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Plantation States: Region, Race, and Sexuality in the Cultural Memory of the U.S. South,  
1900-1945

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Elizabeth Anna Steeby

Committee in charge:

Professor Shelley Streeby, Chair  
Professor Michael Davidson  
Professor Sara Johnson  
Professor Rachel Klein  
Professor Lisa Lowe

2008

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2008

## **DEDICATION**

To all my families.

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sane, reassuring perspective. Thanks to Neel for introducing me to The Coup and good vegan desserts and for insisting we not take ourselves too seriously. I was lucky enough to be schooled and mentored as well by Clarissa Clò, Tania Triana, and Jinah Kim throughout the years. They've each taught me in different ways that we can and should always expect more from the institutions that we're a part of, and that communities happen because you create them, and because you make time for “productive distractions”! Thank you to my peerless peers, Brandon Best, professor of much that isn't fit to footnote and the most thorough archivist that I'll probably ever know, and to Jasmine Meyer, a true comrade and lover of all things good.

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Plantation States: Region, Race, and Sexuality  
in the Cultural Memory of the U.S. South, 1900-1945

by

Elizabeth Anna Steeby

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2008

Professor Shelley Streeby, Chair

In “Plantation States,” I analyze cultural representations of plantation formations from the first half of the twentieth century, a period when “the South” operated as an imagined social landscape that galvanized post-Civil War national reconciliation and expansion as well as resistant social movements. I argue that the plantation, and the region it often symbolizes, served as a powerful site of identification that animated collective memories and provoked competing visions of progress. Consequently, I consider how imagined plantation pasts inevitably invoked a “neplantation” present and a cultural geography that had both temporal and spatial mobility. To reconstruct how the neplantation served as a contested cultural landscape, I necessarily draw from a wide

range of cultural texts, including turn-of-the-century Atlanta newspapers, unpublished playscripts, canonical modernist novels, and prisoner-produced journalism. Throughout I am concerned with cultural texts that represent continuities and ruptures in the transition from plantation slave cultures to emergent cultures of empire and incarceration.

I look at three different contexts in which the plantation is re-imagined and adapted for the twentieth century in neplantation forms, namely: the Atlanta white riot of 1906, the U.S. imperial occupation of Haiti (1915-1934), and the evolution and reform of the twentieth-century Southern penitentiary. I consider these decades of “Jim Crow Empire” as an era of collusion among white supremacist projects, state delimitation of citizenship, and U.S. imperial expansion. I examine discourses of race and sexuality, in particular, as integral to technologies that furthered segregation, racial/sexual terror, and unfree labor structures. I therefore highlight the tensions between the neplantation's development of capital, on the one hand, and the formations of “plantation state” subjectivity on the other. I suggest that racialized and sexualized neplantation subjects were often characterized as deviant or criminal by those who sought to advance systems of social control, while those who opposed structures of inequality made the modernized plantation their target. I formulate the neplantation as a cultural institution, a social structure, and a hierarchy of labor that produced dangerous subjects who troubled the boundaries of race, sexuality, region, and nation.

## Introduction

This ain't no slavery time, and I'm sure that I'm free.  
--Jelly Roll Morton, "Murder Ballad"

A change in labor system did not mean that the agricultural factory was destroyed any more than an industrial factory would disappear if its labor employment pattern altered. The post bellum "disappearance" or "disintegration" of the plantation has apparently been confused with a modification, a sequent change, in a major southern occupation form.  
--Merle Ponty, "The Renaissance of the Southern Plantation"

. . .the South would always remain in the minds of most  
Negroes, even without the fresh oppression of the post-bellum  
Jim Crow laws, the scene of the crime.  
--LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) *Blues People*

Recorded by Alan Lomax for the Library of Congress in 1938, Jelly Roll Morton's "Murder Ballad" tells the story of a woman who kills her lover's mistress and is sentenced to a "natural life" of hard labor in prison. In first person narration, Jelly Roll delivers an explicit, brutally deadpan account of inevitable incarceration with his piano's repetitive melody signaling the endless march of prison days. "Murder Ballad" offers a warning about the poison of jealousy, but the real threat is that the prosecutor says "today we're dishing out years." This composite "she" begins her tale by declaring: "This ain't no slavery time, and I'm sure that I'm free." By the song's conclusion, however, she dwells on the prison funeral that awaits, bidding: "Goodbye to world because I know I'm gone. . . They will put me in a box in the prison yard, not even a tombstone or a card."<sup>1</sup> At the end, the song's measured repetition has already established what "natural life" will seal that graveyard fate: "The keeper said hard labor is your task. . . your number is nine ninety three, start to working under that great big tree, coffee and bread is all that you will get, outside when it rains you will sure get wet. . ." Each line is repeated two or three times, the

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<sup>1</sup> All song lyrics taken from "Murder Ballad," rec. 1938, *Jelly Roll Morton: The Complete Library of Congress Recordings by Alan Lomax*, Rounder Records, 2005.

labor of the singing miming the long work days that await the prisoner. Her “free” life is undone as she is stripped of personhood and interpellated as a numbered convict laborer, for whom the walls and gates of the prison afford no protection. This prison landscape, one of the twentieth-century “neoplantations” I will consider in the pages that follow, is a cultural geography that is both bounded and boundaryless. That is, it is cordoned off by property lines and jurisdiction but depends on a cultivated authority which extends far beyond those markers in the minds of its inmates and in communities it polices. Within the neplantation, racialized and sexualized subjects are stripped of citizenship and basic human needs. As Jelly Roll's song goes: “prison walls ain't made for people to go.” But in that ever-expanding institution, new forms of resistance emerge. For Jelly Roll's female convict, this takes the form of a sexual encounter with another female prisoner, about whom she says, “I could learn to love like I did that boy.” This scene of pleasure is violently wrenched from the totalizing control of the neplantation. The song offers a meditation on the desperate nature of intimacy in a culture of state-sanctioned violence. Such moments of rupture and containment motivate my study of cultural memory in the U.S. South in the era of Jim-Crow segregation. As twentieth-century texts invoke the plantation past in order to respond to its more nascent incarnations, they speak to its failures as a totalizing regime and to the fundamental fissures in its logic of race, sexuality and empire.

In part those fissures are made evident when plantation nostalgia meets neplantation counter-memory. Just two years before Jelly Roll Morton's song was recorded, Margaret Mitchell's epic novel *Gone with the Wind* was published and quickly became a bestselling book of its era, thereby establishing the antebellum Southern

plantation as a cultural icon with staying power. Mitchell's narrative of a plantation life in peril that, once destroyed, is resurrected by the will of the white South would become an ever-adaptable franchise. The *Gone with the Wind* industry would produce an academy-award-winning film, sequels, and innumerable copycat texts into the twenty-first century (most recently a commercial failure-- a *Gone with the Wind* musical staged in London in 2008).<sup>2</sup> In both the circulation of the text and the development of its narrative, the plantation "modernized." The novel's incorrigible central character, Scarlett O'Hara, restores her family's plantation past by adapting forms of unfree labor. She makes her money selling lumber that will be used for the rebuilding of Atlanta with workers who are convicts leased to her by the state. The brutal treatment of those workers earns her a reputation for ruthlessness, while the profits she earns provide the means to restore the Tara plantation for the post-slavery era. In Mitchell's vision, slave labor's resistance to the plantation structure is sublimated and transformed into Scarlett's refusal to take orders. The trope of humility stands in for plantation discipline. Mitchell's strategic erasure and Jelly Roll Morton's defiant dirge both invoke the salience of the slave plantation past and its reinvention for a neplantation present. In doing so, they perform the persistence of race and class-based structures of inequality, though to different ends. While Mitchell's novel is bent on naturalizing those hierarchies (though she makes a new place for the Scarletts of the South), Morton's song implicitly criticizes the legal and extralegal forces that retool the plantation for a new day. As both a white supremacist fantasy and a material structure, the "Old South" plantation died a discursive death so that it might be reborn. Or, as Scarlett

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/columnists/article-556688/Darius-Danesh-damned-fine-hero.html> for more on the musical production.

puts it, “tomorrow is another day.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout “Plantation States,” I put texts with different ideological frameworks in conversation with one another, in order to consider how the neplantation functioned as a means to ground and/or to contest the adaptation of the plantation to new modes of production and accumulation of surplus labor for a modern “New South” era.

The plantation of the U.S. South rose to power as a system of labor, a social architecture, a mode of production, and a cultural geography in direct relation to the transatlantic slave trade. A structure of mastery and subjection was reproduced through the architecture of its “Big Houses” and slave quarters and through the blueprints of its fields, mills, and cotton gins. Its landscapes and interiors conferred sovereignty and dominion upon just a few, while its laboring majority was perpetually subjugated to the boundaryless confines of plantation space and time. As systems of race-based enslavement of Africans were tailored to different political and economic contexts in the U.S., the Caribbean, and Latin America, so too was the plantation adapted to different landscapes, products, and markets. Cultures of plantation slavery were as mobile and marketable as the economies that produced and sustained them. In the U.S. South, plantation slavery made cotton kings and famous novelists. The plantation state/slave colony always depended upon collusions between capital and the state in the production of markets and citizenship. From that often tense collusion, however, dangerous, desiring and revolutionary subjects were born. While plantation narratives justified slavery by occluding the role of capital and the state in the formation of racial, sexual, and labor hierarchies, slave narratives represented the plantation as a site of violent excess and barbaric disorder. In the twentieth-century cultural

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<sup>3</sup> *Gone with the Wind* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1936) 1037.



texts I analyze, that dynamic tension was played out in restagings and retellings of the plantation as a living memory, as a palimpsest of contested histories.

In dominant historical and literary periodizations, it is often assumed that emancipation and the democratizing and modernizing reforms that followed formally dismantled the architectures of plantation slavery. Cultural texts of the twentieth-century South, however, suggest that the plantation was both resilient and mobile. In this dissertation, I argue that in the Jim Crow era, specifically the period from 1900 to 1945, the plantation was reconstructed as a critical site of identification and disidentification. For the abolition of slavery did not ultimately undo entrenched relations of power and economies of culture. Instead, as Saidiya Hartman argues: “emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection.”<sup>4</sup> Legal freedom did not abolish the plantation's foundations, which continued to map patterns of servitude and subjection onto land, labor, and politics; but instead the plantation, built to withstand dramatic changes, was adapted as an apparatus of the “modern” Southern state. As an institution that naturalized order, the plantation was always ruled with the threat of revolution in mind. In its twentieth-century forms, specters of post-emancipation disorder dictated how the plantation would be reimagined in order to diffuse black political and economic power and the threat of working class resistance in general.

In 1955, geographer Merle Purty introduced the idea of the “neoplantation” as an adaptation of the plantation model for the mid-twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> For Purty, the neoplantation conformed to a set of parameters: the prevalence of large landholdings

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4 *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 6.

5 “The Renaissance of the Southern Plantation,” *Geographical Review* 45.4 (1955): 459-491.

devoted to the production of specialized crops, with centralized management controlling the means and modes of production, in a location in the U.S. South historically devoted to plantation-style agricultural production, and characterized by distinctive spatial layouts and settlement patterns of management and labor.<sup>6</sup> According to his study, accounts of the plantation's disintegration or disappearance confused devolution with modification. As he and his student Charles Aiken would argue, those declaring the plantation's demise had wrongly assumed that the plantation depended upon slavery, when in fact slavery had depended upon the plantation. Aiken provides evidence that, at the turn of the twentieth century, when the death of the plantation was being mourned most profusely, it was in fact, "at the height of its numerical and spatial importance."<sup>7</sup> While this small group of geographers and historians has paid attention to the plantation's adaptations, formulated as the neoplantation, this concept has been absent from the field of Southern literary and cultural studies.<sup>8</sup> While I rely on the material evidence of the neoplantation as an ongoing geographical organization of land, labor, and production, I reformulate this concept as a way to conceptualize twentieth-century culture and memory as well. For the geographers, the neoplantation was necessarily located in parts of the South that had historically experienced this spatial arrangement, and so implicitly they acknowledge the neoplantation as relying on a particular culture of race and labor. This dissertation complicates their formulation of the neoplantation by looking to neoplantation culture, which I see as a crucial part of its expansion and change. I examine the ongoing dialectical relationship

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6 Purty 460.

7 *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998) 8.

8 Clyde Woods's recent article, "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?: Katrina, Trap Economics, and the Rebirth of the Blues," is as far as I know the only exception to this. To trace the origins of New Orleans's tragedy in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, he considers how structural racism has been adapted to late twentieth-century U.S. political rhetoric and economic policy, or what he calls "neoplantation politics." *American Quarterly* 57.4 (2005: 1005-1018).

between adapted plantation models and modernized forms of enslavement. I begin with the turn of the century, the height of neoplantation “numerical and spatial” importance and the height of discourses that mourned its death, and I conclude in the mid-century when black exodus and increased mechanization had presumably culminated in yet another (discursive) death of the plantation.

During this period, I analyze the neoplantation as a mobilization of the plantation past through cultural forms, as a structure and a cultural geography that accompanied the nation-state in its quest for imperial territory, and as a structure adapted by the state for a model of incarceration. As much as I choose this moment based on the plantation's prominent place on the twentieth-century map of the U.S. South, I consider it an era in which the plantation traveled and took on new institutional trappings, ushering in yet another cycle of development, mobility, resistance, and decline. During these decades, the “neoplantation” inevitably colluded with the segregated Jim Crow state resulting in a kind of “neoplantation state,” which adapted capitalist modes of labor and production to the state's interests in preserving limited access to citizenship and vice versa. Formations of race and sexuality were mobilized at strategic moments as a means to justify neoplantation technologies of subjection. In 1896, the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalized racially segregated railway cars, effectively restricting the sexual and economic mobility of black men and women and mandating white women's allegiance to white heteropatriarchy. The constructed threat of the black male rapist mobilized lynching campaigns which murdered black men and women by the thousands from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. Around 1900, state-led disfranchisement of black male voters in the forms of the poll tax, the grandfather clause, and the institution of restricted primary

systems resulted in registration rates that, in some cases, dropped nearly one hundred percent from the 1890s to the early 1900s. A nationwide anti-miscegenation law proposed to Congress in 1912 did not pass but was supported by state politicians throughout the U.S. Meanwhile imperial subjects of U.S. rule in sites such as Haiti were imagined as hyper-sexual and homosexual and sexual violence was used as a weapon against those occupied communities. Sexology and racial science became influential discourses while penologists debated the merits of conjugal visitation policies and the problem of homosexuality in prison. In so many ways, race and sex became regional and national obsessions.<sup>9</sup>

Concurrently, resistant cultural workers and activists contested discourses and practices that engendered spaces of cultural and political unfreedom. Neoplantation intimacies—between blackness and whiteness, normative and nonnormative sexuality, capital and state boundaries, and nation and empire—produced volatile, and sometimes “criminal,” subjects who alternately sought recognition, justice, and revolution. Throughout, I will consider texts that suggest that the neoplantation was not an anachronism or an aberration but was instead key to twentieth-century formations of democracy and modernity. Through cultural analysis, I demonstrate how the ever-adaptable plantation, as a contested terrain of memory and political economy, produced subjects who exceeded the boundaries of region and nation. Thus the “plantation state” also indicates a critical subject position from which to interrogate the violent production of modernity.

In Richard Gray's analysis of the enduring symbols of the plantocracy in the twentieth-century industrialization of the region, he asserts that “in the postbellum South,

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<sup>9</sup> See Robyn Wiegman's *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) or Nayan Shah's *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2001).

the New and the Old frequently found a means of accommodation.”<sup>10</sup> Though the “new”/“old” dichotomy was meant to signal the region's transformation from a pre-modern secessionist slave society into the welcoming site of industry, Northern capital investment, and racial cooperation, as Gray implies, the transition between eras might be better thought of as a kind of surrogation.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the very “newness” of the region paradoxically relied upon the continued reconstruction of an Old South mythos and ideology. My dissertation considers how Jim Crow era cultural texts are defined in terms of the past, and in particular, how the plantation, as metonym for the antebellum South, serves as a locus of cultural memory and as a set of reproducible technologies with concrete material effects on its workers. This means looking for the plantation as a sometimes discrete, sometimes explicit entity, which is perhaps more often invoked than named. Drawing from the formulations of Antonio Benítez-Rojo, my analysis assumes that the plantation acts as “a proliferating regularity,” which models itself across disparate temporalities and spatialities, but that “it is precisely these differences that confer upon the Plantation its ability to survive and to keep transforming itself, whether facing the challenge of slavery's abolition, or the arrival of independence, or the adoption of a socialist mode of production.”<sup>12</sup> Paradoxically then, the

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10 *Southern Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000) 40. Late nineteenth-century Atlanta orator Henry Grady popularized this antithetical distinction between the Old and New South eras, proclaiming that the South of slavery and secession was dead, and that the New South that replaced it favored reconciliation with the Union.

11 Surrogation in Joseph Roach's sense is defined as an ongoing process that is predicated on a failure to replace that which has been lost, or failure to arrive at an unattainable origin: “In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric.” *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia U P, 1996) 2.

12 *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992) 74. Though the plantation might be analyzed as a paradigmatic model when approached from the macro-level, the differences in colonialisms, histories of plantation labor resistance, and geographic specificity, among other factors, ensured that the plantation would function and mean quite differently depending on its position in space and history.

plantation survives as an ordering construct because it models “repetition with a difference.” The twentieth-century institutionalization of its structural elements in the service of regional, national, and imperial projects has much to do with its prominent, and contentious, place within cultural memory.

