fate equivalent to death. Sethe decides to relieve her daughter of breath and blood rather than return her to slavery and total ownership by those who would use her as chattel. Rachel resolves that she will not use her body as a vessel to deliver another hostage to apartheid. Both of these actions on the part of hued women, the mothers of nation, testify to a withdrawal of commitment from the national enterprise of American whiteness, to which they have been hitherto subservient. These two women characters, one fictional but drawn from life and the other theatrical and possibly autobiographical, refuse to continue to

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protective cover of anonymity by introducing himself as *Nobody*. In the same way, lynchers can retaliate with impunity against the hued who, in their eyes, threaten their existence with their voracious demands for equality and recognition. Polyphemus temporarily turned the tables on Odysseus and his crew, eating those who had eaten his food. Whites feared that the hued would turn the tables on them and shrouded themselves in collective anonymity in order to protect themselves from that eventuality. Odysseus was saved from the full onslaught of retaliation from the Cyclops and his neighbors largely because he had hidden his identity. This is undoubtedly a lesson taught in every colonial primer. Withhold your real name from those you choose to colonize. There is untold power in a name. To know the name and see the real face of one's enemy is to be empowered, to be in full possession of the capacity for recompense. "[H]e who is marked with value is left unremarked." Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 5.

submit without comment to the tradition into which they have been born.<sup>5</sup> Both writers slice into the umbilicus of the past with the pen as sword.

In writing lynching drama at the beginning of the twentieth century, women playwrights of hue registered the general disaffection prevalent among the hued with the murderous treatment they had consistently received. Better to control one's fate and the fate of one's children rather than entrust the future to their enemy. These women authors (Angelina Weld Grimke, Mary Burrill, Alice Dunbar-Nelson and their literary progeny that includes Toni Morrison) were exhibiting their determination to question and offer opposition to the status quo. This project of interrogation and dissent is one in which the majority of hued writers, male and female, have been engaged since Phyllis Wheatley, a slave in Boston born in Africa who learned English and Latin, published a collection of poems in England in 1773. The jury is still deliberating on whether or not the writing of Wheatley can be classified as protest, but not all women of hue were silent and acquiescent in the abuses their people suffered in service to the American nation. A few resorted to extreme measures. For some women of hue in severe circumstances, curtailing the life of or refusing to give birth to children of hue was preferable to having them killed on a daily basis with wanton cruelty, their sense of autonomy and importance sucked out of their minds and bodies like liquid.

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<sup>5</sup> Slaves are voiceless. The free are not. To be voiced is to be free. In The Phoenician Women by Euripides, Jocasta asks Polyneices what it is like to live in an alien culture. Polyneices replies that the pain of it is indescribable. It is tantamount to losing one's tongue. Jocasta cannot bear the thought of such a restriction. "Not speak clearly? A slave's life." Euripides, The Phoenician Women. Translated by Peter Burian and Brian Swann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 34.

The hued body is also consumed, chopped up and distributed, in the rite of lynching. One piece of the male anatomy is often more prized than another.<sup>6</sup> The generative ability of the hued body is jealously guarded and appropriated—withdrawn from the hued and deeded to the white communal body that becomes infused with the specter of its enhanced power.<sup>7</sup> The obliteration of the hued body in lynching, its

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<sup>6</sup> The penis as coveted possession, the capital prize in the lynching rite, recalls the Egyptian myth of Osiris, later identified with Dionysus, the Greek god who originated in a foreign place, as did the hued. Both divinities were dismembered, but Dionysus was roasted, as was often the case with the lynching victim. The body of Osiris was split and scattered because of the jealousy of his brother, and the hued male often excited the envy of the white male, who was his American brother under the skin. Osiris was reassembled with, in some versions of the myth, the exception of his penis. The power of the god, his magic, was his ability to create a replacement for himself, to project his blood and seed beyond the limitation of his own particular life. With the loss of the penis, the organ of multiplication, the potency of the father (as well as of the community) is eliminated. Castration was a frequent feature in the American lynching ceremony. “The main event ... began with a period of mutilation—often including emasculation—and torture to extract confessions and entertain the crowd, and built to a climax of slow burning, hanging, and/or shooting to complete the killing. The finale consisted of frenzied souvenir gathering, and display of the body and the collected parts.” Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 204.

The pleasure that removing the penis, capturing it, provided many of the white males in the lynching assembly is recorded visually. In February 1935, there was an exhibit of lynching art sponsored jointly by the NAACP and the John Reed Club. Charles Alston created a drawing for that exhibit in which a white male holds high a severed hued penis. The face of the man holding the fragmented body part is ecstatic and triumphant. The John Reed Club decided not to include that drawing in its show. The Alston drawing, along with several others planned for that 1935 show, was on exhibit in December 1999 in a gallery, Kenkilaba House, owned by the painter, Joe Overstreet, on East Fifth Street in New York City.

<sup>7</sup> “[W]hiteness embodies an odd duality of distinguishing itself from something nonwhite while appropriating the nonwhite to justify its being and ... its unique Americanness.” Valerie Babb, Whiteness Made Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 43.

total maceration and takeover by the reigning community, feeds the white body politic.

[*B*]odily sacrifice is the totem core of American nationalism. ... At the behest of the group, the lifeblood of community members must be shed. Group solidarity, or sentiment, flows from the value of this sacrifice. The totem god of society, which turns out to be society itself, cannot do without its worshippers any more than its worshippers can do without the god of society. It must possess and consume, it must eat its worshippers to live.<sup>8</sup>

Like a Eucharist, the sacrificed body of flesh and blood is shared in joyful communion, redolent of satisfaction. Claude McKay, a Harlem Renaissance poet and novelist, wrote a sonnet entitled, *The Lynching*, which captures the satiated delight of the crowd that takes in, consumes, the tortured image of the hued body.

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.

His father, by the cruelest way of pain,

Had bidden him to his bosom once again:

The awful sin remained still unforgiven.

All night a bright and solitary star

(Perchance the one that ever guided him,

Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)

Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.

Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view

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<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4.

The ghastly body swaying in the sun.  
 The women thronged to look, but never a one  
 Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue.  
 And little lads, lynchers that were to be,  
 Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.<sup>9</sup>

This fascination with and ingestion of the hued body is intentional for southern supremacists and tacit for many blinkered northerners who are not (or refuse to be) cognizant of the extent to which they are desirous of and dependent upon the hued teat, a primary icon of hued bounty. When held down in utter and devout subservience, hued bodies produce wealth and nurture for the superior class.

The religious iconography of white supremacy and lynching does not end with references to defiled madonnas or crucified bodies that become cult objects drawing groups together in rapt astonishment. Lynching was a rite in the civil religion of white supremacy, which was a variant of the civil religion of sectarianism and nationalism, both of which are dependent on blood sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> The same is true of Christianity, but in Christianity, the rending of the body and the spilling of the blood are masked, transubstantiated into bread or wafers and wine or grape juice. “[R]eligion is defined by the evidence of a sacred symbol system and its embodiment in ritual.”<sup>11</sup> The Ku Klux Klan, staunch promoters and ministers of white

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<sup>9</sup> Claude McKay, Selected Poems of Claude McKay (New York: Bookman Associates, 1953), 37.

<sup>10</sup> Marvin and Ingle, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Wilson, Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 10.

supremacy, chose to exploit symbols that were sacred. Their show of lights, horses, and hooded uniforms which merged the visual iconography of chivalry and Christianity were mysterious as well as mystifying, both emblems of the sacred, which belongs to the realm of the unknowable, the partially hidden, the ineffable. Mystification is also achieved by outrageous display. In one early Klan procession, the members of the Klan exhibited synchronized movements that were silent and intended to create awe.

[They] donned their robes and disguises and put covers of gaudy material on their horses. A skyrocket sent up from some point in the town was the signal to mount and move. The different companies met and passed each other on the public square in perfect silence; the discipline appeared to be admirable. Not a word was spoken. Necessary orders were given by means of the whistles. In single file, in death-like stillness, with funeral slowness, they marched and counter-marched throughout the town. While the column was headed North on one street it was going South on another. By crossing over in opposite directions the lines were kept in almost unbroken continuity. The effect was to create the impression of vast numbers. This marching and counter-marching was kept up for about two hours, and the Klan departed as noiselessly as they came. The public were more than ever mystified.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> J.C. Lester and D. L. Wilson, Ku Klux Klan: Its Origin, Growth, and Disbandment (New York: AMS Press, 1971), 93.

The civil religion of white sovereignty, supported by its army of the mighty faithful, mandated rules for proper behavior and extracted the steepest penalties for infraction of its commandments. Death was its domain. The adherents of the Klan demonstrated their presence and power ritually through parades and lynching and other ghoulish behavior.

Its members cultivated a mysterious appearance, dressing like medieval penitents in robes, usually ghostly white or demonic black. They also wore conical head pieces, decorated with devilish horns, beards, and sometimes long red tongues sticking out. The organization used phrases to evoke the images of darkness, grave yards, and ghosts. The Klansmen worked at night ... so that 'the mystery and fear of the unseen would aid them.' As a result, the Klan 'became a terror to the guilty. Their imagination became invested with the grim images of retribution.'<sup>13</sup>

Lynching was terrestrialized hell. It was also a holy crusade. The priests of lynching, the hooded brotherhood, chased and captured and chastised the heathen serpents who dared invade and pollute their southern paradise. Lynching expressed the wrath and scourge of a self-defined godlike people whose commandments had been infringed.

The feminized hued community—permanently assigned to servile status and shorn of its ability to fend for itself—is deformed into a bizarre, grotesque rendition of madonna in service to a precocious golden child. Such an interpretation would explain the southern and national preoccupation with the mammy figure of whom Al

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<sup>13</sup> Wilson, 113.

Jolson sang with such devotion.<sup>14</sup> But before Jolson's tribute was memorialized on film, mammy was made into a commodity throughout the land. She graced books, menus, cookbooks, salt shakers, and cookie jars, and under the trademark of Aunt Jemima, her face can still be found on some pancake boxes. "Stories of mammies as the protectors of white children filled white southerners' recollections of both pre- and postwar childhoods. Mammy was a white child's best friend, a secure refuge against the world."<sup>15</sup> Early in the twentieth century, white playwrights, many of whom were female, wrote a flurry of mammy plays in which mammy comes to the rescue of her white family. Several representative titles follow: Mammy Lucindy, Gin'l Managuh (1911) by V.H. Pendleton, Mammy (1913) by E. H. Boyd, Mammy; Or, The Pendletons of Virginia (1913), Mammy (1915) by Mrs. Bernie Babcock, Mammy Jinny's White Folks (1915) by R.B. Longuire, and Mammy's Lil' White Rose (1924) by Lillian Mortimer.<sup>16</sup> The mammy's permuted, updated and airbrushed, presence is still a contemporary factor, revealed in the film career of Whoopi Goldberg and in the extraordinary television and media success of Oprah Winfrey, who incidentally performed the role of Sethe in Beloved. The mammy is the American reconceptualization of the beneficent earth mother, the Cycladic figure of round heart and body, who listens to and understands all their troubles and would

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<sup>14</sup> In 1896, it was proposed that the mammy, along with the faithful uncle (the hued male who did not sin against the tenets of white supremacy), and the planter (white supremacy personified), be monumentalized in stone. Wilson, 105.

<sup>15</sup> Hale, 99.

<sup>16</sup> James V. Hatch, Black Image on the American Stage: A Bibliography of Plays and Musicals, 1770-1970 (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1970).

never add a dose of retaliatory arsenic to their soup. She is down-home spiritual goodness, personified. She is the soul of big-bosomed generosity.

In Moultrie, Georgia, in 1921, a man named John Henry Williams was lynched. As he was being burned on the wood of sacrifice, he sang a spiritual, "Nearer My God to Thee," and commended his soul into the everlasting.<sup>17</sup>

[A] cracker by the name of Ken Murphy gave the Confederate yell: 'Whoo-who let's get the nigger.' Simultaneously five hundred poor pecks rushed on the armed sheriffs, who made no resistance whatever. They tore the Negro's clothing off before he was placed in a waiting automobile. This was done in broad daylight. The Negro was unsexed and made to eat a portion of his anatomy which had been cut away. Another portion was sent by parcel post to Governor Dorsey, whom the people of this section hate bitterly.