Cultural memory signifies a space in which personal and community histories often operate in tension with official or sanctioned accounts of national or regional development.<sup>13</sup> Dominant historical narratives have been tailored to exclude memories that cannot be easily assimilated or integrated. In her study of Asian American cultures of immigration, *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe states:

Culture is the medium of the present--the imagined equivalences and identifications through which the individual invents lived relationship with the national collective--but it is simultaneously that site that mediates the past, through which history is grasped as difference, as fragments, shocks, and flashes of disjunction. It is through culture that the subject becomes, acts, and speaks itself as "American." It is likewise in culture that individuals and collectivities struggle and remember and, in that difficult remembering, imagine and practice both subject and community differently.<sup>14</sup>

If culture is the realm in which history is “grasped as difference,” disquieting memories can also work across time and space to apprehend history as continuity, as a disturbing “sameness.” In this dissertation, I gather texts that consequently often point to the need to reassess narratives of modernity and progress. I include texts such as newspapers, folklore, and songs, which lie outside the traditional bounds of the literary, precisely because more narrowly literary avenues of representation more often than not are limited to those memories that support dominant narratives. Therefore, I deploy a cultural studies

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<sup>13</sup> In my use of “cultural memory,” I am drawing from Marita Sturken's formulation that cultural memory calls attention to important and strategic forgettings which delimit collective narratives. *Tangled Memories: the Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996) 2-3.

methodology, which values interdisciplinarity and textual diversity, in order to present a more nuanced depiction of plantation cultures past and present.<sup>15</sup> Like the African-American studies tradition I am indebted to, I do not imagine that cultural memory provides access to a transparent and full depiction of plantation life past or present.<sup>16</sup> After all, the violences of history assure that some stories remain unrecoverable and unspeakable. For this reason, “Plantation States” examines “flashes of disjunction” rather than narratives of resolution. As an alternative, I create an intertextual dialogue by reading dominant cultural depictions in relation to those that expose the struggles and difficulties of reconciling the slave plantation's past with the realities of post-emancipation oppression.

In my formulation, the neplantation maintains the racial hierarchies of the slave plantation, in which “whiteness” depends upon an architecture of mastery and “blackness” serves as its constitutive outside. Though twentieth-century segregation signified a shift in paradigmatic practices of subjection, it did not fundamentally depart from slavery's ideological foundations.<sup>17</sup> However, segregation further expanded *who* might claim white power and who would be deemed a black threat, and therefore subject to state and extralegal violence or “terror” at any moment. The neplantation state interpellated white subjects, regardless of their class status, as citizen-soldiers. As C. Vann Woodward puts it:

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15 A cultural studies approach affords a more complex view of how texts make meaning in relation to the social forces at work in a given moment. As such, I am inspired by the ongoing cultural studies work of scholars like Stuart Hall, Lisa Lowe, Lauren Berlant, George Lipsitz, Michael Denning, Ann Stoler, among many others.

16 For example, I implicitly and explicitly look to the work of scholars such as Angela Davis, Hazel Carby, Cedric Robinson, Toni Morrison, Orlando Patterson, Hortense Spillers, and Sharon Holland for models of inquiry and approaches to African-American cultural history.

17 While I do not want to naturalize the development of neplantation structures as inevitable successors of the slave plantation (thereby erasing ruptures and tensions before, during, and after Reconstruction that spoke to the myriad ways in which social formations might well have been lived quite differently, and sometimes were), I am interested in the enduring continuities between the plantation and the neplantation in order to understand how race and sexuality defined the region in such codified terms.

“Jim Crow laws put the authority of the state or city in the voice of the street-car conductor, the railway brakeman, the bus driver, the theater usher, and also in the voice of the hoodlum of the public parks and playgrounds.”<sup>18</sup> He reminds us that though codified racial formations had much to do with the exigencies of racism, Jim Crowism always exceeded its legal parameters. The white lynch mob has, since Ida B. Wells's “Red Record,” been seen as the most explicit example of this phenomenon: white communities are granted the authority to supersede the state as they go into jails, “arrest” black suspects (often on accusations of raping white women), and then murder them in public displays of mutilation and, often sexual, dismemberment. Though I do not specifically consider lynching in this dissertation, my project, in a conceptual sense, freezes that scene—of the white mob entering the jailhouse—and considers how cultural discourses of race and sexuality frame the convergence of white impunity and state violence. How does this collective violence gain legitimacy? How are witnesses and victims of collective trauma silenced? In what ways do these witnesses serve as resistant spectators? In the critical tradition of Ida B. Wells and contemporary African-Americanist studies of performance and culture, I treat white mob violence as a cultural formation rather than a history of isolated spectacles.<sup>19</sup> In the cultural texts I consider, agents of violence, sometimes in uniform, sometimes not, exploit narratives of racial and sexual excess, thereby routinizing the violence of the neoplantation order. Counter-memories revisit that relationship between the spectacle and the everyday, between the plantation and its successors, as a means to articulate loss and resistance.

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18 *The Strange Career of Jim Crow: A Brief Account of Segregation* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1955) 93.

19 See Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *On Lynching* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2002); Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996).



In “Plantation States,” I consider three different neoplantation contexts: the theatrical staging of terror and the Atlanta white riot of 1906, the U.S. occupation of Haiti and the culture of Jim Crow empire, and the Southern penitentiary system and the development of the chain gang.

I see this era as one in which “the South,” as a spatial and temporal imaginary, is mobilized, if often disavowed, in the service of the nation-state and its designs on imperial expansion into sites such as Haiti. In what follows, I seek to augment and complicate Michael Rogin's notion that “the South [was] not a defeated part of the American past but a prophecy of its future.”<sup>20</sup> In particular, I am interested in how cultural texts addressed the durability and portability of the paternalist plantation model for imperial “futures.” As the U.S. imperial conquests of 1898 in Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and Guam, and later Haiti in 1914, brought millions of people of color under the jurisdiction of U.S. control, politicians from every region denounced the possibility of citizenship for imperial subjects. Discourses of barbarism and civilization fueled both domestic exclusion of people of color and imperial expansions of military domination. While exclusionary practices and racial hierarchies had never been the trademark of the South solely, the South was frequently invoked as signifier of segregating and subjugating regimes.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, during this same period, white riots erupted at the start of the century in deep South urban capitals such as New Orleans (1900) and Atlanta (1906), and violently divided urban

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20 “The Sword Became a Flashing Vision.” *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: U California P, 1987) 194-5.

21 See Woodward, 54. This paradigm was then always available as a way to disassociate, when convenient, from violent Southern racism and its antidemocratic laws when the nation came under attack for its hypocritical claims to being a democratizing or liberatory imperial presence. See Nikhil Pal Singh's article “Culture/Wars: Recoding Empire in an Age of Democracy,” for a consideration of this paradigm during the Cold War era. He argues that the logic of the cold war depended upon the abjection of the South, slavery, and Jim Crowism. *American Quarterly* 50.3 (1998): 471-522.

centers across the country in the nineteen-teens, as the streets of Springfield, Illinois, East St. Louis, Missouri, Houston and Chicago erupted in stagings of racial terror. These riots have been historically explained in relation to the Great Migration of African-American laborers from the agricultural South to the industrial centers of the North and the West, and in relation to World War I and the radicalization of black soldiers returning from war.<sup>22</sup> While the demands of black laborers and soldiers for citizenship and mobility were certainly met with white resistance, I want to suggest that racialized violence was overdetermined by the demands of capital and the regulations of the state. As capital demanded surplus labor in these urban centers, spurring the movement of black and white laborers, the state sought to preserve a disposable workforce through criminalization and imprisonment. Throughout the U.S., capital and the state in tandem produced the conditions for racialized violence and the emergence of racialized sexual subjects in both rural and urban environments. The resultant patterns of mobility and immobility consequently characterize cultural narratives of the neplantation.

Cultural memory and structured inequalities testified to the resilience of the plantation past. In Atlanta's newspapers, Harlem's plays about Haiti, Faulkner's novels, and chain gang narratives, to name a few, the plantation is more than just a backdrop, it's a narrative structure of power. In cultural texts, the map of the "big house," with its slave quarters surrounded by a landscape of confinement, adapts to fit industrial mill towns, urban neighborhoods, imperial islands, and penal architectures. In the historical context that surrounds the production of these texts, the neplantation, as a stratified, paternalist model of labor, influences the development of interstate infrastructure, expansion, and

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<sup>22</sup> See for example W.E.B. Du Bois's "Souls of White Folk," *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Dover, 1999) 17-29.

industrialization. The Big House symbolically, and sometimes literally, suggests the institutional sanctum of the prison warden, the military's imperial government, the mill owner, and state officials. In cultural representations of the neoplantation, emancipation renders bodies/subjects as liminal and disposable. They are “free” to sell themselves into neoplantation “slavery” and become reproducible surplus labor through state processes of segregation, imperialism, and criminalization. In my analysis, cultural representations reveal how the neoplantation polices private spaces through public dictum. While anti-miscegenation laws most obviously prohibited sexual intimacy between “the races,” all laws prescribing racialized boundaries carried with them the power to criminalize interracial contact when deemed inappropriate. Therefore, the codes of segregation did not prohibit intimacy so much as they worked to establish the state as an ever-watchful eye. As historians of segregation such as C. Vann Woodward suggest, the slave plantation relied upon intimate contact between whites and blacks to maintain constant surveillance, while the post-Reconstruction era sought to prevent intimacy in every detail of life, from the streetcar to the bible on the witness stand. In this view of Jim Crow-ism, racial difference was made evident through imposed and codified social distance and any number of visual markers that made race legible on streets, buildings, signs, or legal documents.

We have to extend this view of segregation, however, to consider how bodies became marked within those spaces as both *desiring* and *desirable* in relation to those marked differently by race and gender. As much as segregationist discourse marked and mapped spaces, it also marked bodies and behaviors. However, the Jim Crow neoplantation state always denied its presence at the scene of its crimes--institutions sanitized state violence. The liberal state rendered itself as a humanist adjudicator, and so functioned as an

intermediary between various modes of domination and the black, poor, and sexually nonnormative subjects whom they sought to control. Legal discourses were supplemented by racial science, sexology, and penology, among other “scientific” studies, which shored up racialized notions of normativity. This amounts to what Siobhan Somerville calls “the queer career of Jim Crow.”<sup>23</sup>

Somerville argues that “the color line” both policed and produced desiring sexualized subjects. George Chauncey states that early twentieth-century theories of homosexuality shifted from an “inversion” model, which considered homosexual subjects as inversely gendered (following Freud's model of the invert as the man trapped in a woman's body or vice versa) to a theory that homosexuality was characterized by improper object choice.<sup>24</sup> Homosexuality, then, became as much about practices and desires as embodiment. Concomitantly, formations of racial identity came to be viewed in relation to desire and practices that posed a threat to reproduction. Somerville's examination of early twentieth-century sexology and racial science discourse suggests that those subjects who crossed the color line, in terms of racial identification (the paradigmatic “mulatto”) and/or in terms of sexual desire, were linked to the queer(ed) subject who transgressed male/female and/or homosexual/heterosexual binaries. The discourses that bolstered racial segregation were co-constitutive with the discourses that mandated compulsory heterosexuality and normative gender roles. Threats to the notion of racial “purity” were defined by representations of bodies, and, increasingly, discursive formations of desire, which exceeded or frustrated scopical and/or performative regimes of containment. Inspired

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23 *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000).

24 Cited in Somerville, 16: “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conception of Female Deviance.” *Salmagundi* 58-59 (fall-winter 1982): 114-46.

by the work of Somerville and others, I consider how diverse discourses and disciplines intersected in the production of Southern ideals and aberrations. In particular, I examine the neoplantation as an arbiter of racial and sexual regulation.<sup>25</sup>

Following Roderick Ferguson's argument that capital produces subjects who transgress state boundaries, I consider the neoplantation as a structure that produces deviant subjects who resist the terms of their subjugation and exclusion.<sup>26</sup> Ferguson's queer of color critique is one of the important theoretical frameworks for my dissertation. From this perspective, I consider subject formation in relation to the state's regulation of citizenship and the development of capital. In line with Judith Butler's theorization of gender “performativity,” a queer of color critique rejects essentializing or biological constructions of queer identity (from notions of “inversion” and psychological disorder to the “gay gene”), and instead sees sexuality as historically situated and socially constructed. It advances Butler's theories, however, by positing race and labor as central to constructions of sexual norms and aberrations. Queer subjectivity is always already racialized, so common discourses that analogize race and sexuality—those that argue that sexuality functions “like race” (common today in arguments for the legalization of gay marriage)--are rendered, at best, incomplete. Instead, discourses of race and sexuality are co-constitutive and historically and materially interdependent.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, a queer of color

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25 Throughout, I consider formations of race and sexuality as always in process, as discursive constructs that shaped, and were shaped by, bodies and material conditions. At a basic level, I rely on Michael Omi and Howard Winant's theory of racial formation: *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1986), and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity: *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

26 In Ferguson's formulation, “capital requires the transgression of space and the creation of possibilities for intersection and convergence. Capital, therefore, calls for subjects who must transgress the material and ideological boundaries of community, family, and nation.” *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 17.

27 Queer of color critique, then, draws from feminist of color activists and theorists who have insisted that women are differently positioned based on race and class status, as well as by experiences such as

critique disidentifies with Marx's notion of historical materialism on account of Marx's investment in heteropatriarchal norms. In this disidentification, however, a historical materialist framework is not dismissed but reformulated to consider how subjects, such as black transgender sex workers or genderqueer prisoners, might be seen as agents of critique, rather than simply a symbol of capitalist degradation. A queer of color critique reclaims the abject as a point of departure rather than a point of devolution. This is particularly useful to an understanding of the plantation-- as an institution, a cultural geography, an economic formation—that has historically produced aberrant subjects. The neplantation, which proliferates under codified segregation laws, imperial efforts, and the criminalization of racialized communities, then, offers an important site for a queer of color critique. The neplantation narrative's conflict and resolution often underscore the extent to which capital's development both frustrates and depends upon state boundaries of citizenship and sovereignty.

While I certainly accept the premise that segregation disrupted the formations of white/black intimacy under slavery and created physical, economic, and social distance between differently racialized subjects, I argue that the Jim Crow era did not attenuate the bonds between blackness and whiteness but produced new terrains of intimacy and (dis)identification within racial and sexual formations. Jim Crow segregation, and by extension Jim Crow empire, might best be seen as a structured intimacy rather than an imposed distance. After all, segregation functioned because of proximity, contact, and

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immigration and cultural/national identifications. As such, they have advocated that feminist movements not only have to acknowledge those differences and to hold white feminist movements accountable for their problematic universalization of women's rights issues, but to forge cross-racial, cross-class alliances in order to criticize nationalist and racist heteropatriarchy. See for example the work of M. Jacqui Alexander, Chandra Mohanty, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga.

recognition. Furthermore, the expansionist logic of U.S. imperialism in the early twentieth century proceeded under the flag of white supremacist ideology as well as its bifurcated racial segregationist policies of regulated intimacy. Blackness and whiteness were performed (and redefined) every time a customer stepped onto a streetcar, or into a theater, or when they labored alongside one another on a chain gang, or when they confronted one another on the battlefields of empire. If segregation resulted in the mapping of spaces and the delineation of bodies, then the neplantation was its corollary.<sup>28</sup> Neplantation subjects denaturalized processes of segregation and spoke to the violences of not only the region but the imperial nation. They called attention to the ways in which the “outside” worked to constitute the “inside” and the normative, the citizen and the non-citizen, the free and the unfree, often by performing the tensions of differently racialized bodies in contact with one another.

My first chapter, “Staging Terror: The Performance of Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* and the Atlanta White Riot of 1906,” looks at productions of plantation romance on the Southern stage and the phenomenon of early twentieth-century urban white riots. Beginning on September 22, 1906, thousands of white Atlantans attacked African Americans, their businesses and property, as well as streetcar passengers. The violence, which continued for four days and resulted in at least 25 deaths and countless injured black Atlantans, exclusively targeted spaces and bodies racialized as black.<sup>29</sup> In deeming the

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28 In this analysis, I do not want to suggest that segregation and the proliferation of the plantation in new forms were confined to the practices of the U.S. South. In fact, Woodward and many others have long since argued that “Southern” Jim Crow more closely resembles the Northern practices of racialized social geographies and structural inequality that were developed in the antebellum era and afterward in Northern and Western urban and rural sites. See *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*.

29 Reports on the death toll and the number of injured vary drastically and due to the role that the mainstream press and state institutions played in inciting the riot, there is no way to ascertain exactly how many people were victims of the riot or how much material damage was done. This count is based on the official record as cited in Mark Bauerline, *Negrophobia: A Race Riot in Atlanta, 1906* (San Francisco:

physical assaults, structural damage, and racial/sexual terror inflicted on black communities in Atlanta a *white* riot, I draw from the work of Sheila Smith McKoy to emphasize how white violence has been historically obscured, particularly in contexts of *de jure* segregation. My analysis of this play, which was both a regional and national success, and the riot reveals that terror often relies on inversion: hegemonic groups/nations ensure totalizing power through violence/terror while assigning the role of terrorist to those who pose threats to its organizing principles. This inversion attempts to render injustice and injury perpetrated against black communities as unintelligible, as outside the realm of possible narrative frameworks. Both “terrorism” and “riots” are positioned as excessive-- beyond legal boundaries and control and as detached from the state. The white supremacist “Invisible Empire” advocated that African Americans be denied all rights to citizenship and “expatriated” from the nation and sent to imperial sites such as Liberia. In this context, the neoplantation represents a cross-class, white alliance that ensures its mastery through collective performances of terror, propagated through cultural outlets and sanctioned by the state. In this neoplantation vision, whiteness, rather than land or wealth, is an embodied and discursive property that confers power, if unequally. The neoplantation of urban Atlanta takes the form of a racialized social geography. That geography is reflected in the constraints on black mobility, both socially and materially, as the neoplantation police relegated black communities to the poorest living conditions with the least infrastructure and with only the paternalist's false promise of access to privilege.

Through analysis of Dixon's antithetical response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the performance of the Atlanta riot, I interrogate the relationship between racial and sexual

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Encounter Books, 2001), and Gregory Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot: Race, Class, and Violence in a New South City* (UP Florida: Gainesville, 2005).



violence and its common venues: the stage and the street. The policing and lynching of unruly plantation workers and representatives of Black Reconstruction within Dixon's play cloak extralegal violence in melodramatic affect.<sup>30</sup> In the conventions of racial melodrama, “virtue,” the body's sexual currency, signifies property, rights, and ownership in need of protection. In the logic of racial melodrama, that virtue is particularly performed by white women suffering at the hands of black men, while black women function as protective sympathizers. In this white heteropatriarchal myth, spectacles of rape and tears are wedded to the event of slave emancipation. For Dixon, terror and nostalgia are ingredients in a white supremacist vision of modernity and the Ku Klux Klan is the bastion of progress. This narrative and the white supremacist cultural movement it called for imagined the neoplantation and attempted to impose its blueprint on the urban center of Atlanta through the theatrical spectacle of violence.

I consider the play and the subsequent riot as part of a performance genealogy, with modes of what Joseph Roach calls “surrogation” ensuring continuities between one “performance” and the next.<sup>31</sup> I examine how legal and cultural associations of blackness with crime and hyper-sexuality disallowed the prosecution of white rioters and further accommodated so-called “Old South” ideologies and practices within Atlanta, Georgia, the designated pillar of the New South. The local newspapers not only participated in the celebration of Dixon's play but also produced sensational accounts of race-sex panic that incited white violence. The newspapers' accounts of black men invading the private space of the white woman's bedroom were used to shore up policies of social and economic

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30 “Black Reconstruction” is the term used by W.E.B. Du Bois to reference the post-emancipation period when freed slaves asserted their rights to citizenship, as well as social and economic justice. See *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

31 *Cities of the Dead*, 2.

segregation and political disfranchisement. As in Dixon's drama, the ballot box was strategically conflated with the white woman's womb. Atlanta's so-called "vice district" was an early target of the press and the rioters, suggesting the extent to which discourses of "degeneracy" structured scenes of violence. In analyzing the riot through the lens of performance studies, I argue that spectators play an active role in the orchestration and contestation of violence. I analyze specific scenes of the riot to consider how white violence meant to terrorize black communities in Atlanta as a whole and to consider how some of those who witnessed and testified to that violence served as "resistant spectators." These "disordering" performances are examined alongside the activist African-American journalists of the *Voice of the Negro* who spoke out against Dixon, the riot, and U.S. imperialism. In line with those journalists, this chapter theorizes Dixon's nostalgic plantation drama as a state-sanctioned performance of terror, which helped to foment the subsequent violence inflicted upon African-American bodies and property.

Performance studies provides a methodology with which to examine Dixon's drama as more than a piece of propaganda--as a staging of white power that not only legitimates white violence but calls it into existence in particular ways. This analytical frame allows for a consideration of how embodied performance produces knowledge and animates future performances. It also insists that modes of performance can and must supplement our understandings of written texts. This becomes especially crucial in contexts such as the Atlanta riot because state officials and news outlets were quick to silence accounts of the violence that contradicted theirs. From Diana Taylor's consideration of "the archive" and "the repertoire," I take the approach that institutional archives preserve texts and histories contoured to projects of dominance and delimitation. In particular, the

literature of the archive excludes other ways of knowing and remembering that counter hegemonic narratives of encounter and conflict, in search of resolution. The repertoire, on the other hand, produces epistemologies through orality, storytelling, and embodied movement that have historically been performed by the colonized subject. In Joseph Roach's theorization of surrogation, he suggests that with each performance, something is lost, and each subsequent performance seeks to return to an unattainable origin (exemplified in saying: "The king is dead! Long live the king"). Resistant spectatorship exposes the instability of white supremacist and plantation origin myths, announcing its inconsistencies and its failures. The testimonies and collective organizing of such spectators reframed the mobilization of the "lost cause" as an animation of Old South fantasy in the service of New South modernity. A performance studies approach theorizes spectatorship as a dynamic, often collective process that carries with it the potential to resist that which it is called to witness.

The second chapter, "(Almost) Black, (Almost) Queer: The Shifting of Southern Boundaries and the U.S. Occupation of Haiti," analyzes how modernist and historical revisions represent the plantation of the transnational South as doomed by violations of an already compromised racial and sexual order. Through analysis of African-American anti-imperial texts, travel narratives, anthropological studies, and William Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, which were produced during the U.S. occupation of Haiti, I argue that queerness and blackness converged in depictions of unstable plantation empires "at home" and "abroad." Though many of the texts written by U.S. authors during the occupation were set during an earlier historical moment—such as the plays and novels written by Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes—I argue that those Haitian plantation narratives of

slavery and revolution inevitably spoke to the concerns of a neoplantation present. Likewise, the anthropological studies of Zora Neale Hurston and Melville Herskovitz traced the developments of Haitian culture, especially folk cultures, as a continuous struggle of preservation and adaptation throughout the various phases of colonial, national, and imperial plantation systems. The Haitian plantation in conflagration remained a potent and relevant narrative for both Haitians and U.S. audiences because, despite having overthrown colonial slavery a century earlier in Haiti, and having granted emancipation to slaves in the decades previous, U.S. neoplantation structures continued to impede black liberation. In the black radical and anthropological texts that sought to honor Haitian difference, the plantation, as a structure that demands unfreedom from its laborers, shapes sexual formations and practices that develop in spite of and in opposition to its boundaries.

In this chapter, I consider how representations of the neoplantation regions of the U.S. South and Haiti, in particular, charted ongoing relationships of proximity and interconnectedness. Stories of Haitian resistance are told by U.S. Americans through stories of romance and desire that often transgress U.S. cultural constructs of the heteronormative. U.S. American-authored texts then represented identifications and disidentifications through fraught intimacy within national and transnational plantation cultures. The U.S. occupation of Haiti, after all, depended on the mobilization of paternalism and exoticism, so central to the earlier colonial projects, in order to justify U.S. economic and military control over a people who had fought for over a century to stave off the slave plantation, colonial or otherwise. W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson assert that Southern whites had a powerful hand in shaping the U.S. imperial project in Haiti, which extended from methods of military domination to policies of segregation and economic development.

Mary Renda argues that Haiti was a part of the U.S. empire but was never “wholly ingested” into the national framework, and black activists suggest that this reflects U.S. domestic policies toward African Americans. Indeed, the U.S. failure to recognize Haiti’s sovereignty becomes a key trope of anti-imperialist, anti-racist texts representing the black republic during this era. Recognition functions on many levels to indicate an ongoing history of white heteropatriarchal planter power that did not acknowledge the inherent contradictions embedded in its claims to racial and sexuality “purity.” Faulkner’s novel *Absalom, Absalom!* takes up those contradictions as central to the inevitable fall of the Southern plantation. But importantly, he creates a Haitian character who embodies racial and sexual fluidity as the means to deconstruct the myth of plantation order. In this novel and in the larger twentieth-century cultural context in which it was produced and circulated, the transhistorical Haitian revolutionary stood for resistant imperial subjectivity. As the “Black Republic” and the only site of a successful slave-led rebellion, Haiti could not be easily integrated into a narrative of benevolent paternalism and naturalized plantation order. Occupation-era texts spoke to Haiti’s uneasy place within U.S. empire through the context of its early nineteenth century scenes of romance, revolution, and plantations ablaze.

I argue that “voodoo” Haiti was depicted as a site of racial and sexual excess and instability, where gender norms were thrown into flux and the plantation order was met with defiance.<sup>32</sup> In the texts that represented Haiti during this era, the perceived instability of race, gender, and sexuality in Haiti was inextricable from the desires and designs mobilized by empire. The U.S. imperial presence in Haiti made it possible for imperialists

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<sup>32</sup> “Voodoo” was the pejorative Americanized term for Haitian spiritual and social practices of voodoo. I use this term to emphasize the problematic portrayal of Haitians in U.S. popular culture.

and anti-imperialists alike to travel to, write about, and imagine Haiti as an object of consumption and a site of fascination. I consider how race and sexuality operate in representations of the Haitian plantation, as it signifies revolution and imperial designs. As previously mentioned, Siobhan Somerville argues that racial indeterminacy often converged with gender and sexual deviance in the discourses of sexology and racial science in the early twentieth century. By historicizing racial and sexual formations, anti-racist representations of Haiti sought to undermine those discourses. Sexualized “Mulatto” characters recurred in texts about Haiti, particularly those that staged the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath, as subjects who had been granted conditional access to colonial power and who therefore had reason to repress revolutionary plantation laborers. As is made evident in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, the category of mulatto evidenced the different racial and class stratifications within French colonialism as opposed to the U.S.'s increasingly binary constructions of blackness and whiteness, as they were codified in twentieth-century Jim Crow laws. In arguing that Faulkner's novel ought to be read in relation to the U.S. occupation of Haiti, I focus on the mixed-race Haitian-Southern character of Charles Bon as a transnational, queered subject of empire who seduces his white Southern half brother, Henry Sutpen, in an attempt to find inclusion and recognition within a heteropatriarchal plantation order. I read their queered relationship through the lens of neoplantation empire and argue that their failed (romantic/reproductive) union is signified by the quintessential U.S. figuration of abject Haiti: the zombie. I conclude my study of queer neoplantation depictions from this era by doing a comparative analysis of the zombie in *Absalom*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse*, and William Seabrook's *Magic Island*. The zombie figures not simply as the mythical detritus of the colonial slave

era or the product of “voodoo” potions. Rather, the zombie, like the ghosts of slavery that populate other depictions of Haiti, represents the neplantation formation of the liminal laborer, who in a post-emancipation, post-colonial world, remains socially dead.

While the Marines practiced techniques of domination on Haitian subjects and set up systems of unfree labor to build imperial infrastructure, the Southern penitentiary system worked to criminalize the mobile working class for its own modernizing needs. From its inception, the Southern prison disproportionately constrained black agricultural workers to a life indebted to either the state or private landowners. The first decades of the century importantly saw the transformation from the convict leasing system of the nineteenth century to the state-run chain gang plantation prison of the twentieth century. Matthew Mancini has argued that this system was characterized by the disposable, rather than reproducible, treatment of its laboring bodies, which might be summed up in the apothegm “one dies, get another.”<sup>33</sup> The outlawing of convict leasing which gave way to “prison reform,” or paradoxically, the institutionalization of the state-run Southern prison, did not result simply from humanitarian politics, but rather because “disfranchisement was on the way. . .the chain gang was on the rise, and convicts were becoming a burdensome expense to those who leased them.”<sup>34</sup> So the transition from the privatized convict leasing system to the state-run plantation prison might be seen as a strategic shift in economic control, but not perhaps as a dramatic sea-change, or indicative of ideological rupture.

In my third chapter, “The Carceral and the Conjugal: Neplantation Prison Resistance Literature and the Problem of Sexuality,” I examine 1930s and 1940s

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33 *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

34 Mancini 225. Mancini here deploys Foucault's theory about the “intimate interconnectedness of reform and oppression” (215).

neoplantation prison cultures and the relationship between the “criminal” and the “citizen.” In this study, I examine how race and sexuality were articulated through and by the figure of the prisoner in popular texts such as Robert Burns's 1932 nonfiction narrative *I Am a Fugitive From a Georgia Chain Gang!* and Carson McCullers's 1940 novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. By focusing largely on texts that articulate ideas about racialized sexuality from the viewpoint of prisoners, I am able to compare how prisoner subjectivities were structured by neoplantation technologies of segregation, surveillance, labor, and confinement. I draw from the growing body of prison studies pioneered by activist scholars such as Angela Davis and Joy James, whose research examines how the U.S. prison system has adapted the structures of slavery to create the prison-industrial-complex and a culture that normalizes the inevitability of prison for men and women of color and the poor.<sup>35</sup> I focus on an earlier moment in the development of a regional penitentiary system to mine earlier examples of prison resistance and to illuminate how the neoplantation has been foundational to transforming “the prison of slavery” into the “slavery of prison.”

All of the texts I examine might be considered to some degree either reformist or abolitionist. That is, they represent a flashpoint in Southern penal history when the conditions and methods of the prison were lambasted as barbaric, pre-modern, and inhumane. In developing this line of critique, these texts invariably drew parallels among incarceration, the chain gang, and the slave plantation. Reflecting the shift to penal structures that proposed to rehabilitate and reform the prisoner, they reaffirmed distinctions between the modern penitentiary and torture and between the backward South and the

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<sup>35</sup> See Joy James, ed., *States of Confinement: Policing, Detention, and Prisons* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1996); Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York : Seven Stories Press, 2003); Joy James, ed., *The Angela Y. Davis Reader* (Malden, Mass. : Blackwell, 1998).



progressive nation. However, I read texts such as Burns's *Fugitive* narrative and Angelo Herndon's 1937 autobiography *Let Me Live* against the grain to analyze how the neoplantation prison works in conjunction with the state to “modernize” infrastructure and industry by maintaining a racialized unfree labor supply. A 1904 Georgia “peon's” anonymous account of his life as an indentured plantation laborer places the contract at the crossroads of sharecropping and the chain gang. The contract, which ensured various forms of indebted, unfree labor, became the neoplantation's flexible method of limiting black working class mobility and adapting methods of subjection to the post-Reconstruction “New South” era. As he puts it ironically, the laborers “sold themselves into slavery.” Even before the convict leasing system was outlawed, then, processes by which plantation laborers would be criminalized or, at the very least, subjugated by a carceral culture were underway.

Applying Foucault's idea of the “carceral continuum” to the neoplantation prison, I examine prison formations that are both “mobile” and “contained” to examine how regimes of discipline and punishment operate across both temporal and spatial continuum. Specifically, I look at how the prison structures geographies and cultural memory beyond its institutional boundaries. Just as the chain gang “cages” moved from place to place, building highways and railroads, so too did the effects of racialized incarceration travel from prison camps to family homes. I read chain gang narratives, penitentiary stories, and prisoner-produced newspapers to consider how they render the prison as a manifold structuring force that precludes alliances and intimacies between prisoners, their families, and communities; on the other hand, prison life compels intimacies within the homosocial, segregated world of the prison that work to foster violence between inmates. Texts such as

Herndon's *Let Me Live* and Spivak's 1932 novel *Georgia Nigger* represent sexual acts and homosexual relationships between men as evidence of the prison's degradation. Sexuality became another means by which the state reduced black men in particular to beasts, or nonpersons. Even within prison farms such as Mississippi's Parchman penitentiary, which allowed for conjugal visits with wives and sexworkers, prisoners dismissed that “privilege” as another means by which they were surveilled by the state and denied intimacy.

Neoplantation prison subjectivity is defined by an overwhelming sense that the body in every way is penetrated by the mastery of the state. As a male-centric genre during this era, the prison narrative represents carceral sexuality as a perversion of the dominant/submissive paradigms of heterosexuality. I relate these prisoners' descriptions of prison sexuality and gender variance to the penological studies of prison sex that proliferated during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>36</sup> I place different projects of prison “reform” in the context of the emergent formation of prisoner (homo)sexuality and the neoplantation's technologies of subjection. Throughout this dissertation, I address who spoke about the prison and why, as well as the disciplines, institutions, or subjects that called for reform, and the basis for those reformist projects. I necessarily draw on several models of critique and cultural theory: namely, the tenets of “new abolitionist” anti-prison movements; theories of “neoslavery;” Foucault's theory of the birth of the modern penitentiary and its attendant regimes of discipline; and queer of color critiques of heteropatriarchy. While my work is limited in its scope, only focusing on male-authored texts and primarily relationships between men in Southern neoplantation prisons, I hope to contribute to the

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<sup>36</sup> This chapter works to provide earlier evidence of formations of prison masculinities in relation to sexual violence and intimacy, and so is inevitably in conversation with the more contemporary formations considered in recent collections such as *Prison Masculinities*, eds., Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).

critical genealogy of prison literature offered by scholars such as Regina Kunzel and Estelle Freedman.<sup>37</sup>

In these studies of geographically situated neoplantation texts, the South functions as a loaded signifier of cultural and political investment. Throughout, I take up both canonical and noncanonical narratives of this region in order to disturb and recontextualize “Southern” epistemologies. In my dissertation, moreover, I question the uses and usefulness of the concept of “region” in discussions of how and why culture comes to matter. I take up the challenge issued by recent scholars to complicate notions of the South as an imagined geography that is always/only being mapped vis-à-vis the U.S. nation or other regions within. The older, exceptionalist approach, which considered the region as contained by national boundaries and social formations, only encourages the endurance of a nostalgic, canonical approach to Southern Studies; however, contemporary scholars insist on expanding and testing the cultural borders of the South. The legacy of Confederate nationalism and the ideologies upon which it was conceived continues to produce an overdetermined view of the “solid South,” not just in political red state/blue state maps but in cultural geographies. Inspired by critical work done by scholars such as John Howard, Barbara Ladd, and Kirsten Silva Gruesz, I elaborate a concept of region that modifies and complicates the black/white, heteronormative, nationalist paradigm of the postbellum South.<sup>38</sup> Like Patricia Yaeger, I am “tired of the old categories” and want to find ways to

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37 Queer feminist prison studies scholars such as Estelle Freedman and Regina Kunzel look to the early and late twentieth century, respectively, to examine the role of sexuality in prison and reformatory management, penological discourses, and prisoners' narratives. Freedman's work, for example has centered on female relationships within reformatories and state institutions and looks critically at the racialization of butch-femme roles in those contexts. See Estelle B. Freedman, “The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915-1965,” *Feminist Studies* 22.2 2 (Summer, 1996): 397-423; and Regina G. Kunzel's “Situating Sex: Prison Sexual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8.3 (2002): 253-270.