The Negro was taken to a grove, where each one of more than five hundred people, in Ku Klux Klan ceremonial, had placed a pine knot around a stump, making a pyramid to the height of ten feet. The Negro was chained to the stump and asked if he had anything to say. Castrated and in indescribable torture, the Negro asked for a cigarette, lit it and blew smoke in the face of his tormenters.

The pyre was lit and a hundred men and women, old and young, grandmothers among them, joined hands and danced around while the Negro burned. A big dance was held in a barn nearby that evening in

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<sup>17</sup> Orlando Patterson, Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 204.

celebration of the burning, many people coming by automobile from nearby cities to the gala event.<sup>18</sup>

It is significant that the lynching began with a Confederate cry. The honor of southern masculinity, which had suffered a severe blow in the Civil War, demanded the sacrifice and mutilation of the hued male anatomy. In that internecine war, the hued won freedom over the dead bodies of white males.<sup>19</sup> Their newly achieved freedom was later denied and rolled back through the repeal of voting rights and through the institution of segregation which removed the hued from the central core of power and limited their self-directed participation in the public sphere. By creating a pyramid or man-made mountain on which to kill and display the body of Williams, the lynchers were invoking ancient religious symbolism. The constructed mound which was taller than a man replicated the "Cosmic Mountain, the World Tree or the Central Pillar which sustains the planes of the Cosmos."<sup>20</sup> The lynchers and their

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<sup>18</sup> Theodore G. Vincent, editor, Voices of a Black Nation: Political Journalism in the Harlem Renaissance (San Francisco: Ramparts Press, 1973), 53.

<sup>19</sup> Hued soldiers fought in the Civil War, and they fought admirably. It has even been claimed that absent their participation, the North may well have lost the war. Matthew Wentworth Higginson, a New England officer from a well-to-do family who commanded a hued regiment, wrote: "No officer in this regiment now doubts that the key to the successful prosecution of this war lies in the unlimited employment of black troops. Their superiority lies simply in the fact that they know the country, while white troops do not, and, moreover, that they have peculiarities of temperament, position, and motive which belong to them alone. Instead of leaving their homes and families to fight they are fighting for their homes and families, and they show the resolution and the sagacity which a personal purpose gives." Joseph T. Glatthaar, Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 122.

<sup>20</sup> Mircea Eliade, Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 42.

followers were symbolically recreating the world of their comfort. In that world which they fictionalized into existence, they assumed vindication and righteousness as their exclusive prerogative. They ruled absolutely, absent the increasing disruptive incursions of the hued who posed political challenges to the tenets of their civil religion of white sovereignty. At the center of their circle of comfort hung the sacrificed hued man, woman, or child on a tree. The massacred and mutilated body of the hued demonized victim was their pivotal totem, the figure around which they danced and from which they drew national nourishment. Only in the sacred circle was that body central.<sup>21</sup> Outside the circle of empowerment that they drew for special sacrificial purposes, the hued body was peripheral, distanced, through segregation, from their vision and privilege.

To be banished from public central was to be displaced, and the ramifications of this displacement included sexual destabilization. Men of hue who were socially ostracized from the center were unmanned (another interpretation of ritual castration) and women were thereby unwomanned, not deemed deserving of velvet respect. The lack of deference with which women of hue were generally treated may have had a positive side. It may have relieved them of some of the gender oppressiveness that attended many white women (while at the same time exposing them to other restrictions and pressures that white women did not have to bear). As a result, a cadre of artistically and intellectually capable women of hue were able to position themselves on the forefront of drama, crafting new personae for the hued community. (White and hued society reflect each other, they frequently mirror or engage in

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<sup>21</sup> “*Kuklux* alluded to the Greek ‘*kuklos*’ for *circle*, invoking borders.” Marvin and Ingle, 197.

imitation, one of the other. So while white women made moves to gain their freedom in the arena of the public, so did women of hue. When the women's rights movement, which grew out of abolitionism, became nationally recognized in 1848, at Seneca Falls, the white and the hued strains were in harmony. This was evidenced by the inclusion of Sojourner Truth who made her famous speech in Seneca Falls that asked whether or not she could be termed and treated as woman as well. Subsequent to the initial years, the women's right movement split into partitions, one for white women and one for hued; both were agitating for visibility and power in the same time frames.) Hued women writers, in a sense, took on the roles of honorary men. It may also have been more salutary for hued women to take on this authority in the community since they could nurture the drama and burgeoning dramatists in the schools where they taught. In addition, the larger society was probably not as threatened by their achievements as would have been the case if an equal number of hued male playwrights had presented a counter cultural viewpoint.

Segregation was not divorced from lynching. Both of these racial strategies, one more extreme than the other, aimed at banishment of the body of the despised class. In one, the banishment was permanent, whereas in the other the banishment was partial. Lynching, permanent banishment or exile, was anthropophagic. It eliminated the hued body by making it disappear, absorbing it into the communal body of whiteness. Segregation was anthropoemic; it disgorged the hued bodies and relegated them to social exile.<sup>22</sup> Both strategies, whether taking in or pushing away, manifested the power of the ones who sounded the call to surround or dismiss. The

hued, however, found the strings of white control oppressive and continually sought to clip them. Such exercise of autonomous initiative (which incidentally had been pivotal in the founding of America) was not tolerated. It had to be punished and punished so severely that it would not again be attempted. But hope is unquenchable in the human soul. The hued banded together and formed their own communal bodies in advocacy of their defense. The lynching of Williams occurred several years after a hued group in Georgia circulated a petition urging that their civil rights be recognized and charging that they were being treated worse than enemies in their own land.

They denounced lynching as 'worse than Prussianism and condemned the 'discrimination,' 'humiliation,' and 'segregation' their people were daily subjected to as a violation of the fulfillment of the fundamental rights of citizens of the United States. Most dramatically, they attributed the 'brutalities and indignities' to the way Southern whites had 'filch[ed]' the vote of black men in an 'effort to re-enslave us'. Finally, the signers vowed to continue to 'exert our righteous effort until not only every eligible black man but every eligible black woman shall be wielding the ballot proudly in defense of our liberties and our homes.'<sup>23</sup>

Symbolically, the hued community was castrated through lynching and made to swallow the symbol of its prowess and progress. Still, there were those in the hued

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<sup>22</sup> The terms, anthropophagic and anthropoemic, are derived from the work of Levi-Strauss. Zygmunt Bauman, Postmodernity and its Discontents (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 18.

community who refused to be intimidated, who believed they had their own holy war to fight.