38 See John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

complicate our understanding of how the term “Southern” has functioned as a concept of occlusion and to privilege the role of counter-memory in opposing local and global structures of inequality.<sup>39</sup>

While cultural studies of the South can and have benefited from a transnational framework that broadens the scope of textual analysis to include sites such as the Caribbean, I echo the concerns that this might produce a “colonizing” effect, wherein the scholarship of Latin Americanists, Caribbeanists, and the work of transatlantic/circumCaribbean slavery scholars is occluded. What Southern Studies must do, then, is open a substantive dialogue with the ongoing work being produced by transnational feminist cultural studies, queer of color critiques, and studies of slavery and diaspora, as well as adopting multiethnic approaches to the transnational south. Deployed together, these frameworks reveal how gendered, racialized, and sexualized subjects have been differently affected by the development of capital and the delimitation of citizenship. In particular, these approaches suggest the means and methods with which we might consider how women of color, unfree laborers, and queered subjects, among other resistant subjects, have contested the circuits of knowledge that accompany capital in its uneven development and the state in its quests for imperial power. As Tara McPherson insists: “we need new models of cross-racial alliance that also recognize the danger of dreams laced through with union, dreams that can all too easily operate via the desires of white subjectivity, erasing the specificity of history and negating the oppositional power of the

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1999) and John Howard, ed., *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, (New York: NYU Press, 1997); Barbara Ladd, *Nationalism and the Color Line in George W. Cable, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1996); Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2000) xii.

counter-memories of black southerners.”<sup>40</sup> By extension, the counter-memories of Asian American and Latino Southerners, for example, have often likewise been marginalized to the point of erasure. Like many “new” Southern Studies projects, mine is limited in scope to anglophone cultural and theoretical texts produced by U.S. American authors, as well as to an analytic of race that is “black and white.” Consequently, my study is constrained to a determined set of perspectives on the mobile neoplantation, but what I aim to offer is a nuanced view of how local and more global imaginings of the neoplantation have implicated the U.S. South in the development of U.S. empire. Because the neoplantation is fluid and not fixed, the plantation state can never wholly contain the meanings or effects of those imaginings. In what follows, I hope to offer a formulation of neoplantation cultures that might be useful to studies of differently racialized laboring cultures which have been integral to the transitions and transformations of the “New” South as well as the post-Civil Rights era South.<sup>41</sup>

In order to transform “Southern Studies” into a field that reflects the complex and multivalent cultural history of the region, we must confront the various ways in which that region has been defined in relation to and in distinction from the transnational sites, such as those of the plantation Caribbean, to which it has been connected via circuits of national, imperial, and colonial power. Scholars such as Shelley Streeby and Amy Kaplan remind us that “empire” has occupied an uneasy place within U.S. culture, and political rhetoric has often sought to distance imperial projects from histories of violent conquest and their companion labor schemes, by emphasizing a break from the past, and by asserting the

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40 *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003) 7.

41 See, for example, Moon-Ho Jung's study of Asian labor in the transition from legalized slavery to the era of emancipation: *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006).

democratizing or benevolent impulse of new ventures.<sup>42</sup> By no coincidence, the plantation, as a building block of colonial and imperial development, has likewise been eschewed as a relic of the nation's past or a Southern aberration. In this dissertation, I hope to contribute to a much larger, necessary conversation about the place of the plantation in the construction of region, nation, and empire.<sup>43</sup> In doing so, I turn to the South as “the scene of the crime” and seek to unpack how figurations of the region have been mobilized in the service of and in resistance to the neplantation.

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42 See “Empire,” *Keywords in American Cultural Studies* (New York: NYU Press, 2007) 95-101; Amy Kaplan, *Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U P, 2005), among others.

43 Though it is beyond the scope of this project, studies that address the (neo)plantation's development in other sites of U.S. empire-building, such as Liberia, Hawaii, and Mexico, might also further an understanding of how plantation models have continued to be adapted for different contexts. Comparative cultural analysis might work toward a broader sense of how neplantation subjects contest modes of abjection and subjection, as well as how disparate populations' incorporation within U.S. empire has shaped regional and (trans)national culture.

## Chapter 1: Staging Terror: The Performance of Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* and the Atlanta White Riot of 1906

Now you talk about terror, I been terrorized all my days  
had to eat out the water melon patch  
and you know they put me in a shack  
stole my name  
left me in chains  
you know they hung me from the tallest oak tree  
they castrate on me. . .  
everything they wanna do  
I say you talk about terror  
people I been terrorized all my days. . .<sup>1</sup>  
--Willie King, "Terrorized"

The capacity of the body for memory means that the abject remains available in victims as a source for social transformation. The affectivity of the body can be used to produce greater terror through more violence or to heal through empathy for the victim's suffering.

--Michael Humphrey, *The Politics of Terror and Atrocity*

At the start of the Jim Crow era, an imagined neplantation future guaranteed a central place for the U.S. South in a national vision of white supremacy. This chapter examines the foundations of twentieth-century white nationalism and the transformation of plantation pasts into staged neplantation violence. I consider how cultural memories of the Southern plantation evoked the history of the region to fuel the movement toward a new racial order. Cultural critic Michael Rogin aptly describes these early decades of the twentieth century as a period in which: "...the southern race problem became national, [and] the national problem was displaced back onto the South in a way that made the South not a defeated part of the American past but a prophecy of its future."<sup>2</sup> While various urban centers and regions of the U.S. had witnessed violent contestations over the status of racialized immigrant groups throughout the nineteenth century, the nation faced an

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<sup>1</sup> This song was included in the compilation "Feel Like Going Home," assembled from *The Blues* series of documentaries coordinated by Martin Scorsese. The project was produced by PBS and federally funded in 2003, declared by Congress as "The Year of the Blues" (seemingly without irony), the same year that the U.S. declared war on Iraq.

<sup>2</sup> "The Sword Became a Flashing Vision". *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: U California P, 1987) 194-5.

unprecedented migration of African Americans from the South in the early decades of the twentieth century. The “southern race problem,” which had come to be understood through a black/white binary, had been dealt with through policies of segregation, exclusion, and white terror tactics. National discourse advocated that this southern regional race paradigm be adapted to fit the needs of the nation. Therefore, as Rogin notes, the South's preoccupation with “blackness” and its history of racial contestation became a prophecy of the nation's future. The events of the Reconstruction era, namely the effective override of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Constitutional amendments through legal and extra-legal means, were often invoked and viewed as particularly resonant to white national leaders in the wake of the twentieth-century Great Migration. White supremacist cultural texts called for the resurrection of the Ku Klux Klan as a means to adapt the racial, gendered and sexual order of an imagined plantation past for forms of neplantation hegemony. They sought to contain the mobility of the black working class and to construct the white heteropatriarchal structure as the norm through the regulation of intimacy between races. Consequently, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the (white) South was resurrected as victim of the “War of Northern Aggression” and “reconstructed” as a victim of blackness. Representations of Reconstruction-era white Southern victimhood were nationally mobilized in a manner which justified and inscribed a neplantation era of white riots, legalized segregation, and disfranchisement of African Americans.<sup>3</sup> Racial and sexual terror in the guise of an omnipotent and paternalist Ku Klux Klan organization was

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<sup>3</sup> I am thinking of how President Woodrow Wilson and his administration, among others, took up the history of the Reconstruction era as model for their political agenda. Michael Rogin, “The Sword Became a Flashing Vision.” *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: U California P, 1987). See also Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin'?: The African American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996); C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1951); W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1935).



exercised in violent spectacle and seemingly banal theatrical performances.

Regional performances of racial and sexual terror mobilized nationalist sentiments, as white Southern and Northern characters were literally wedded in their post-war struggles to maintain racial supremacy in the wake of the abolition of slavery and the Constitutional amendments which promised access to citizenship for black men. Sandra Gunning characterizes the early twentieth century as dominated by white “anxiety over the seemingly unresolvable presence of 60 million blacks in American economic and communal life.”<sup>4</sup> White anxiety surrounding post-Civil War black political, economic, and social power becomes more specifically focused instead on “the (apparently) more containable problem of miscegenation... Thus the threat of blacks’ voting, working, buying property, and thereby inevitably achieving full American citizenship must be reimagined as, and thus contained by, the threat of black [male] rape” (ibid.). The collapse of political and economic equality into “social equality” is theorized by Kevin Gaines as a ubiquitous tactic used by the white South as “a sexualized diversion from and justification for political and social inequality, a slogan mobilized frequently, but most effectively at election time...”<sup>5</sup> Thus, white supremacist cultural workers created a narrative of black sexual violence, and called upon a repertoire of racial and sexual terror, that attempted to justify this conflation.

In these early decades of the twentieth century, making claims about victimhood hinged on making claims to experiences of “terror.” My investigation of this history of terror as a set of cultural and political discourses focuses on these crucial decades, when terror, injury and victimhood defined the terrain of white nationalist neoplantation projects

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4 *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996) 32.

5 *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. (Chapel Hill: UNC P, 1996) 59.

and African-American resistance struggles. The experience of injury was often characterized as an experience of “terror,” or the experience of being perpetually marked as a target of oppression and violence. The power of terror lies in its ability to interpellate bodies as under constant surveillance, though the violence itself remains unpredictable. In a climate of terror, identity becomes a potential site of imminent danger. As with the U.S.'s current war on terror and its reliance on a depiction of national victimization at the hands of “foreign” terrorists, historically, internal conflicts surrounding who can or cannot claim injured (or terrorized) status have relied upon and helped to produce formations of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Though I propose a return to a much earlier historical moment in U.S. history, when the stakes and the players differed significantly, I argue that this might benefit our current understanding of how discourses of terror are deployed and continue to resonate with experiences of structural inequality, violence, and identification today.

This chapter looks at one of the foundational myths of white nationalism of the twentieth century and the violence which has accompanied the belief in terrorized white victimhood. My analysis attempts to remember a cultural history of racial terror and to interrogate the ways in which this history has been actively forgotten within the dominant nationalist history. This forgetting, as other scholars and artists have pointed out, enables the ongoing, uncritical deployment of a rhetoric of terror that has dire consequences. My insistence on the necessity to more broadly historicize “terror” in relation to the neoplatation pre-Civil Rights era and the pre-McCarthy era is not, however, without precedent. In his 2002 blues song, “Terrorized,” Alabama musician Willie King critically remembers and reconfigures terrorism as central to the nation's development. In the

tradition of W.E.B. Du Bois's anti-imperialist writings, he implicitly indicts the U.S. American enforcers of race and class oppression and racially motivated violence as the terrorizers<sup>6</sup>: “I say you talk about terror, people I been terrorized all my days. . .”. King's rebuttal to the contemporary notion that terror is something that (a foreign) “they” do to “us” is that violent exclusion and terror tactics have long been implements of political strategy wielded against African Americans. He positions himself in the genealogy of a racialized American population that has been enslaved, re-named, lynched, and exploited. For King, this is both a personal and a collective experience. He sings about a violence which structures material conditions, of unchecked power allowing for “everything they wanna do.” In the contemporary context of ubiquitous nationalist discussions of a “War on Terror” and the need to “hunt down” Islamic terrorists, King sings of the need to “talk about terror” from an entirely different angle. The repetition of a black (man's) experience of white violence— “I've been terrorized all my days”--emphasizes the inherent contradictions and erasures of a long history of domestic terrorism within these contemporary discussions of terror. His implicitly suggests that the neoplantation vision remains a powerful site of contestation.

My consideration of the discursive and material history of terror begins in the first decade of the twentieth century, a historical juncture where the neoplantation state's imperial interests intersected with regionalist and nationalist discourses of belonging and

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<sup>6</sup> I am thinking specifically of Du Bois's “Souls of White Folk” (1920) in which he challenges the benevolence and democratic intentions of U.S. imperialism. Du Bois points to the inherent hypocrisy of a nation which violently denies citizenship to populations of color and perpetuates racism through its domestic policy, yet takes the position of making the world “safe for democracy”: “Instead of standing as a great example of the success of democracy and the possibility of human brotherhood America has marched proudly in the van of human hatred,--making bonfires of human flesh and laughing at them hideously, and making the insulting of millions more than a matter of dislike, --rather a great religion, a world war-cry: Up white, down black; to your tents, O white folk, and world war with black and parti-colored mongrel beasts!” (28). *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* (New York: Dover, 1999).

citizenship. Ideologues, including cultural workers, politicians, and journalists, labored to insure that the “Invisible Empire” of white supremacy, and the Ku Klux Klan in particular, would influence U.S. national policy and imperialist ventures throughout the twentieth century. For example, the discourse and policy surrounding U.S. imperial efforts in the Philippines, and later in Haiti, intersected with debates surrounding domestic issues of racial (im)purity, fears of miscegenation, and resistance to third world immigration.

Domestic terror within the U.S., as a strategy in which spectacles of excessive violence put communities in perpetual fear of sudden attack, torture, lynching, or death, has often gone hand-in-hand with exclusionary domestic legal policies toward populations of color living in the U.S. Terror and atrocity theorist Michael Humphrey asserts that terror “reveals who is protected and who is not protected by the sovereignty of the law” as “distance from full citizenship is measured by the accepted level of violence against particular individuals.”<sup>7</sup> In the U.S., terror has often worked in the service of hegemonic whiteness, with the state and its representatives either explicitly or implicitly sanctioning the use of legal and extra-legal violence against populations of color. In turn, this has worked to shore up a sense of white nationalism that exceeds national boundaries in its furthering of U.S. cultural, economic, and political imperialism overseas.

Willie King's critique of the dominant discourse on terror resists a unifying nationalist sentiment or a seamless narrative of US history as an inclusive, classless, colorblind democracy. In this chapter, I will consider how the contradictions and erasures King points to are re-written as progress and democracy by dominant narratives within U.S. culture, history, and policy. In addition, this chapter critically addresses the historical

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Humphrey, *The Politics of Atrocity and Reconciliation: From Terror to Trauma* (London: Routledge, 2002) 4.

linkages among the local, the regional, and the national, arguing that domestic violence against racialized others works in consort with imperial projects abroad. As culture and cultural texts often become the realm in which these debates are played out, or, quite literally, staged, the genealogy of terror is productively traced in its discursive performances. I borrow from King's lead in my analysis of the 1905-1906 Atlanta, Georgia-area performances of Thomas Dixon's incendiary play, *The Clansman*, and the Atlanta white riot of 1906--a play which became a national spectacle of white supremacy and a riot which became a model for white violence. The play, which was performed nationwide to sold-out white audiences, represented a cohesive, if fraught, white American unity. While the Civil War had been a time of division, Reconstruction was resurrected as a tragedy around which white Northerners and Southerners could rally. A neoplantation era of white nationalism was advocated as a means to protect the interests of all whites, whether working class or the descendants of the plantocracy. That formation of white cross-class alliance would become the instrument of destruction for those subjects who posed a challenge to its ideals and policies. *The Clansman* was the prototype for this paradoxical neoplantation vision of destruction and protection.

My reading of *The Clansman* performance and the riot will consider how the theatricalized violence performed within the playhouse prefigures the riot as a manifestation of racial and sexual terror. Through my reading, I hope to trouble distinctions between cultural production and political strategy. In doing so, I will point to the ways in which performance analysis helps make visible how embodied and staged performances perpetuate racist genealogies, as well as how resistant spectatorships might contest or rupture those genealogies. My analysis of Dixon's play engages Joseph Roach's

conceptions of the work done by performance-- “that it carries out purposes thoroughly, that it actualizes a potential, or that it restores a behavior.”<sup>8</sup> In particular, I want to consider how the conventions of American racial melodrama work to incite demonstrative race hatred and sexualized constructions of black men in particular. I see the 1906 staging of *The Clansman* as a remembering of the loss of white power during the Reconstruction era for the strategic purpose of reinscribing black violence and white supremacy onto a twentieth-century nationalism. As Linda Williams has argued in *Playing the Race Card*, claiming the status of victim-hero in racial melodramas worked to strategically mobilize twentieth-century white supremacist ideologies.<sup>9</sup> How do the victim-heroes of Dixon's drama convert the figure of the injured white Southerner (and consequently the injured white American) into an empowered fiction of unified, transcendent white power? How did this potent fiction become a site of identification for white Atlanta audiences so compelling that the potential for violence became actualized? In what follows, I will consider the reception of the play by audience members and community leaders in Atlanta and situate the performance in the context of a burgeoning city that obsessively policed racial boundaries despite its marketing slogan: “the city too busy to hate.” How did this self-proclaimed symbol of the “New South,”<sup>10</sup> founded on post-Civil War industrialization,

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8 *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia U P, 1996)3.