Lynching dramas record the emancipation and persecution of a community and the reactions to and repercussions of that emancipation and persecution by all major parties to the conflict. White males, the majority group sponsoring and witnessing the burning death of hued bodies, wrote lynching dramas, some of which sought to show the validity of their behavior. The Clansman, for example, condoned lynching and The Nigger was ambivalent in its attitude, presenting a figure who was incapable of stopping the lynching from occurring. White females, who also participated in the lynching crowd and were often cast as the righteous motivation for the lynching, wrote lynching dramas. In this particular study, there is only one white woman playwright and her play castigates the Christmas Eve lynching on a southern hill that she depicts in The Noose; in so doing, she points to the religious significance of lynching as southern Calvary. The hued male, the primary target of the public ceremony of lynching, wrote lynching dramas. The only hued male whose work is studied in this dissertation initiated the genre and imparted a revolutionary possibility to the form as a site where the victim class could intervene in the status quo. Hued females who were sometimes lynched with as much brutality as hued males also wrote lynching dramas. As much as victim, however, their role was also survivor and witness. They and their children mourned and buried the bodies of their kin and kind after the time of display, after the bodies were exposed to the injuries and ravages of preying eyes, birds and time. They were made to live with the daily pain of loss.

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<sup>23</sup> Nancy Maclean, Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 27.

They were left unhusbanded, unsonned, unfathered, unbrothered by the exertions of lynching.

Lynching, the iconic act that symbolized most clearly the brunt of the destructive intent of the white community toward the hued, compelled the hued woman with rhetorical talent to pick up a pen and fight back with words and alternative images. In so doing, the hued woman dramatist participated in the engendering of a separate order. The new order that she conceived in words, images, characters, and history was iconoclastic relative to the order that had been in force. At the same time, that her work was destructive, it was also creative of an order juxtaposed to the estranged one she textually sought to replace.<sup>24</sup> The hued female made her debut as American dramatist under the jurisdiction of lynching drama. In reaction to lynching, the American playwright, male and female, white and hued, created a dramatic chorus of antiphonal sentiments, a choir of conflicting but deeply expressive voices.

This full-length study of early lynching dramas has revealed that the roots of lynching in America are long-lived and sturdy. Lynching drama documents a strain of theatricalized intense political and social visual and visceral violence that predates the nation, and may even serve as its midwife. “[N]ationalism is a theatrical performance of invented community.”<sup>25</sup> Particularly in frontier areas, or in sections

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<sup>24</sup> “In the modern society and under the aegis of the modern state, cultural and/or physical annihilation of ... the strange was a *creative destruction*; demolishing, but building at the same time; mutilating, but also straightening up ... It was part and parcel of the ongoing, order-building, nation-building, state-building effort, its necessary condition and accompaniment.” Bauman, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Anne McClintock, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Gender, Race and Nationalism,” in Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat, editors,

of the country where contact with non-European peoples was frequent, the urgency for lynching, for writing law on the flesh of the body, was strong before the American Revolution. Subsequent to the American Revolution, lynching was more prevalent in some geographical areas than in others. Public punishment that spontaneously erupted from and satisfied the desire of the sovereign class, lynching was transformed into a national preoccupation through the involvement of media. Looked at from another angle, the fascination of the public with lynching, which refracted the rule of crime and punishment, is reflected in the inclusion of narratives of lynching in a variety of genres and media.<sup>26</sup> When lynchings were in vogue in the South from the end of the nineteenth through the first few decades of the twentieth century, newspapers, which were religiously read, reported lynchings often. Scenes of lynching were also recreated and recounted in novels and short stories.<sup>27</sup> Participants in lynching often liked to be photographed at the site of the crime. In more than a few pictures, the males who are wearing their Sunday go-to-meeting clothes, exhibit a high measure of satisfaction in having their presence recorded at this socially

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Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 102.

<sup>26</sup> The lynchers were obsessed with crime and punishment. They assigned a crime and extracted punishment, but the lynchers also evaded the net of crime and punishment. They did not think that their killing of hued victims, even if innocent of the crime in question, deserved punishment. Once again, the principle of reversal was in operation. The hued must pay for their actions, even when no offense had been committed, but the sovereign class was rarely if ever punished for its deadly deeds.

<sup>27</sup> Trudier Harris in Exorcising Blackness and Sandra Gunning in Race, Rape, and Lynching write about the use of lynching in novels and short stories.

sanctioned event.<sup>28</sup> Early films, most notably The Birth of a Nation but also all white-authored lynching dramas between 1859 and 1909, reenacted lynchings.<sup>29</sup>

Lynching was a compelling subject in American drama. So compelling in fact that it occasioned the first textual responses from the hued male and female playwright and incited more than a few white females to chime in on the issue.<sup>30</sup>

White female playwrights came late to the discussion. Of the four parties most involved in the lynching scenario, hued male, white male, hued female, white females were last to become vocal, even though their implication in the conventional lynching narrative was major. The honor of white women was claimed and taken as a rallying cry in the mouths of white males in the lynching posse. The tardy arrival of

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<sup>28</sup> In January 2000, an exhibit of lynching photographs opened in New York at the Roth Horowitz Gallery. The exhibit was so well received that it was transferred, in March 2000, to the New York Historical Society. The exhibit opening at the Horowitz Gallery coincided with the publication of a book of lynching photographs to which the historian, Leon F. Litwack, among others, has contributed an essay, Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (Twin Falls Press, 1999). Grace Elizabeth Hale also features photographs of lynchings in her study of segregation and lynching. Hale reports that postcards were sometimes made from lynching photographs, and several of these postcards are included in the book as well as in the exhibit. A “photo of the charred body of Jesse Washington [lynched in Waco, Texas in 1916] ... circulated as a souvenir postcard ... sold in Waco to those participants and spectators unable to acquire pieces of the body itself or of the chain or the tree.” Annotation on the sixth page of illustrations in Hale, 146-7.

<sup>29</sup> The plays in question are The Octoroon, The White Slave, The Clansman, and The Nigger. In this dissertation, which is the first in-depth study of lynching drama in its inception, I also make reference to early films that include lynching. No one has yet written a serious work on the role of lynching in early American film. Toward that effort, I am planning to include an appendix on lynching films.

<sup>30</sup> Other white female playwrights who wrote about lynching do not fit into the chronology of this study. But three of the more important ones are Mary White Ovington, a founding member of the NAACP, Corrie Crandall Howell, who wrote The Forfeit (1925) in which a white woman engineered the lynching of an innocent hued man, and Lillian Smith, the novelist. Smith wrote Strange Fruit, which made its debut on Broadway in 1945.

white female playwrights to the discussion occurred because many of them were divided as to whether to stay on the side of their men or whether to strike out on their own and take a contrary position. Tracy Mygatt, for whom little biographical material remains, was one of the intrepid few white women who bucked the status quo. Chronologically, there is a connection between the writing of the first play against lynching that we know of by a white woman and the receipt of the vote by women. Taking a stance unpopular with most white males in high as well as in low places may well have been a way of announcing female independence. Aligning oneself with the hued and their cause has long been a way of raising the banner of self-assertion.

Lynching measured and fomented national propensity and policy. The erasure of distinction that occurred within the ranks of the lynchers created political consolidation.<sup>31</sup> Those who danced in the circle of celebration after a lynching and those who identified with the dancers formed one sect or denomination, an empowered one.<sup>32</sup> Those who commiserated with the victim formed another, a disempowered one. White groupings and hued formed an axial relationship, one to the other. The hued lay in place on the x axis and whites ascended the pole of y. The two groups enjoyed a limited partnership in that the rights of one were limited and the rights of the other were virtually without horizon. The horizon stopped at the line of

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<sup>31</sup> "Not the act of tracing boundaries, but their cancellation or negation is the constitutive act of the city." Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 85.

<sup>32</sup> Religion evolves from dance. It is felt and acted out "with ideation remaining 'relatively in abeyance.'" Tom F. Driver, The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Lives and Communities (New York: Harper

life and death. Lynching expressed the perimeter of white daring and sense of defeat, loss. In the aftermath of a fratricidal war, which had drained the blood of millions of American sons, both North and South, the white fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters who survived wanted to make someone pay. The smell of vengeance, usually reserved for the gods, was strong in their nostrils. It was this indulgence in collective killing, this sense of themselves as above law and death which lynching conferred on them, that gave them security in their threatened potency. Whenever the progress and achievements of the hued, the raising of the head of a people kept underfoot, question the supremacy of whiteness, lynching, a social monster, reappears and rages.

Lynching and its violent representation in newspapers, novels, short stories, photography, film, and drama created a dynamic spiral out of which the splintered, dismembered nation was re-formed and re-consolidated. The local character of lynching is transmuted into national status by the written word in newspapers, novels, plays, and film scripts. The visual aspect of lynching, its spectacle, is given perpetuity by photography, drama, and film, which are art forms collectively enjoyed, and this collective appreciation enhances impact and political import. Drama imparts to lynching a palpability that is instantaneous, of the moment, and ripe with presence. Of all the art forms that treat lynching, drama is closest to the act of lynching, microcosmic war. *Agon*, which is contained in the formal word for lead actor, *protagonist*, means struggle. Forces of good and evil vie with each other on stage, and the forces of the right win so that order can be revitalized and the society can continue to thrive. Lynching also presumably pits wrong against right with right (as

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Collins, 1991), 94.

it is defined by might) triumphant. The media contribute to the reception of the constructed truth and function as ancillary agents of order. The newspaper, particularly, is the handmaiden of the experience that is immanent in the drama and in real life. In the novel and in the newspaper, the reception of knowledge and feeling is limited and singular, experienced in isolation. In film, the experience is collective, but the event is not actually taking place in front of the eyes. That is true in photography as well, which can be viewed in isolation, but is more often appreciated in a group. In photography and film, the unfolding of the act and its appreciation are not simultaneous. In drama, the act and its appreciation are occurring at the same time and in the same place. In lynching, the victim and those witnessing the victimization are joined in time and space. They are most intimately connected. Drama is representation, but it is also real. Lynching as well is symbolic but actual at the same time.

A violent act, usually war, is procreative and protective of the legal entity that is nation.<sup>33</sup> The inclusion of lynching in the media also served to mute its extralegal status. Perhaps the term to use is quasilegal rather than extralegal. More than a few Klan members were officials of government. In Georgia, Governor Clifford Walker belonged to the Klan.

[He] consulted Klan leaders before introducing new initiatives to the state assembly. On the local level, prosecution of Klan violence was hardly likely when municipal governments, police departments, and

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<sup>33</sup> “[W]here the highest violence, that over life and death, occurs in the legal system, the origins of law jut manifestly and fearsomely into existence.” Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in Peter Demetz, Reflections (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 286.

courts were rife with Klan members and sympathizers. ‘Everybody in the courthouse belonged to the Klan’ in Atlanta, recalled a local city attorney, “virtually every judge, the prosecuting officers ... all the police and the mayor and the councilmen.’ If he exaggerated, it was not by much. With the cards thus stacked in its favor, the Klan could act with impunity.<sup>34</sup>

No wonder the white faces in the lynching photographs collected in Without Sanctuary are so complacent.<sup>35</sup> Those men were comfortable with acting within the aura of the law, canon and judicial. Lynching was further laundered in the media. It became publicly ratified through its inclusion and celebration in the public arena. Lynching was condoned popular practice. The media and local as well as national figures allowed the lynchers to feel that their actions were consistent with public opinion. Law enforcement agencies as well as the media made the banquet of lynching appealing and available for mass consumption.

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<sup>34</sup> Maclean, 18.