9 She argues that this in part stemmed from the long-term success of *abolitionist* racial melodramas such as the play adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. Williams positions abolitionist and white supremacist melodramas along a continuum rather than as strictly in opposition to one another—they in many ways mobilize stock characters and plots in order to engender sympathy and political motivation, if to different ends. She argues, therefore, for the continuity of the mode, the conventions employed, and its centrality within U.S. culture for the better part of two centuries: “Melodrama is the alchemy with which white supremacist American culture first turned its deepest guilt into a testament of virtue. But. . . it is also the alchemy by which African Americans would themselves eventually reframe both the Tom tradition of white sympathy for blacks and the anti-Tom tradition of sympathy for beleaguered whites to their own ends” (44).

10 This was Henry Grady's slogan for the city, which he touted in an attempt to distance Atlanta from the many failures associated with race and class in the agrarian, post-bellum South.

attempt to restore a plantation-esque racial hierarchy, which (at least in the context of this city) had only ever existed as fantasy?<sup>11</sup> Finally, I will consider those “resistant spectators” to borrow Diana Taylor's phrase, who contested the riot—namely, the radical black press of Atlanta, led by *Voice of the Negro* editor J. Max Barber, and members of the community who sought redress—as well as those thinkers who continue to contest the racist narrative performed by *The Clansman* today. I will conclude this chapter with a reading of DJ Spooky's current 2005 project, *Rebirth of a Nation*, as part of this genealogy of performance, but importantly as a breaking apart or as a revisionist redux of Dixon's and Griffith's racial melodramas.

An interrogation of the relationship between these performances must first begin with a look at the construct “race riot” and the context and events which framed the 1906 Atlanta riots. The cultural history of the term “race riot” as it has been applied to sites such as Atlanta deserves critical attention, as the label itself has often effaced the role that whites have played in spectacles of violence and the complexities of race, class, and gender underlying events deemed as a “race riot.” Sheila Smith McKoy argues that riots such as Atlanta's need to be resignified as “white riots” in order to address the obfuscations the concept of “race riot” has enabled. The “cultural 'normative' of race riot,” as McKoy characterizes, has a particular history of attributing violence to black bodies: “. . . black bodies remain at the center of each white riot, both claimed and blamed by the same set of hegemonic practices. This dislocation allows for the kinds of slippages that enable the historical record to focus on black bodies in the midst of violence, while erasing the white

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<sup>11</sup> Atlanta, after all, was not built around plantations, but was developed around antebellum trading routes, due to its strategic position on the Chattahoochee river.

bodies that instigate and initiate the violence.”<sup>12</sup> The events and context indicate just such a slippage in terming Atlanta's violence a “race riot”: Beginning on September, 22, 1906, thousands of white Atlantans attacked African Americans, their businesses and property, as well as streetcar passengers. The violence, which continued for four days and resulted in at least 25 deaths and countless injured black Atlantans, exclusively targeted spaces and bodies racialized as black.<sup>13</sup> Remembering the Atlanta riot as a “race riot,” then, erases both the material and discursive violence enacted on black Atlantans and severs “whiteness” from its past violences.

The discursive effects of the Atlanta white riot are by no means uniform or without contestation. Narratives and recollections exist outside the official historical record in the form of cultural memories which resist dominant remembrances and histories of the events. They, in particular, denounce the white riot and its role in the production of collective racial identities. For instance, I am in part inspired to pair this play and this riot because of resistant testimonies such as early NAACP leader Walter White's autobiography, *A Man Called White* (1948). Though his account was published decades after the events he describes, his memoir makes a conscious intervention into the historical accounts of the riot and racial terror. White narrates the moment at which he realizes his status as a racialized subject during the riot when his family's home became a target of white terror: “I know the night when, in terror and bitterness of soul, I discovered that I was set apart by the

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12 *When Whites Riot: Writing Race and Violence in American and South African Culture* (Madison: U Wisconsin P, 2001) 6- 7.

13 Reports on the death toll and the number of injured vary drastically and due to the role that the mainstream press and state institutions played in inciting the riot, there is no way to ascertain exactly how many people were victims of the riot or how much material damage was done. This count is based on the official record as cited in Mark Bauerline's *Negrophobia: A Race Riot in Atlanta, 1906* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001) and Gregory Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot: Race, Class, and Violence in a New South City* (UP Florida: Gainesville, 2005).



pigmentation of my skin (invisible though it was in my case). . .”<sup>14</sup> White and his family could “pass” as white, but the white rioters in September of 1906, in a scene of violent interpellation, pronounced them black. Their home, which sat on the border between a predominantly white neighborhood and a black neighborhood, was marked by the white rioters as “too nice for a nigger to live in.”<sup>15</sup> White's detailed testimony redeploys the rhetoric which dominated 1906 accounts of the riot in order to criticize the complex race and class dynamics of the event. The “terror and bitterness” he experienced despite the “invisibility” of his blackness complicate notions of race as simply grounded in bodily markings. Rather, White's family seems to have been a target because of their class status and their position within a racialized social geography. By bringing together the riot and Dixon's play, this chapter hopes to force a consideration of how the deployment of violence and terror shaped white community formation within a shifting urban and regional landscape.

### **Reading Text and Event Through Performance Studies**

White, along with other journalists and activists at the time, situated the riot's performance of white violence in relation to the many stagings of Dixon's play in the months preceding the riot. In his autobiography, White characterized the play as the “fuel” that was added to the fire of growing race hatred.<sup>16</sup> Though much important critical scholarship has concentrated on Thomas Dixon's seminal white supremacist melodramatic novel *The Clansman* (1905) and D.W. Griffith's subsequent 1915 film adaptation of the

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<sup>14</sup> *A Man Called White* (New York, Viking Press, 1948) 5.

<sup>15</sup> White 11.

<sup>16</sup> White 8.

story in *The Birth of a Nation*, little attention has been paid to Dixon's adaptation of *The Clansman* and its predecessor, *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), for the stage. White's account, among others, points to the stage production as an unforgettable cultural force which motivated white rioters. Consequently, how might both play and riot be considered as related through what Joseph Roach calls "genealogies of performance"? Performance studies, with its focus on memory, embodiment, and the discursive, provides a useful theoretical model in a consideration of the relationship between play and riot. Roach (and subsequently Diana Taylor) rejects defining performance in terms of its ephemerality, but rather sees performance as inherently reiterative.<sup>17</sup>

Performance genealogies draw on the idea of expressive movements as mnemonic reserves, including patterned movements made and remembered by bodies, residual movements retained implicitly in images or words (or in the silences between them), and imaginary movements dreamed in minds not prior to language but constitutive of it.<sup>18</sup>

In this analysis of cultural transmissions, Roach develops the concept of "performance genealogies" in order to characterize how elements of performances are retained and transformed though contexts, actors, and stages change. Roach argues that embodiment often distinguishes performances from other discursive texts as performance involves linguistic, visual, and physical markers. However, embodied movement, whether material or conceptual, is positioned in relationship to the discursive, as "not prior to language but constitutive of it." His formulation does not presuppose an originary non-discursive embodiment, but assumes that embodiment and language are mutually constitutive. The

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<sup>17</sup> Both scholars reject theories such as Peggy Phelan's, which see performance as distinctively characterized by its ephemeral, "live" qualities. For Phelan, performance disappears as it is actualized: "Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representation. . . Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance". *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993) 142.

<sup>18</sup> Roach 26.

genealogy of performance is made possible through both bodily and discursive remembering. Importantly, these performance genealogies are defined by that which is present as much as by that which is absent; that is, “the silences between” images or words (hence the dynamic relationship between performance, memory, and forgetting). Consequently, performance has an intrinsic relationship to cultural memory and to legacies of substitution (or “surrogation”) which defy a cohesive narrativizing impulse. In short, bodies might “remember” aspects of a performance which cultural and historical narratives might not be able to coherently account for. Performance studies then draws on the embodied aspects of performance as a means to consider the gaps or ruptures within discursive practices.

The “live,” embodied aspects of performance are often associated with a “repertoire,” while the more tangible, permanent aspects of performance are assigned to “the archive.” The privileging of the archive over the repertoire often presumes a kind of rigid distinction between discursive product and embodied practice. Archival memory is associated with discursive material such as literary texts and documentation, “all those items supposedly resistant to change.”<sup>19</sup> Taylor reminds us, however, that archival material is always mediated and therefore subject to change in the ways that it is read, collected, maintained, and used. Meanwhile, the repertoire is constructed as that which “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement. . .all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> The mistake in privileging archive over repertoire is in assigning static ontological status to the archive while only conceding

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19 *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003)

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20 Ibid.

ephemeral epistemological status to the repertoire. In troubling these distinctions, we might come to see the instability and mutability of the archive, the ways in which its very materiality becomes subject to change; while, on the other hand, the repertoire might be valued as a source of reproducible knowledge. In acknowledging the “material” embodied aspects of repertoire, we come to a broader understanding of the discursive. The distinction between the two repositories should be seen as much less oppositional; for as Taylor and Roach insist, both the archive and the repertoire involve the mediated transfer of memory and knowledge.<sup>21</sup> This chapter relies on the archive of the U.S. Library of Congress as the source of the unpublished play script of Dixon's *Clansman*, but also considers the significance of non-discursive performance elements of the play, much of which, I argue, became a part of the script carried out in the riot.<sup>22</sup> Spectacles of riot-related violence, such as the injured bodies of black Atlantans displayed on the streets, for instance, have a direct relationship to the *The Clansman's* on-stage lynched bodies as well as to the narrative of the play's script. However, due to the impossibility of critically reading the embodied gestures of the performers one hundred years later, all that remains are accounts of the audience members and attention to stage directions and staging elements. By reading play and riot together, however, I think that we might come to a richer understanding of the archives and repertoires which constituted these performances. Readings of the play and riot can supplement one other—where one falls silent or renders bodies unaccounted for, the other offers up potential enactment and remembering.

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21 Taylor does importantly acknowledge that “individual instances of performance disappear from the repertoire” while “this happens to a lesser degree in the archive” (*Archive and Repertoire*, 20).

22 Taylor offers a critique of a totalizing discursive analysis, insisting that this privileging of the archive is a legacy of colonialist constructs which discounted indigenous and non-European epistemologies. (*Archive and Repertoire*, 6)

The temporal, thematic, and performatic relationships between the play and riot, in this case, allow for a unique opportunity to consider how both archive and repertoire intersect in the transmission of the complicated and multiple narratives which make up cultural memory. Roach notes that performances have the potential to restore behaviors, so we might see nationalist performances, for example, as tools for maintaining power and suturing allegiance to a regional or national body. However, with each generation of performance, “surrogation” plays a significant role.<sup>23</sup> Roach defines surrogation as a ongoing process predicated on a failure to replace that which has been lost, failure to arrive at an unattainable origin: “In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric.”<sup>24</sup> For instance, he cites the powerful performances of “whiteness” as entailing a fiction that is actualized by performance, but which posits an origin that can never be found. In Roach's formulation, surrogation emphasizes the continuities between performances rather than the particularities which define a specific performance act. Within performances, surrogation works to eclipse the ruptures and fractures within history and memory. Performance's potential for appropriation and transformation cannot be idealized—as with every other cultural mode,

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23 This is the intervention Taylor makes in Roach's formulation in *The Archive and the Repertoire*: She insists that acts of transfer can also work through “doubling, replication, and proliferation rather than through *surrogation*. . .”. For Taylor, this kind of “doubling” within performances often happened within syncretic colonial cultures where multiple meanings might be attached to acts which appeared singular and/or substitutive. Her formulation of the “doubling” possibilities of performance suggests how performances might resist normative discourses and surrogations. She cites for example the cult of the Virgen de Guadalupe as a representational strategy “of doubling and staying the same, of moving and remaining, of multiplying outward in the face of constricting social and religious policies [which] tells a very specific story of oppression, migration, and reinvention that might be lost if the model of substitution, loss, and narrowing down were used to explain the 'continuities'” (49). The Virgen de Guadalupe has served as a meaningful figure for a host of different populations over the centuries across various sites of Spanish colonialism, but has retained a degree of culturally specific significance for each population.

24 Roach 2.

its reiteration and appropriation often further reinforce and reify oppressive pre-existing power structures. However, an analytic of performance and surrogation can animate a critique of such monolithic constructs to reveal their inherent instabilities. For example, analysis of *The Clansman* reveals a performance of the loss of the plantation South as the demise of the white family and economic power. The play positions the Ku Klux Klan as Reconstruction surrogates who promise to recoup that which has been lost for the white antebellum planters. In the play, white supremacy, although threatened by Reconstruction efforts, is portrayed within a continuum, as a naturalized racial order is reaffirmed by the end to Reconstruction and the entrenchment of Jim Crow segregation. Reconstruction acts as the rupture which is effaced by Dixon's (re)construction of race, gender, and class positionalities as static.<sup>25</sup> Dixon constructs black male sexuality as the threat, the twentieth-century rupture, that necessitates the reinvention of plantation in the form of a kind of neoplantation fantasy that would shore up beliefs and practices of white supremacist order.

For Dixon's narrative of white surrogation to resolve rupture through continuity, *The Clansman* performed a simplistic inversion of Southern racial and sexual dynamics and the material realities of the Reconstruction era. This white supremacist rendering of Reconstruction as a moment of white victimization—that is, the illegitimate loss of a providentially rendered power—sees white violence as a justified, defensive response to “black terror.” My analysis of Thomas Dixon's play *The Clansman* and the Atlanta Race Riot of 1906 reveals that terror often relies on inversion: hegemonic groups/nations ensure totalizing power through violence/terror while assigning the role of terrorizer to those

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<sup>25</sup> *The Clansman's* stagings of racial melodrama might be seen in relation to a variety of performance predecessors which all participate in the fiction of whiteness, including popular nineteenth and twentieth century performances of minstrelsy, nineteenth century Klan rides, and public lynchings, as well as the stagings of abolitionist racial melodramas such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

which pose a threat to its organizing principles. This inversion attempts to render injustice and injury perpetrated against black communities as unintelligible, as outside the realm of possible narrative frameworks. Both “terrorism” and “riots” are positioned as excessive, beyond legal boundaries and control, as detached from the state. As such both onstage racial and sexual terror and offstage riot become blackened and African Americans, by association with that violence, are determined unfit for inclusion into the nation.

Consequently, white supremacist ideologues like Dixon depict a national identity that is always a racial identity: American-ness is whiteness. In these performances of terror, black desire and black sexual violence are foregrounded on center stage while whites “parade” and charge in an aestheticized tableau. Black characters require constant policing, by whatever means necessary, and consequently are represented as unfit for access to citizenship and privilege. Whiteness, perpetually represented as detached from violence, then becomes a legitimating force, a prerequisite for access to power. However, as Butler and other critics have argued, the construction of an outside, of a “terrorizer,” undermines the very stability of binaristic categories such as “victim”/ “terrorist.” This instability opens up spaces for resistance.<sup>26</sup> In White's depiction of the riot and black leaders' responses to the riot, as in Willie King's insistent lyrics, the appropriation of a rhetoric of terror becomes the means with which groups contest injury well into the twentieth century.

Resistant spectatorship importantly offers a position to challenge and interrogate

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<sup>26</sup> Butler's consideration of materiality and the discursive in regards to sex and gender offers a commentary on the inherent contradictions of the production of normative subjects: “. . .the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation. . .This disavowed abjection will threaten to expose the self-grounding presumptions of the sexed subject, grounded as that subject is in a repudiation whose consequences it cannot fully control. The task will be to consider this threat and disruption not as a permanent contestation of social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility.” *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. (New York: Routledge, 1993) 3.

such performances of exclusion. Resistant spectatorship involves a politics of looking that calls attention to the injustices of violence that are censored or rendered publicly invisible. This spectatorship gives voices to victims, embodies trauma, and reconstructs cultural memory. In the case of the stage performance of *The Clansman* and the staged spectacle of violent white riot, *The Voice of the Negro*, the radical black press edited by J. Max Barber acted as a collective resistant spectatorship. The newspaper was supported by prominent, politicized black ministers and a readership of some 20,000 people. *The Voice* spoke out early in the winter following the play's initial performances, denouncing the white supremacist ideology it called "Dixonism." Barber resisted the protection granted by state officials to such racist cultural forms.<sup>27</sup> Other southern newspapers denounced the play as "a warped spectacle of white supremacy, resembling a lynching more than a drama" and Reverend Broughton of the Baptist Tabernacle Church, in particular, declared it "born in hell and operated by the devil."<sup>28</sup> J. Max Barber, however, situated the local performance of the play within the context of its nationwide success. The newspaper characterized Dixon not as an anomaly but as one of many actors in a network of state-sanctioned racial and sexual terror. Practicing an inversion of Dixon's use of Kipling's "white man's burden," Barber re-locates the "problem" of the era as a problem of whiteness and its attendant privileges. He connected the local and state political attempts to disfranchise black voters as part of a nationally-sanctioned project. For instance, in June 1906, Barber criticized President Roosevelt for turning a blind eye to "the open nullification of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments of the Constitution in the Southern section of the United States."<sup>29</sup> Barber

<sup>27</sup> In the case of one *Clansman* performance in Atlanta, audience-member Governor Terrell reportedly gave the play's performance a standing ovation. (Bauerline 35)

<sup>28</sup> Bauerline 35.

<sup>29</sup> Qtd. in Bauerline 81.



was perhaps the most radical voice of the black community in Atlanta but his views resonated with a sizable readership.

The national press at the time not only supported a white supremacist rendering of the Atlanta riot, but also heralded Dixon's play during the same time period. Literary historian Durant Da Ponte reports that the media facilitated his race hatred propaganda across the country: "The New York newspapers were filled with articles, pictures, interviews, letters. Dixon was quoted at great length, and his comments grew more exaggerated and bitter and inflammatory than ever. 'The Negro is an animal,' he said. 'Would you permit him to marry your daughter?' 'The country is not big enough for the civilized white man and the half-savage negro.'"<sup>30</sup> Like the white commercial-civic leaders of Atlanta, Dixon used the press as a platform for advocating racial exclusion. This radical exclusion was expounded as the necessary answer to Dixon's rhetorical questioning. Blacks were always male and animalistic, and they posed a threat to the purity of the white national family due to an unbridled sexual desire for white women. As the riot drove blacks from urban Atlanta, Dixon and subsequently Griffith would advocate for blacks to return to Africa due to their utterly inassimilable status. Dixon's neplantation vision entailed that either blacks submit to their prescribed roles, to social and economic immobility, or be exiled from the nation altogether. He called upon local audiences to sympathize and organize toward a larger collective vision that had imperial implications. In this way, he conscripted spectators to become actors.

Diana Taylor characterizes spectacles as "dependent on a complex scene of interface: understanding *both* the local cultural specifics of national dramas *and* the way

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<sup>30</sup> "The Greatest Play of the South." (Tennessee Studies in Literature 2:1957) 21.

that national and international spectacles interface and produce each other.”<sup>31</sup> To interrogate how Dixon's performance functioned at the national level, we must consider how anti-Tom performances fit into this context of white nationalist anxiety. Williams argues that melodrama, and in particular racial melodrama, has functioned as a “central mode of American popular culture.”<sup>32</sup> She marks Dixon's melodrama and Griffith's subsequent film adaptation as “anti-Tom” representations, which inverted Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic novel and the proliferation of stage adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>33</sup> The playbill that accompanied Dixon's play explicitly advertised the latter as “A Sequel to Uncle Tom's Cabin.”<sup>34</sup> We must think, then, about *The Clansman* as part of a national genealogy of racial melodramas, with key predecessors such as Stowe's drama. Therefore, local performances of racial melodrama might have ramifications for and implicate a regional or national audience, or it might, as in the case of Atlanta, provoke and prefigure a series of widely varying regional and national responses.

However, in order to clarify the relationship between performance and white nationalism, why should we begin at the local level? Taylor asserts that performances are always defined by and in terms of the local: “To say something is a performance amounts to an ontological affirmation, though a thoroughly localized one. What one society considers performance might be a nonevent elsewhere.”<sup>35</sup> As the ontological status of a performance is determined by the local, so too does the nature of the relationship between the performance and the spectator vary. In many ways that reception might be thought of as

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31 *Disappearing Acts*, xi.

32 Williams xiv.

33 Williams 5.

34 Playbill from Atlanta History Center archives.

35 Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* 3.

overdetermined by the particular context of that performance. In the case of *The Clansman* and Atlanta, I consider how the local sensationalist and “negrophobic” press, for instance, played a large role preceding and following the many area performances of the play, thereby contributing to its incendiary effects. According to Taylor: “Performance and aesthetics of everyday life vary from community to community, reflecting cultural and historical specificity as much in the enactment as in the viewing/reception” (ibid.). What this play meant for Atlantans, then, was different from the various other urban audiences for whom the play was performed, as it called up what for many were the perceived lived histories of the Reconstruction Era and its ongoing effects.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, “the performance model also helps spectators define their position vis-à-vis spectacles of violence.”<sup>37</sup> The parameters of performance are shaped by larger cultural assumptions as well as the intimate local—the performance space which contains and distinguishes performers and spectators, which itself might become, as it did in Atlanta, a permeable and fluid boundary, rather than a clearly demarcated line between stage and audience or between playhouse and city street.

Atlanta, like many other developing urban centers at the turn of the century, defined itself in terms of the regional, as the epitome of what Henry Grady deemed “The New South,” a region unburdened by a history of slavery or racial conflict and welcoming to industrial development rather than confined to an agrarian economy. However, Atlanta's

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36 Williams claims that *Birth of a Nation's* film revision of the Uncle Tom narrative produced more violent anti-black audience response than Dixon's play: “Griffith's film was more incendiary, more racially hateful in its consequences, more likely to produce the phenomenon of race riot. . . than Dixon's novels and play”. The reason: Griffith's greater willingness to deploy the familiar features of the Tom material: “For it was Griffith, not Dixon, who ultimately created the most effective counter to the Tom story” (128,9). She argues that this has much to do with portrayal of blacks in the film: Griffith's more sympathetic portrayal of the antebellum South and the loyal plantation slave. But the case of Atlanta points to the need for consideration of local specificity in a comparative analysis of the violent impact of these cultural texts.

37 *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's “Dirty War”* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997) xi.

development as a regional industrialized center was marked by racial violence and segregation. As Gregory Mixon asserts in his study of the race riot:

The riot installed disfranchisement as the capstone to four decades of political reform and institutionalized segregation as the dominant form of race relations. In the economic sphere alone, the ramifications of segregation marginalized the black business district and its proprietors and relegated black workers to the most subservient positions. This, in the end, was the urban ethos of the commercial-civic elite that took advantage of every opportunity, including the deadly riot, to make Atlanta a prototype metropolis of twentieth-century America.<sup>38</sup>

The white riot of Atlanta would be followed by several key episodes of anti-black riot in cities such as Springfield, Illinois; East St. Louis, Missouri; Houston, Texas; and Chicago in the first decades of the century. We might see both the performance of the play and the subsequent riot as a prototype for the many genealogies of these performances that would proliferate in the twentieth century. This race riot, in particular, effected significant local, regional, and national changes. Locally, it severely impeded the progression of black economic and social autonomy as a result of the mobilization of a neoplantation fantasy that all whites could potentially share. This fantasy compelled black stasis and subjection. What is more, performance, by its very nature, lends itself to re-enactment. Regionally and nationally, the performance of white violence provided a model, and served as a paradigm, for the institution of segregation policies and led to the immediate emigration of blacks from the city, as they fled to other Southern urban and rural areas, and to the (often false) promise of a less restricted, less violent life in the urban North.<sup>39</sup>

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38 Mixon 130.

39 We might think about the Atlanta riot as part of a genealogy of various other local white riots as well: “The same forces that erupted into violence in the South also set afoot a migration of African Americans from the rural [and, I would add, *urban*] South to the urban and industrial North, leading to more bloodshed and rioting. The causes of this rioting varied as competition over jobs and housing, became as important as, if not more important than, racial prejudice in the violent rioting of the North”. Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996) 111.

Dixon's play and its celebration of regionalism inspired a national celebration of whiteness. Multiple *Clansman* troupes toured the US for five years, often simultaneously, and filled theaters for months in New York, Los Angeles, and cities across the nation. The very terms under which the production was advertised implied a larger agenda of racial policing. Its marketing was meant to ensure that audiences were all white and sympathetic to the history of the Klan. For instance, the play's theater bill emphasized the presence of an on-stage white supremacist army and celebrated the performance as: "The Greatest Play of the South...A Daring, Thrilling Romance of the Ku Klux Klan. A Specifically Selected Metropolitan Cast—50 People—A Splendid Scenic Production. Two Carloads of Scenery—A Small Army of Supernumeraries, Horses, Etc.." <sup>40</sup> The commodification of violence was presented as a romance enforced by an army, while the size of the production's cast and the breadth of their "scenic production" are highlighted and contribute to the performance of a fiction of absolute white power. As the playbill employs the rhetoric of spectacular modernity it promises a degree of realism. The performance sought to authenticate its melodramatic narrative by selling itself as "metropolitan" in cast, but grounded in the historical past through the use of horses, the romanticized transportation of the nineteenth century, an army, and an elaborate set. Williams asserts that "melodrama borrows from realism." <sup>41</sup> Rather than seeing melodrama and realism as antithetical, she contends that attention must be paid to the frequency of their confluence. As in its playbill, the staging of *The Clansman* would similarly deploy the tropes of realism in order to fortify its melodramatic plot conventions. The play would construct an imaginary landscape of the romanticized plantation South and a historical moment when that way of life had come

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40 Qtd. in Da Ponte 17.

41 Williams 38.

under attack by Reconstruction efforts. Its power lay in its claim to authoritative cultural memory.

This staging of spectacular modernity depended on a broader social acceptance of policed racial boundaries. The winter 1906 performance of *The Clansman* was a performance of whiteness for an all-white audience at the Downtown Grand Opera House, not far from what would become the epicenter of the riot. In some instances, whites threatened any blacks who might attend the performance with death, highlighting audience participation, as well as their close identification with the performance. Audience members of *The Clansman* both worked to actualize the surrogation of the loss of white power in Reconstruction and were implicitly called upon to enact and restore a behavior of white supremacy. Its narrative of black dominance and black rape of white women sought to engender notions of white supremacy and white female victimhood, situating those women as dependent upon white men for protection and privilege.

As in Atlanta in 1906, what precedes the organization of the Klan and its retributive lynching of the play's villain, Gus, however, is the threat of black political power, not the black male rape of white women. The play, after all, begins not with a rape but with a ballot box. The “Black League,” the “secret” arm of black political power, is said to threaten blacks who do not vote for black and Reconstructionist candidates. They close the polls early, preventing white men from voting; raise taxes on wealthy white planters; and white men in the play threaten that next they will wield “bayonets to enforce the marriage of blacks to whites” (40)<sup>42</sup>. All attempts by blacks to gain legislative representation, elect black officials to statewide office, or redistribute land to former slaves are collapsed within

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<sup>42</sup> All quotes that follow are from Thomas Dixon's unpublished playscript from 1906, which is housed at the U.S. Library of Congress.

this narrative and dismissed as subterfuge, as merely a means for black men to mandate miscegenation.

In the play, miscegenation also has a causal relationship to the corruption of political power. In Dixon's stage production, the threat of the black rapist is not only made manifest in the soldier Gus, but also in the mulatto Lieutenant Governor Syllas Lynch. Lynch embodies all the potential danger of miscegenation and its political consequences. He attempts to achieve "absolute equality" via marriage to the white Elsie Stoneman, but is prevented by Ben Cameron and the Klan, who rescue her. After Elsie's rescue, Lynch is then, "led off to be kicked down the steps of the capitol by Ben, who claims Elsie for his own."<sup>43</sup> The violence done to Lynch is invisible to the audience, but the connection between rescuing white womanhood and punishing Lynch for political engagement exemplifies Dixon's central attempt at conflating the two situations. In the play, as in the discourse surrounding the Atlanta white riot, the threat of miscegenation and black corruption of political and economic power become interchangeable. The KKK in Dixon's play, then, demonstrates to the white audience that they will police and torture blacks, both within the domestic and the public space, who seek political power and who step past the few prescribed subservient roles allowed. This regulation of public and private intimacy serves as a mandate for the deployment of Jim Crow laws.

However, white violence in the play (as in the riots) is obscured by a depiction of blacks' brutality against whites and against one another. In the stage production, blacks visibly experience physical violence only at the hands of other blacks. In addition to white propertied men and young white female virgins, the play also positions "loyal" blacks as

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43 Da Ponte 17.

victims of this Reconstructionist “terror.”<sup>44</sup> The central sympathetic black characters of Nelse and Eve are content to “stay in their place” within the former planter household, and are depicted as the violent defenders of that household. They act as both complement and foil to the white Camerons—the Camerons are restrained and filial, Nelse and Eve are violent and matriarchal. The couple's abusive relationship fits in with Dixon's overall foregrounding of black-on-black violence, which often emerges alongside depictions of racial primitivism.<sup>45</sup> Eve takes on the masculine role in her family, reversing the patriarchal white model offered by the Cameron family, while also acting as a surrogate mother for the motherless Cameron children. She threatens Nelse with verbal and physical violence to discourage him from considering himself as her equal. As he claims that a “voting paper” makes him her equal, she resists saying: “Take more'n dat ter make you my equal” (Act I, 28). This scene works to depict black southerners as non-normative and as unfit for citizenship, implying that the black family subverts gender norms; while Eve ventriloquizes the white Klansmen's claims that possession of the ballot, or legal sanctioning, does not override a presumed natural racial hierarchy.<sup>46</sup>

Black superstition operates as a kind of veil for white terrorist tactics in the play. Superstitious black men bend to the will of the Klan without ever being physically threatened. Instead, a kind of self-imposed psychic terror does the work of policing black masculinity, while the Klan remains a disembodied threat. For instance, when Lynch's

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44 Williams cites the portrayal of loyal blacks as a point of difference between Griffith's *Birth* and Dixon's play; however, I would argue that the play's portrayal of these characters has a genealogical relationship with the film's sympathetic depiction of antebellum plantation slaves and loyal former slaves.

45 Love-making between the two becomes one of the recurring parodies within the play and works to foreclose the possibility of legitimate civil unions between black men and women.

46 This dialogue might also be read in relation to other speeches by Eve in which she seems to reverse the rhetoric of the “new woman” of the turn-of-the-century, who might have actually made claims to equality and the ballot herself. Dixon largely seems to filter this rhetoric through Elsie, but Eve also references it at times.



spies, Corporal and Dick, report on a Klan meeting they were assigned to spy on, they repeatedly respond “in terror” that there were no men present: “Dey wuz ghosts!” (Act IV, 8). With gestures meant to be absurd, they insist: “Dey wuz spirits ridin' w'ite horses wid big blood red eyes an' w'ite wings! De hosses wuz twenty feet high – an' some er de sperets ridin' em wuz higher'n de Cote House. Dey wuz all bal'headed, 'cep' on top whar er straight blaze er fire shot up in de air ten foot high!” (ibid.). The monstrous Klan they describe reinforces a larger-than-life, monolithic whiteness that supercedes state institutions such as “de Cote House.” The spectacle of white power they describe simultaneously works to confer an exalted, transcendent status, while the parodic speech and reaction of the black spies implicitly insists upon the innocuous humanity of the Klansmen. As in their description, the Klansmen of the play often ride across the stage on horseback (as they will in Griffith's film) in order to distance the white heroes from lowly blacks. The implication of this scene (rendered second-hand, and so further distanced from white terror) is that the terror of the Klan is manifested partly through effective costuming. An apparition of whiteness polices black witnesses through spectacle and psychic threat rather than physical force. This works to distance the Klan from acts which might be considered violent *crime*; instead, extra-legal violence is eclipsed through a naturalization of white supremacy.

In the play, black violence is always overdetermined. Black characters anticipate and foretell the inevitability of black violence while white characters (aging gentry and women in particular) suffer from dangerous naiveté. In particular, black female superstition, portrayed with an almost reverent exoticism, works to further naturalize the construction of black men as sexual predators. The character of Eve fits into a genealogy of fictional black conjure women, as Dixon borrows elements from both racist and anti-racist

literary traditions to construct a figure who has a kind of unique access to supernatural knowledge but only in the service of protecting white womanhood.<sup>47</sup> Like Dr. Cameron, Eve can look into people's eyes in order to glean information about them. Eve, however, needs an object belonging to the person in order to tell their fortune. She uses “voodoo” to conjure up the danger that Elsie will find herself in—Lynch's threat of rape/marriage. Stage directions describe her “Murmuring of voodoo song and looking into Elsie's eyes and hand, then off into space.” She then prophesies: “. . . A black hand on yer throat about ter strangle yer – dey is tryin' to sabe you, an' can't – Yes, glory to God – he's a-comin' agin, all in white, an'--his eyes shine lak stars an' his brea'f's lak fire-----” (Act III, Scene 1, 12). Dixon's use of “voodoo” here references exoticist and racist depictions of black Haiti often ascribed to southern slave culture as well. Though voodoo was often associated with the threat of black revolution, Dixon here resignifies voodoo as an aspect of “loyal” slaves' culture that might be appropriated for the maintenance of plantation hierarchies. Eve echoes General Forrest's characterization of black male rape of white women, with the vulnerable throat standing in metonymically for the vulnerable white woman's virginity. The repetition of rape encoded in silencing—through the strangled throat—points to the function of the rape myth as a method of policing white women as well as black men. Additionally, Eve, the only black female character in the play, prophesies the rape of a white woman, but remains silent on the fate of black women. This speech, along with the masculinization of her character throughout the play, disallows the possibility of black female vulnerability. The ongoing threat of white male rape of black women cannot be

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47 For instance, Charles Chesnutt's “conjure women”--in particular *In the Marrow of Tradition*, which foregrounds the story of the Wilmington white riot of 1898.

prosecuted or even rendered intelligible.<sup>48</sup> Rather she depicts white masculinity as Elsie's otherworldly savior, whose “eyes shine lak stars”(Act III, Scene 1, 12).