<sup>35</sup> “The use of the camera to memorialize lynchings testified to their openness and to the self-righteousness that animated the participants. Not only did the photographers capture the execution itself but also the carnival-like atmosphere and the expectant mood of the crowd, as in the lynching of Thomas Brooks in Fayette County, Tennessee in 1915: *Hundreds of kodaks clicked all morning at the scene of the lynching. People in automobiles and carriages came from miles around to view the corpse dangling from the end of a rope. ... Picture card photographers installed a portable printing plant at the bridge and reaped a harvest in selling postcards showing a photograph of the lynched. Negro women and children were there by the scene. At a number of country schools the day’s routine was delayed until boy and girl pupils could get back from viewing the lynched man.*” Leon F. Litwack, “Hellhounds,” in Without Sanctuary, 10-11.

The public quality of the death in lynching is the consumable part of the act. It was intended that the death be shared with those who benefited therefrom. The death of the lynch victim was wished for and participated in by the community that precipitated and sanctioned the execution. A theatre of hierarchical violence acted out in public, lynching filled the eye of the beholder who saw his or her cohorts as strong and powerful, able to impose their sovereign will on the chosen enemy. Like theatre, lynching was intended to be seen. It was designed for the edification and enjoyment of the white populace and to inspire fear and awe in the minds of the hued. This lesson of white pleasure at the spectacle of hued pain was rehearsed and repeated for the white community that was made to understand that its privilege depended on its distinction and social distance from the hued.

Today, it would be a mistake to think of lynching as an obsolete phenomenon. Slavery and segregation have been legally abolished, although it could be claimed that both continue to exist in residual form.<sup>36</sup> Lynching has regenerated itself and

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<sup>36</sup> The film on the fighter Ruben "Hurricane" Carter, which stars Denzel Washington and was released early in 2000, is imprinted with the pattern of the nineteenth-century escaped slave narrative. Carter is incarcerated for a crime he did not commit, just as the slave lost his freedom, not for something he did but because of something someone else wanted. Carter tries repeatedly to get out of jail, but his appeals are turned down. These attempts at freedom are analogous to the attempts that slaves made to run away and escape from the confines that controlled their lives. Many of these attempts ended in failure. While in jail, Carter decides to educate himself. Slaves who were determined to be free often interpreted the ability to read and write as keys to freedom, and became tireless in their quest for these skills. Carter wrote a book, which can be compared to the slave narratives that slaves wrote to prove to the world that slavery was not a justifiable penalty for them. On the basis of this book, Carter claimed the attention of a young hued man, himself an escapee from deprivation. This young man had found freedom and possibility in Canada, which was a legendary destination for runaway slaves. With the help of humanitarians from Canada, modern-day abolitionists, Carter secured his freedom and is now living and working in Canada, where runaway slaves established towns and communities. According to the simplest definition of lynching, which is the

proliferated, forcing and striding its way with bravado into the present day.<sup>37</sup> It has had children and grandchildren.<sup>38</sup> This generative element of lynching was predicted in those lynching dramas explicated in this dissertation that included references to past and present lynchings. Lynching does not belong to a single time; it transcends the borders of the past; it partakes of tradition.

The legacy of lynching persists ... It persists in political ads, such as the infamous Willie Horton spot, that perpetuate the related lynching

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portrayal of the forward-moving hued male as a criminal and punishing him as such without conclusive evidence, Carter, who was on his way to being a highly successful boxer, was lynched.

"Lynching ... becomes a kind of trope: it shifts from a reference to an exact manner of death to a representative sociopolitical act whose objective is to repress and forestall black progress." Angeletta KM Gourdine, "The Drama of Lynching in Two Blackwomen's Drama, or Relating Grimke's *Rachel* to Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*," *Modern Drama* 41.4 (Winter 1998), 535.

<sup>37</sup> One of the reasons for the explosive response to Clarence Thomas's comment that the Senate hearings conducted to approve him for the Supreme Court in 1991 constituted "a high-tech lynching" was the assertion and consequent acknowledgement that lynching had entered a new era of meaning. As Thomas used the term, lynching now meant victimization of those who were not white. "[B]y employing the lynching analogy ..., Thomas fundamentally recast the form and the substance of the hearings. He placed himself firmly in a historical plot in which he was the victim." Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London: Routledge, 1997), 99.

<sup>38</sup> Over the July Fourth weekend in 1999, Benjamin Smith, a member of the World Church of the Creator, killed Asians, Jews, and the hued. The next month, Buford Furrow shot a Filipino-American postman and a Jewish woman in Los Angeles. Furrow had shown interest in America's Promise Ministries and in the Christian Identity movement, which is a white supremacist organization.

"There are many forms of identity 'faith,' but basically its followers believe that Caucasians are God's chosen people—the true Israelites. Jews, along with blacks and other nonwhites are the 'mud people,' mongrels, not even humans, the offspring of Cain, who was born from the seed of Satan. The Jewish imposters, out of jealousy, want to destroy the white race. The blacks are merely their pawns." Marianne Vollers, *Ghosts of Mississippi: The Murder of Medgar Evers, The Trials of Byron De La Beckwith, and the Haunting of the New South* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 229.

practices of not only staging the black criminal but also staging the criminal as black. It persists in the skepticism and fear with which many non-whites approach this country's judicial system. It persists in endlessly replayed video footage showing a contingent of L.A. police officers brutally beating Rodney King, and it persists in the verdict of jurors who found the police, just as their historical counterparts so often found those accused of participating in a lynching, 'not guilty.' It persists in contemporary hate crimes intended to terrorize not only the immediate victim but also the entire group of which the immediate victim is but an unlucky representative.<sup>39</sup>

The hardness of lynching, its persistence in the American imaginary, makes a study of lynching drama, in the period of its inception, worthwhile. Lynching drama offers a record, written by those who were enslaved, by those newly emergent into political power, by those aggrieved by defeat in war, by those born to privilege. The record left by early lynching dramas was also created by the wily who immigrated here in search of richer pastures, by the adept who sued for expanded notice, and by those motivated by entrepreneurial intelligence. It takes stock of rich facets of the American mind over a substantial period of time. It presents a kaleidoscope of opinion on a subject that forms an enduring and recurring tendency in the American nation. By unearthing the roots of lynching drama, we can start to understand its branch and flower.