In her vision of rape, however, Eve does also psychically inhabit the role of rape victim, if just for a moment, as she, “paralyzed with terror,” anticipates the fate of the white child Flora, who will not be rescued in time as Elsie will (Act III, scene I, 23).<sup>49</sup> In this moment white femininity and black femininity, constructed elsewhere in the play as wholly separate and in opposition, converge in Eve's prophesy of Flora's sexual victimization. Like Tara McPherson's reading of the relationship between Scarlett and Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, we might consider how “this ambiguity hints at a longing for racial union even while it labors to hold black and white apart, a familiar pattern across southern history and racial representation.”<sup>50</sup> For Dixon, however, this union of black and white women serves to subordinate both to a white masculine ideal. Eve is set up, as Margaret Mitchell's “Mammy” will be, as the nostalgic guardian of white femininity but both are symbolically policed by the threat of rape.<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, Eve's vision is significant in two ways: it

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48 In the context of the Atlanta riot, black women's experience of sexual violence was similarly silenced. Though black leaders did reference the ongoing history of black women's sexual victimization to counter racist claims about black male barbarity, the dominant cultural and political institutions did not acknowledge their charges. I consider this in more detail in my analysis of Du Bois's “Litany of Atlanta” later in this chapter.

49 See Tara McPherson's discussion of “lenticular logic” as “a monocular logic, a schema by which histories or images that are actually copresent get presented (structurally, ideologically) so that only one of the images can be seen at a time” (7). She is specifically interested in how this logic applies to historical constructions of race and gender in Southern culture. She uses as an example a 3-D plantation postcard which turned one way reveals a white antebellum belle and turned another shows a grinning mammy figure. McPherson's argument insists that in Southern cultural texts, whiteness often presents itself as a free-floating signifier, that is paradoxically always dependent upon representations of blackness. Her focus on the relationship between white Southern femininity and the attendant disavowal of black femininity in ubiquitous texts such as *Gone with the Wind* has particular relevance to my reading of Dixon's plantation myth. *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003).  
50 McPherson 59.

51 One crucial re-enactment of *The Clansman* involves a young Margaret Mitchell, who as a child growing up in Atlanta, reportedly staged scenes from Dixon's work with childhood friends in her home. Her early affinity for this narrative has striking implications for the romantic plantation story which would bring her international fame and acclaim, the “historical” fiction *Gone With the Wind*. This anecdote perhaps indicates just how much her text is a part of *The Clansman*'s genealogy (Bauerline 192).

distances white women from a visceral experience of rape and so they maintain symbolic virgin status; secondly, it works to preclude the identification of the white male as rapist, while simultaneously, if only momentarily constructing black women as rape victims. Thus the black woman's visionary rape functions as a kind of symbolic policing of multiple subject positions: white women, black women, and black men.

As theorist Peter Brooks has argued, melodrama involves “characters who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichean conflicts between good and evil.” Linda Williams suggests that this results in a simplistic moral stereotyping.<sup>52</sup> As the archetypal black male threat, Gus's body and his strength are foregrounded both in the context of black military and political might as well as in the context of his sexual power. Time and again, stage directions point to Gus “feeling his muscles exaltingly,” implying that they are the means by which he will “keep on top” in all arenas of South Carolina's social and political order. The black male body, then, is constructed as a weapon of terror in this text, even when associated with its state-sanctioned authority, such as the militia. Lynch assures Gus: “And you, my boy, will command a company of troops, wear gold epaulets on these big shoulders, a gold collar on your neck, and a flashing sword at your belt” (Act I, 29). Through Lynch, Dixon voices a depiction of the black revolutionary that harkens back to Haitian revolutionaries, like Toussaint L'Ouverture, who were often depicted in uniforms modeled after the style of the French colonial army. Black militias had been disbanded at the end of Reconstruction, but attempts to prohibit blacks from owning firearms were still of central concern in 1906 Atlanta and the South as a whole. However, armed black revolution is here collapsed into the symbolic threat of black rape. Gus's uniform, after all,

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<sup>52</sup> Qtd. in Williams 40.

is not as threatening as his weapon and so this scene works to foreshadow Gus's "attack" on Flora. Like Griffith, Dixon turned the audience's focus to the phallic threat of the "flashing sword." Gus's military position demonstrates the play's repetitive conflation of black enfranchisement with hyper-sexualized violence.<sup>53</sup>

White vulnerability to this threat is concentrated in the suffering of the (always) impotent, virtuous white woman. This affords white men their chance to reclaim the power which their race and gender affords them. Linda Williams argues that melodrama compels action by staging the suffering of infallible individuals: "melodrama focuses on victim-heroes and on recognizing their virtue. Recognition of virtue orchestrates the moral legibility that is key to melodrama's function. Virtue can be recognized through suffering alone, or in the action variants of melodrama by suffering that calls for deeds."<sup>54</sup> The white Southern men present the organization of the Klan as a heroic and necessary response to a reign of terror. Act III, scene 2 opens:

In the den of the Klan, the Chaplain speaks: God of our Fathers, have mercy on the innocent, the weak and the defenseless! The terror of tonight deepens with the darkness and the stoutest heart grows sick with fear for the red message the morning bringeth!

In this scene, the Klan leader positions whites as vulnerable and terrorized by using the rhetoric of Christian victimhood. The klansmen then bring forth Gus (a white actor in blackface), a member of the local army and a former field slave accused of raping young

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<sup>53</sup> Later in the play, Ben returns to the symbolic threat of black Haiti in relation to rape of white women when he proclaims: "we're walking on volcano. I can feel it's black crust give beneath my feet" (Act III, 9) just after he learns that Gus has given Flora candy for her birthday. The individual threat of Gus, then, has been metaphorically written as an attack on the foundational grounds upon which whites like Ben claim their authority. The "volcano", which was often used to describe the revolution in Haiti, threatens to "erupt" in black sexual anarchy. Haiti, as the first successful overthrow of white plantation power and the first black republic, represents the epitome of white supremacist fears.

<sup>54</sup> Williams 29.

Flora, the 13-year-old white daughter of Dr. Cameron, a former Confederate planter. From the photo stills of the play's production, all central black characters appear as white actors in blackface, but with black male extras populating the fringe of the action. Their very presence on stage calls attention to the performativity of race embodied by the black-face Gus, while at the same time their position on the edges of the drama works to reinforce the Klan's naturalization of black liminality. It is unclear whether these black extras were used in every performance of the play or the Atlanta play in particular, but in these photo stills at least they importantly stand in as representatives of the populations demonized and terrorized by the Reconstruction-era Klan. These extras might also be said to stand in for those blacks who would later witness the spectacle of white power of the Atlanta riot.

The chaplain's depiction of the black male rapist in the state of South Carolina as a “terror” to the white population is a sentiment that is repeated over and over again throughout this performance. The character of KKK leader General Nathan Bedford Forrest describes this threat to white racial purity as “the shadows of the unspoken terror—the grip of the black beast's claws on a white girl's throat!” (22). However, the white klansmen continuously perform the “unspoken terror”; they assign the role of terrorizer to the archetypal construction of the black male rapist in order to legitimate their organization and the terror and violence it prepares to inflict upon the black South Carolina community. The lynching of Gus is performed as a response to the fiction of the black rapist, and this response is cloaked in claims to divine right and institutionalized nobility. The consequences of the black hand on the white girl's throat become the noose around the black throat.

Dixon employs the body of the violated white woman as a symbol which

necessitates retribution. The excessive violence of Flora's rape and Gus's subsequent lynching are significantly not visible in the stage production of the narrative. In the scene in the den of the Klan to which I referred earlier, Flora's blood stands as evidence of the violence done to her and her subsequent untimely death. Dr. Cameron hypnotizes Gus and in a trance he reenacts the rape and Flora's death. In so doing, he indicts himself through the psychological manipulation of white men, but they significantly do not accomplish this through physical violence. Like the cyclops Klan leader, Cameron's eye is the instrument of torture; he “knocks him down with his eyes”(2). During the “trial” of Gus, Dr. Cameron hypnotizes him and stage directions indicate: “The negro collapses into a hypnotic condition, lifting one hand, as if to ward off a blow, stares around the cave and grins as if in a dream”(7). He then proceeds to narrate a staggered sequence of his pursuit of Flora and her suicide as she jumps into the river, with the his attempted rape as the climax: “She-she comin' -now-now I git her-” (8). Despite his insistence: “I ain't gwine hurt ye!” (ibid.), the Klan takes his pantomime as an admission of guilt. In this “trial”, in which the writ of habeas corpus is suspended, the Klan orchestrates a re-enactment of a rape scene that was never enacted on stage. Gus's guided hypnosis constructs an originary scene of violence: the scenario myth constitutes the act. The fictive scenario of rape is entirely orchestrated and controlled by the Klansmen players who construct their “den” as a stage within the stage of the playhouse.

Cameron's hypnosis reflects the proliferation of turn-of-the-century scientific theories that posited hypnosis as a method of diagnosing pathologies in patients. Freud, among others, practiced hypnosis as a viable treatment for psychological disorders. Similarly, the reference to Gus's dream-like state points to psychoanalytic theories that

dreams reveal aspects of character not manifested in the patient's conscious state. Dr. Cameron's "diagnosis" of Gus points to the confluence of scientific race theory and psychoanalytic theories of sexuality. Pathology and criminality are intrinsically linked to processes of racialization and sexualization. Gus is patient/criminal, while Cameron is doctor/judge. As blacks are continuously associated with embodied violence, whites disguise their violence and instead wield the powers of science and the law.

When the klansmen do commit acts of excessive violence, they are coded as as "act of revolution." Dr. Cameron discursively renders Gus's lynching, but it is not performed on stage:

"As sworn officers of Law and Order—execute this beast! It shall be a deed of the soul not the flesh—an act of open revolution! At midnight hand him from the balcony rail of the courthouse until dead. Cut down the body—drag it at a horses' heels through that camp of black soldiers—blow your whistles, rouse them from their sleep, and let them see and know, and then boldly fling the carrion on the doorstep of the Negro Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina—Go!" (31).

As the klansmen are disembodied, becoming "ghosts" in white robes, ambassadors of a spiritual realm, the body of Gus is transformed from the inhuman, the monstrous, into the abject, the animalistic "carrion" corpse. As this scene ends, the audience has been invited to participate in the imagining of a lynching. In an era when lynchings were celebrated as festive events by white communities and postcards of lynched bodies were sent as souvenirs, the unperformed lynching stands out. Dixon's project always masks the terror and atrocity of the Klan while excessive black violence is made center stage. As a "deed of the soul and not the flesh" Dixon distances the Klansmen from their brutality and aligns their lynching with the legitimating practices of "law and order." He stages Gus's brutal murder, as states stage death penalty executions, out of public view, while Gus's dead body



is made into public spectacle. The invisibility of the lynching works to foreground the violence performed by black characters, while the clansmen, like Flora, remain both “untainted” and innocent. While the act of white Klan members lynching Gus is obscured, the end product of the lynched body takes center stage. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry posits that torture “converts the reality of ‘absolute pain’ into the ‘fiction of absolute power.’”<sup>55</sup> Taylor also notes that torture “annihilates the victim...The aim of terrorism and torture is to prove to the population at large that the regime has the power to control it.”<sup>56</sup> The pain inflicted upon individuals is meant to paralyze entire communities. The imagined lynching proves to be a powerful signifier and prefigures the enacted murders of the white riot of Atlanta. Since in melodrama suffering entitles virtue, Flora's death ensures her status as virtuous virgin, but also works to justify the action of white violence. The off-stage lynching of Gus prefigures the off-stage riot which would terrorize the black population of Atlanta.

Dixon (and subsequently, D.W. Griffith) toured the country doing speaking engagements and speaking during the intermissions of *The Clansman*'s stage productions. Thus Dixon interrupted the theatricality of terrorism in order to justify its performance, while the victims of the terror he writes are made visible only as they disappear. He proclaimed to his audiences intent on justifying his text: “My object is to teach the north, the young north, what it has never known—the awful suffering of the white man during the dreadful reconstruction period”.<sup>57</sup> Here Dixon erases regional distinctions by emphasizing the plight of “the white man” rather than “the Southerner”, and places the South in an

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<sup>55</sup> Qtd. in *Disappearing Acts* 129.

<sup>56</sup> *Disappearing Acts* 130.

<sup>57</sup> Da Ponte 17.

authoritative, pedagogical position over the “young north.” At Southern performances such as one in Atlanta, he established his “credibility” with the audience by praising his father as a member of the original Klan, placing himself within a genealogy of regional white supremacy.<sup>58</sup> As Dixon once used the pulpit to transmit his beliefs as minister of one of the largest protestant congregations in New York City, he similarly took advantage of the legitimating context of the theater. Taylor asserts that the constructedness of performance ensures its ideological power: “Within this theatrical frame, the room with its props, its scripts for acquiring information, and its professional terminology, the torturers can safely proceed with the annihilation of others...they must place their actions within a frame that justifies and exonerates them.”<sup>59</sup> Through long-standing associations with “civilization” (often colonial) and elitism, the space of the opera house/theater where Dixon's plays were staged conferred cultural legitimacy, while scripts and props convinced audiences that they were accessing historical record. The conditions of performed representation, then, have a direct relationship to the violence proliferated in cultures of terror. In the case of this play, the cultural authority assigned to the performance effectively blurred the lines between cultural workers and agents of the state.

### **From the State to the Streets: Specular/Spectacular Modernity and the Atlanta White Riot of 1906**

The Atlanta white riot involved spectacles of violence against black communities during an election season which saw organized black resistance to disfranchisement. The two candidates for Governor, Hoke Smith and Clark Howell, each affiliated with rival

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<sup>58</sup> Baureline 35.

<sup>59</sup> *Disappearing Acts* 129.

Atlanta newspapers, positioned race and the maintenance of racial hierarchy as central to their campaigns. *The Journal*, which backed Smith and *The Constitution*, run by Howell, each sought to paint the opposing candidate as lenient on the issue of “negro domination.” As inflammatory charges were brought against each candidate, they announced more and more extreme measures to eliminate the political influence of black voters in the state and to preclude their rights to full citizenship altogether. This “race-baiting” seemed to be in response to the visible efforts of black community leaders to begin organizing at local, state, and national levels. In particular, Du Bois's Niagara Movement had started a chapter in Georgia in the winter of 1905<sup>60</sup> and black leaders had organized the Georgia Equal Rights Convention that same season. This break from the paternalistic, accommodationist model of racial uplift was met by outrage and threats of violent consequences from the white commercial-civic elite of Atlanta. They set about mobilizing the many facets of city life they controlled.

Henry Grady, in particular, advised his political successors to make use of the city's newspapers as a platform for inciting race hatred. Drawing from Mark Baureline's and Gregory Mixon's recent useful studies of the riot,<sup>61</sup> I will briefly contextualize the months leading up to the riot in late September. In the summer months preceding the gubernatorial election, the white-owned and run newspapers were filled with reports of white women, young and old alike, becoming prey to black men. As if it were issuing a curtain call for Dixon's play, the *Georgian* newspaper characterized the current situation in Atlanta as “The Reign of Terror for Southern Women.”<sup>62</sup> In that same month, they printed stories of black

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60 At the time, chapters formed in several states across the southern region.

61 *Negrophobia* and the aforementioned study *The Atlanta Riot*, respectively.

62 Baureline 100.

assault or attempted assault of white women. I will briefly outline a representative example of the type of sensationalism and violence that dominated headlines and bred race terrorism. In July, the *Atlanta Journal* narrates the attack of a young Miss Poole by a young black man who seized her and, using his hand, “gripped her throat.” Like many newspaper headlines of the day, this narrative depicts a scene similar to Dixon's play in which the black hand on the white woman's throat becomes coded as rape. The circumstances of the assault on Miss Poole are narrated quite differently in each of the major Atlanta newspapers, but the discrepancies do not serve to dissuade white law enforcement and white male citizens from pursuing violent “retribution.” In this case, the sheriff as well as the girl's brothers lead the charge across the countryside searching for a suspicious black man. They apprehend a black man named Carmichael based entirely on circumstantial evidence.<sup>63</sup>

Like *The Clansman's* Dr. Cameron, this police-led lynch mob assigns guilt based on coincidence and racialized assumption, as guilt is assessed using an “all-seeing eye” in lieu of material evidence. Carmichael is taken outside, identified by the young Miss Poole, and then the white men gathered there proceed to fire forty shots at close range at Carmichael. According to the *Atlanta Constitution's* report, however, Carmichael is said to have died from 6 gun shot wounds. The media here acts in collusion with the lynchers in their failure to demand that the shooting be investigated and in their active participation in erasing the violence done by whites—forty shots are reduced to six. The white men agree to burn his body, but policemen interfere and opt instead for a slow procession through the city,

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<sup>63</sup> The accounts of this assault varied so much in content that the suspect's name was identified by some reports as Frank Carmichael, Fred Carmichael, and sometimes just Carmichael. This seems indicative of the level of specificity involved not only in the reporting of the “crime” but in its official investigation as well. (Bauerline 85-87)

through black neighborhoods, to the black undertaker's residence.<sup>64</sup> Carmichael's lynched body, like Gus's, then, becomes the means by which black populations are terrorized; the parade of the mutilated victim repeats a spectacle modeled after Dixon's theatrics. Humphrey asserts: "Atrocities horror and terrify by producing wounded and mutilated bodies as political signs and victims. Torture, rape, mutilation and massacre are acts of excessive violence whose effects flow from the production of horror in victims and witnesses."<sup>65</sup> This staged act of terror necessitates the full participation of white witnesses to verify and justify its own account of black violence against white victimhood. The mutilated and paraded black body is meant to act as a sign of black transgression, against which whites are forced to act, even as its witnessing by black community members makes clear their own vulnerable position in relation to white hegemonic power. Acts of terror such as this and performances such as *The Clansman* attain meaning, power, and political weight through a dynamic relationship between actors and audience, players and witnesses.