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<sup>39</sup> Kirk W. Fuoss, "Lynching Performances, Theatres of Violence," Text and Performance Quarterly 19.1 (January 1999):28-29.

In the ten lynching dramas studied in this dissertation, all of which were written in the more than sixty years from the eve of the Civil War through the conclusion of the First World War, four ritualistic elements are either implicitly or explicitly present. These four elements, included in varying degrees and with differing levels of emphasis, are chase, capture, chastisement (or lynching), and consumption (or dismemberment and display). All four elements can be subsumed under the heading of the hunt, which is the basic human quest, but permuted in lynching, with its human quarry. From the beginning of time, humans have celebrated the hunt. The first examples of paleolithic art found on cave walls in places such as Lascaux, Altamira, and Trois-Freres, acknowledge human dependence on the hunt. The motive for the inaugural artistic expression, the quest for food also takes on sacred status because it saves the community from destruction and disappearance. It guarantees strength and survival. It is thus the most sacred office possible. The chase or hunt is also fundamental in the American saga. The predominance of the chase as ideological and symbolic in American consciousness is clear from the number of films—too many to enumerate—in which the chase scene is obligatory. Beginning in 1903 with The Escaped Lunatic and The Great Train Robbery, the chase film in America replays the popular law and outlaw theme, which allows Americans, in their normative white version, to see themselves as the good guys who always ride on the side of justice.<sup>40</sup>

All Americans, those born here centuries ago as well as those who arrived as immigrants and captives, understand the story and meaning of the chase. They have

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Musser, The Emergence of Cinema: the American Screen to 1907 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 352.

all lived a part of that inescapable human activity, the dogged pursuit of survival against the odds. Some have lived it more intensely than others. The chase has not meant the same thing to all people. Some have chased much more often than they have been chased. And the reverse is also true. The hued fit into the latter category. Before they were slaves, they were chased. While they were slaves, they were chased. And they were chased with renewed vigor by the self-deputizing efforts of the lynch posse that became generally institutionalized once slavery was abolished. For the hued, the chase is an epic of horror. In microcosm, it reenacted the original scenario that wrested them from their native land and pitched them into slavery. The chase is also emblematic of the revolutionary run that many slaves made, often finding refuge with the Native Americans with whom they intermingled. These slaves chased their freedom, and some found it. William Wells Brown secured it with the ink in his pen. But brutalized and bestialized slaves outnumbered successful escapees.

“The analogy between man’s dominion over the beasts and Europe’s supremacy over the ‘savage races’ was reflected in the symbolism of big-game hunting. ... The chase had long been regarded as a token of human domination over the animals, and European aristocrats had always thought of it as a sort of war game in which a gentleman could hone his military skills by pursuing and killing unfriendly beasts.”<sup>41</sup> The chase, often conducted for sport, divides participants into pursuer and pursued. Pursuit is etched indelibly into the syntax of lynching, a ceremony of ritualistic chase, capture, chastisement, and consumption in which the aggregate

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<sup>41</sup> Matt Cartmill, *A View to Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature through History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 135.

attack those who are socially and politically weaker than themselves, and thus can be set upon and ritually devoured with relative impunity. The lynching prey—most often hued—is human, but rendered bestial, animalized, in the popular imagination. The job of vilification was conducted largely in the media. The human prey that is chased and captured and mortified by sacrifice in the American ritual of lynching bears the imprimatur of the outcast, the beast. The lynching quarry belongs to the demoted, work-identified class. Slaves were brought to these shores for the express purpose of living and working in America as unpaid beasts of burden. They were pushed outside the pale of the human and reclassified as beasts and sub-human brutes.

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In the nineteenth century, “the literature of social Darwinism assured the people at the top of the heap that natural selection among competing individuals had given them rightful power over the poor. The power that Europeans exercised over the rest of the human race was also justified in Darwinian terms, by analogy with man’s dominion over the lower animals.”<sup>43</sup> Those who were chased, captured, chastised, and culturally consumed were seen as inferior to those who chase, capture, chastise, and consume. In lynching, the victim is chased, then captured. Once captured, the victim is chastised or tortured in front of the gathered congregation. After the liturgy of chastisement concludes in death, pieces of the sacrificed body and

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<sup>42</sup> “The extreme racists of the South believed that the Negro was a beast, and that he had sunk to a morally degenerate condition when the discipline of slavery had been removed. They advocated rigid repression and control, which meant strict public segregation at the least, and which ... extended to the justification of lynching.” Wilson, 101.

<sup>43</sup> Cartmill, 134.

its paraphrenalia (including the rope) are distributed. Then the remains are displayed for visual consumption. Let me clarify what I mean by consumption, the most problematic of the four terms just listed. I do not mean that the lynch victims whose bodies were rendered lifeless and frequently roasted by fire as part of the ritual of lynching were literally ingested by the mouths of those in assembly. No, I am using consumption in the cultural and larger sense of genosorption, which is the disappearance of one community according to the terms of and inside the limits determined by an antagonistic group. In genosorption, the recipient community is fortified with the spleen and sinews of the eliminated group. The lynch victim represented the community to which he or she belonged and when the victim was severed into pieces and claimed by the spectators, then the community that had been disintegrated was symbolically taken over by the participants as well. Whatever the victim once was had been altered and divided. The pieces were appropriated and used at the discretion of those who had initiated and willed the victim's physical destruction.

Pursuit of a culprit, whether with or without the assistance of the hungry yelping dogs obligatory in the slave hunt, is explicit in The Escape, The Octoroon, and The Nigger. Chase is promised, but not a completed action in Aftermath. The two hued males who, it is suggested, are determined to hound a white mob toward the cliff of death in Aftermath do not enjoy the social status that makes chase a normal activity for them. The chase is left unseen, but is threatened. This posture of retaliation reflects the growing but seldom noticed organized militance of the hued in

the South before, during, and after the first global war.<sup>44</sup> Capture is featured in The Nigger when a white mob assembles to look for and demand the body of Joe White. Apprehension or capture is also highlighted in The Octoroon, The Clansman, as well as in Granny Maumee and Rachel. Chastisement, the lynching act in its punitive variety from flagellation at the hands of power to collectively administered capital punishment, is present either as shadow or substance in all the plays studied in this dissertation. In Escape, it is present in the whipping of male and female slaves and in the corporal threat from which the abolitionist, Cato, Glen, and Melinda flee. In The Octoroon, it is present in the death of Zoe from poison that she takes from the hands of George, the heir to the plantation. It is also present in The Octoroon in the revenge-inspired death of McClosky. In The White Slave, it is present in the killing of Daphne by Lacy, the master of the plantation. In The Clansman, lynching is present as on-stage ritual. In The Nigger, chastisement is promised, but not actually seen in its full dimension. In Granny Maumee, the ritual of retaliatory lynching is aborted in Granny's cabin. In Rachel, the extended shadow that lynching casts into the next generation taints the future. In Aftermath, the lynching incites two sons to pick up the guns of war. In Mine Eyes Have Seen, lynching has forced a family from its ancestral home. One motivation of chastisement or lynching is focused on in Mine Eyes. Lynching often replied to the perceived need to squash any signs of ambition

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<sup>44</sup> “[H]istorians of African-American life ... have slighted the surge of resistance to white supremacy by Southern blacks. Contemporaries did not. ... In the three years after 1916, the number of NAACP branches in the South jumped from six to 155. Together, they amassed a dues-paying membership of over 42,000. For the first time, Southerners now dominated the organization's rank and file.” Maclean, 27-8.

and accomplishment among the hued.<sup>45</sup> Alice Dunbar-Nelson makes it clear that the reason the family home was burned in the South was because the family appeared too prosperous and had to be brought down a peg. Chastisement is paramount as well in The The Noose, where we see the punishing effect of the lynching on the hued male servant. Consumption is most pronounced in The Clansman, which includes the lynched body paraded on stage, a sight on which all are expected to feast their eyes and minds.

In the first half of the dissertation, a hued male playwright started the lynching ball rolling in drama and in the second half a hued female sounded the tone of dissent for the plays about lynching written during the period that concluded with the waning of the first world war. Plays which include lynching are valuable to study because with this subject, the hued assume agency, the first American dramatic focus in relation to which they position themselves so prominently. They write on their own behalf, without intermediaries, without authorizing prefaces, without filters. The voice of the hued is strong and authentic in lynching drama, which is modernist in tone, by which I mean that its critical stance is mounted from an internal positioning. According to Clement Greenberg, self-criticism is a major hallmark of modernism. "Modernism criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized. It seems natural that this new criticism should have appeared first in philosophy, which is critical by definition, but as the 19th century

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<sup>45</sup> "An independent and prosperous black family flourishing amid a vast area of poverty is in itself a powerful enough symbol of aspiration to be a source of trouble for that black family's mere well-being prods the black thousands, who, if they moved, would disrupt the delicately balanced forces of racial and economic poser in the South." Richard Wright, 12 Million Black Voices (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 48.

wore on, it entered many other fields."<sup>46</sup> The documented move of the hue into lynching drama marks the moment when the dominant class is publicly and ritually castigated by the recipient(s) of the regime as the invasive and deviant presence.

The questioning of the project of dominance, its surveillance--that is, the refusal to swallow it whole and the mandate of offering alternative readings of it--presents another perspective on the inception date of modernism in America. Generally, we think of modernism as an early twentieth century or late nineteenth century phenomenon, but looked at from this vantage, the modern occurs earlier. It can more easily be dated from the middle of the nineteenth century, and even from the invention of photography, which allowed the artist and the individual to look at the everyday with eyes less shaded with reverence. Another feature of modernism that comes into play here is the move outside conventional stages or artistic venues. "Starting with the early twentieth century avant-garde movements, the practice of the arts forms part of a wider phenomenon of the 'explosion' of aesthetics beyond the institutional limits which are traditionally assigned to it."<sup>47</sup> The hue writers did not lag behind the modernist white artist. It was the modernist white artist who imitated what the hue artist had done previously. William Wells Brown had found alternative stages for the presentation of his work in the 1850s. Angelina Weld Grimke, Mary Burrill, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson presented their plays in schools, which were not the usual places where plays were produced. The project of

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<sup>46</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in John O'Brian, editor, Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 85.

modernism for the hued begins with Brown and is completed with the women playwrights who are writing in the second decade of the twentieth century. These are the artists who set the stage for the flowering of the Harlem Renaissance. They are hardly ever given credit for what they have achieved and contributed. They looked at American policy and found it wanting.

The belief that the hued were heathens who deserved to be publicly denounced and punished with the greatest degree of severity when they sinned against the social norms was constructed by a variety of scripted texts, including newspapers, novels, films, and drama. The hued fought back with the same textual weapons. They created their own newspapers, novels, films, and dramas and used the instruments of the dominant class to fight against the pronouncements that the dominant class had issued against them. The drama is the most important of the previously named media because, like nation, it is built around the collective presence of the body. Lynching drama, a product of the nineteenth century, was initially critical of the American racial project in the hands of its hued progenitor. This critical stance was continued in the twentieth century when women playwrights, both hued and white, refused to support the traditional narrative of lynching advanced by white male playwrights which was that a hued male had raped a white female and deserved whatever castigation, no matter how cruel, he received. Lynching is a passionate subject and it brings out the passions of those who write about it, whether the playwright is female or male, white or hued. The dramas about lynching examined in this dissertation reveal the antipathies and anxieties that throb under the

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<sup>47</sup> Gianni Vattimo, The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 53.

surface of a nation and manifest the points of intersection between sexual preoccupation, political urgency, and religious fervor. Lynching drama provides the context for the emergence of true democratic dialogue, which was the expressed but not the fulfilled hope of those who had devoted themselves to the enterprise of the New World. Through lynching drama, the alternative American voice, which is tripartite (hued male, hued female, white female), comes to the fore. Born during the 1850s and at the dawning of the bloodbath that confronted the crisis of secession, the dismemberment of nation, lynching drama does not reach its full potential until women enter the fray around the time of the first international war that christened Americans as politically mature. In the first six decades of its existence, lynching drama kept in stride with national development. It is no surprise, therefore, that the first representative examples of lynching drama expose the cartography of the fault lines, the racial fissures, under the sacred soil of American democracy.

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