No white men are prosecuted for the murder of Carmichael due to the supposed impossibility of identifying exactly who fired the fatal shots. Though this lynch mob and the white rioters who came after were not protected by the anonymity and invisibility afforded by Klan masks and robes, the criminal justice system afforded them a larger blanket of protection from prosecution or opprobrium. In July, the *Atlanta Journal* did more than borrow Dixon's narrative: they reprinted an excerpt from Dixon's novel version of *The Clansman*. The *Atlanta Journal* had serialized Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* beginning in 1905.<sup>66</sup> The day one of the reprints of part of the novel (dedicated to Dixon's

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64 Bauerline 87.

65 Humphrey 1.

66 Mixon 21.

uncle, “Grand Titan of the Invisible Empire, Ku Klux Klan”) appeared, prisoners in a jail in Watkinsville, a nearby suburb of Atlanta, were lynched. Eight men, seven black and one white, had been “ragged with bullet wounds” while the identities of the executioners were indeterminable.<sup>67</sup> Cultural text and immediate political climate had become entirely inseparable. Dixon's neoplantation vision had transformed the stage into the street.

On September 22, the night the riot began, *The Clansman* was being performed in the nearby city of Augusta, Georgia, and extra editions of the *Evening News* filled the streets warning whites that assaults on white women were happening all over the city. The political stakes of the governor's race had been transformed into white sexual victimization. The newspapers, like Dixon's *Clansman*, shaped and encouraged such changes to the political milieu, foretelling impending racial conflict. Through the convergence of popular culture, political rhetoric, support by white communities, and news reportage, we see how the Atlanta riots of 1906, as Sheila Smith McKoy asserts, became a “race riot,” that is, an act of violence against blacks constituted and reinforced through the white community's naturalization of racial conflict as inevitable: “Marked by the manipulation of contrasting symbols of the oppressor and the oppressed—and in the discourse of white supremacy, whites are the ones targeted for oppression—these images prefigure the inevitability of racial violence.”<sup>68</sup> As white men on the streets circulated rumors that blacks were planning an uprising, they stood on boxes and shouted the need for bloodshed. These boxes became stages upon which the speakers could become players in the drama of the street violence. From there, their incendiary speeches became calls to action, bringing the play to the streets as the public sphere became coopted as a stage for white violence. Despite the

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67 Bauerline 64.

68 Mckoy 14.

mayor's attempts to calm the crowd with speeches and eventually a fire hose, the angry crowd ran through the streets brutalizing black Atlantans, throwing bricks through black businesses, brutally murdering two barbers, parading their bodies in the street, circling city monuments and forming a pile of wounded bodies in an alley. The rioters used pieces of victims' clothing as symbolic props, proof of violence already done in an attempt to make inevitable the violence that was to come, inciting whites to join the riot.<sup>69</sup> The blood of the white woman deployed in Dixon's play as a justification of white retribution had been replaced by the blood of the black victim.

The spectacle of white power began with assaults on black bodies, the imagined weapon of sexual terror, and then spread to assaulting the now tenuous infrastructure of black communities already largely disenfranchised due to Jim Crow legislation, relegated to neighborhoods on undesirable land, and occupying primarily low-wage jobs, with little to no access to public education.<sup>70</sup> Destruction to black property, both business and residential, was one of the most devastating outcomes of the riot. Sheila Smith McKoy reminds us that white riots are not the consequence of a lack of power but are precipitated by the actuality of that power.<sup>71</sup> White hegemonic violence anticipates and responds to threats to the scripted dynamics of an already segregated society. Within white hegemony, class becomes the convenient default explanation for white violence, thus naturalizing both class and race privilege. For example, in the aftermath of the riot, white leaders in Atlanta would denounce the rioters as the "low criminal and semi-criminal class," despite the fact that arrested rioters included students, clerks, carpenters, and construction workers.<sup>72</sup> After

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69 Mixon 86.

70 Mixon 28.

71 McKoy 6-7.

72 Bauerline 159.

days of rioting, the state militia and newly deputized white men were ordered to patrol the streets; strict curfews were imposed. However, the “law and order” instituted worked as a continuation of the threat posed by the white rioters. Black neighborhoods patrolled by the rioters were now patrolled by white militia and policemen, many of whom were rioters recently issued uniforms and made agents of the state. Costuming, then, as a form of legitimating power was as important in the staging of Dixon's play as it was in the performance of the riot.

Both the performance of the riot and the play lashed out against black autonomy. Increasingly, the paternalist white employer/black employee model was being challenged by the rise of black-run businesses in Atlanta. Thus, black-owned barbershops, restaurants, bars and their proprietors were some of the central targets of the white rioters. Some of these were located in somewhat integrated neighborhoods. As Gregory Mixon has argued, the riot was fueled by, more than any other motivation, a need to inhibit and police black social and economic autonomy. To that I would add that the riot policed public spaces that might have afforded intimacy between whites and blacks, if in only in the form of customer/service provider relations. The neoplantation narrative of intimacy as threat worked to enact violence against black social and economic power. Though *The Clansman's* central focus was white sexual and racial purity, on playbills, Dixon emphasized the problem of race and *labor*. For instance, the playbill included one of Dixon's “famous articles,” “The Future of the Negro and Booker T. Washington's Work,” in which he argued: “The Negro remains on this Continent for 1 reason only. The Southern white man has needed his labor, and therefore, has fought every suggestion of his removal.



But when he refuses to work for the white man, then what?"<sup>73</sup> Articles followed which argued for expulsion of blacks from the U.S. He argued for black repatriation to Africa and positioned Liberia as a "friendly colonization." Though Dixon's argument here seems to undermine the play's central focus on the threat of miscegenation, the problem of free black labor is an underlying subtext throughout the performance. Dixon's black characters are loyal slaves, aspiring politicians, or members of the militia. The only black laboring body that he represents, and which he treats sympathetically, is that of the loyal ex-slave who is content to continue serving his former master. The absence of an autonomous black laboring body becomes conspicuous when read in conjunction with Dixon's essay. Dixon's writing points to the intersections of race and class as he always represents blackness as equated with the working class and this confluence resonates in stereotypes still prevalent today. Therefore, both the riot and the play must also be considered as performances of class. White violence was in many ways a protest against the rise of an independent black middle class.

The riot raged for three days, fueled by rumors of impending black retaliation. Countless numbers of black men and women were injured and an accurate count of the dead was never ascertainable, in some part due to the bias of state and media institutions as well as the condition (or absence) of the victims' bodies. Black communities fled their neighborhoods and congregated in churches and schools awaiting an invasion. Blacks, however, were not rioting, nor were they organizing violent resistance: they sought to protect themselves from further attack. Black universities, black-run businesses, and neighborhoods where prominent leaders lived seemed to be particular targets. In outlying

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<sup>73</sup> Playbill from the archive at the Atlanta History Center.

black suburbs like upper-class Brownsville, home of Gammon Theological Seminary and Clark college, the police opened fire on black men whom they claimed had fired on them first. Later all of Brownsville's male residents, numbering nearly 300, were forced from their community by the militia (and a Gatling gun with 1,000 rounds of ammunition) and paraded through the streets to Atlanta's stockade because they armed themselves in anticipation of white attack on their community.<sup>74</sup> Like the flaunting of Carmichael's body through black neighborhoods, the authorities created a spectacle of terror with this march to the stockade, further threatening black communities with a staging of white power. Rumors among whites on the street and in the press continued to anticipate an armed black retaliation in attempts to justify the ongoing violence. These rumors circulated not only locally, but nationally.

The rumored black uprising never materialized. With no organized opposition from blacks or from the police, whites terrorized without pause. Rioters halted the city's public system, stalling trolleys and threatening blacks on board. Recent Greek immigrants were targeted for their affiliations with blacks. "Blackness" then, even in the midst of the riot, was a strategically assigned marker. The riots depended on known rules about the lack of legal rights that immigrants have, as well as their knowledge of the lack of rights for blacks, thus "blackening" all those with limited access to power. Humphrey asserts that: "while it is true that the culture of terror is selective, the way in which it terrorises is as much through constitutive acts of violence as through prescriptive rules defining difference."<sup>75</sup> The rules which governed access to citizenship and therefore the right to legal recourse from the violence of the riot had been delineated based on rigid social

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74 Mixon 109.

75 Humphrey 23.

positioning. However, the riot also produced racialized subjects and altered not only the processes of that racialization but also the consequences.

Across the country, newspapers offered up opposing views of the riot. While some, such as the *St. Louis Dispatch*, the *Washington Star*, and the *Baltimore American* denounced the riot as a shameful atrocity, others, such as the *New Orleans Picayune* and the *Kansas City Star* publicized the threat of black violence in Atlanta, not the reality of white terror and white riot. For instance, the *New York World* reported: “ATLANTA BLACKS TALK OF WAR OF RETALIATION” and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* asserted: “The negroes have seem to be moved by the spirit of racial hatred, and have vented their wrath upon innocent and defenseless white women. . .”<sup>76</sup> The headlines were based on no substantial evidence; but they worked to ensure that black violence rather than white riot would be the spectral performance that loomed over the entire region. On the fourth day of the riot, the *Atlanta Journal* headline read: “STOP CIRCULATING RUMORS; HALF YOU HEAR IS FAKED.”<sup>77</sup> This admonishment, however, had already proven to be deeply hypocritical. As calls for a return to “law and order” multiplied, the leading city newspapers immediately attempted to distance themselves from the riot and its instigators. The white press had profited from the demonization of black Atlantans and stories of sensationalized, aestheticized violence, but, in the end, their power (which was ultimately indistinguishable from that of the commercial-civic elite) depended upon a larger degree of “law and order.” No attempt was made to retract or acknowledge the incendiary nature of the many circulated reports of the terrorization of white women and surges of black criminality. The staging of the neoplantation as a living cultural memory

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<sup>76</sup> Bauerline 230.

<sup>77</sup> Bauerline 208.

that compelled violence was then repackaged as the need for the neoplantation *state* to reassert its control and authority.

The end result is that “race riots” such as these were coded as black. This had a significant impact on the reports in the immediate aftermath of the riot, but also had an enduring impact on the ways in which histories were written. Sheila Smith McKoy insists on “the causal relationship between white privilege and racial violence because white riots occur in racialized societies, [and I would add in this case that it occurred in racialized neighborhoods], places in which blackness is constructed as being alien to the cultural norm. These oppositions are encoded in the valence of white supremacy, which both engenders violence and depends upon it to maintain the racial divides that white supremacy claims.”<sup>78</sup> She notes that riots between non-racialized/white groups are coded instead as “revolution,” “civic duty,” “rebellion,” etc. This is the rhetoric with Dixon used in his performance to describe the actions of the Klan, as the “first blows of revolution.” Deeming this violence a “race riot” thus works to re-inscribe the racialized and sexualized group as that which is nonnormative or “outside the law.” We might consider how media reports of late twentieth-century riots are consistent with this genealogy of representation: violence and destruction continue to be attributed to populations of color while white violence remains occluded.

My act of resistant reading draws from the strength of the black witnesses of the riots who refused to reify the general consensus that the violence of the riots was the cause and effect of black sexual aggression. Immediately following the riot, Atlanta *Voice of the Negro* editor J. Max Barber, who lived and worked in Atlanta close to the epicenter of the

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<sup>78</sup> McKoy 5.

riot and was threatened by local white leaders, feared for his life. Unwilling to act as paralyzed spectator, however, he calls for the prosecution of white rioters: “Behold! We have peace—No, not peace, but a wilderness called peace. Sixty or seventy colored people are in jail for killing one policeman while sixteen whites are in jail for the whole riot which resulted in the murdering and maiming of more than a hundred people.”<sup>79</sup> Barber points to the misapplication of blame and prosecution in the wake of the riot. Implicitly identifying violence as a “race riot” becomes as much a political strategy as the performance of riot violence itself. Because riots are often deemed to be extra-legal or vigilante justice, the collusion between the law and racialized violence is rendered invisible. Along with Barber, black witnesses and family members filled the Atlanta courthouse in the aftermath of the riot to testify to their loss of property and family members, and to attest to the many wounded at the hands of white rioters. Their very presence called attention to the injustice and terror they had experienced. Their testimony functioned as a protest against the legal sanctioning of the riot and as an attempt to rewrite the racial codes which called the violence a “race riot” by naming whites as agents and perpetrators.

There was much at stake for those vulnerable Atlantans who served as witnesses to the injustices of the riot at the local level. Resistant spectatorship at the national level also held serious political implications for those leaders who chose to contradict the narrative which had instigated riot.<sup>80</sup> In November following the riot, Atlanta resident and already

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79 Qtd. in Baureline 218.

80 Less radical black leaders such as Booker T. Washington and Henry Proctor sought an end to racialized violence through a denunciation of lower class and unemployed black Atlantans. In the immediate aftermath of the riot, many prominent black leaders--including Christian ministers, business leaders and educators--condemned the “black criminal classes” and attempted to distance the black elite from those individuals accused of assaulting white women. In many ways, they accepted the paternalistic stance offered by white leaders who sought to repair the damage done by the riot through a familiar, more conservative script of racial harmony. Black leaders' responses to the riot worked to shore up ideological divisions between those, such as Barber and Du Bois, who were fighting for full inclusion into U.S.

prominent intellectual W.E. B. Du Bois published an article in the *World Today* citing the false reports of pre-riot black violence and the gubernatorial campaign as causes of the riot; he praised black self-defense during the riot and advocated black enfranchisement as the only path toward interracial peace.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps the most enduring literary response to the riot was Du Bois's poem "A Litany of Atlanta," published in the October 1906 issue of the *Independent*.<sup>82</sup> Du Bois composed the poem as he hastily returned by train to Atlanta after learning that the riot was still raging in the city where his wife and child then lived. Returning from research he was conducting in Alabama, he composed this poem as a jeremiad, as a series of invocations from a preacher to which the voice of a congregation alternately responds. The litany begins with a critical interrogation as he considers the origin of the black (male) criminal. In his questioning, Du Bois is not interested in proving or disproving the myth of the black rapist; rather his target is the larger system of oppression that prevails as a result such constructions:

"And yet whose is the deeper guilt? Who made these devils? Who nursed them in crime and fed them on injustice? Who ravished and debauched their mothers and their grandmothers? Who bought and sold their crime, and waxed fat and rich on public iniquity?"

The congregation responds: "*Thou knowest, good God!*"<sup>83</sup>

Through this call and response, Du Bois suggests that the figure of the black criminal has

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citizenship and those who supported the Washingtonian strategy of "compromise". (744) Dominic J. Capeci, Jr. and Jack C. Knight. "Reckoning with Violence: W.E.B. Du Bois and the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot." *Journal of Southern History* (Vol. LXII, No. 4, 4 Nov. 1996).

81 Capeci and Knight 748.

82 Du Bois's literary response to the riot also consisted of a short story entitled "A Race Riot", presumably written in the weeks following the riot, but which was never finished or published. According to Capeci and Knight, the story depicts "the 'shout' of the [white] mob as inevitable backlash to black agitation" which they attribute to his larger concerns about white response to black activism. (Capeci and Knight footnote 130, p. 760)

83 DuBois, W.E.B. "A Litany of Atlanta", from *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. Lewis, David Levering (New York: Holt and Co., 1995) 441.

historically been “made” to camouflage the criminal and immoral practices of whites. He implicitly references slavery and the institutionalized rape of black women as evidence of the historical and ongoing symbiotic relationship between the law and socio-economic power. Through the criminalization of black men, whites both profit and are exonerated. Du Bois situates the Atlanta riot within a history of “public iniquity”--the public stagings of white power, then, are endemic to a system which maintains class and race hierarchy. The response of the congregation depicts an empowered black community which “knows” the injustice and violence of this history and demands retribution, as the Atlanta courthouse witnesses did in the wake of the riot.<sup>84</sup> In “Litany” Du Bois extends the blood/profit paradigm beyond race dynamics to explain the relationship between the North and South. “White terror” in the poem is represented as the silence of the Lord to the plight of African Americans with no haven from racism in a nation in which “North is greed and South is blood.” Ultimately, Du Bois employs a rhetoric of terror to represent the metaphorical and literal lack of sanctuary for African Americans in a nation of false promises. By using the call and response form, Du Bois gives agency not only to an individual leader, but to the community as a whole, with each sustaining and propelling the other's critique. This poetic form is an apt model for imagining resistant spectatorship as the individual and the collective rely on one another to effect substantive change. The call and response form

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84 A later stanza describes the situation in Atlanta: “A city lay in travail, God our Lord, and from her loins sprang twin Murder and Black Hate. Red was midnight; clang, crack and cry of death and fury filled the air and trembled underneath the stars when church spires pointed silently to Thee. After all this was to sate the greed of greedy men who hide behind the veil of vengeance! *Bend us Thine ear, O Lord!*”. The stanza starts with the narrative voice of a preacher figure condemning the violence and racism meted out to the black communities of the city; these “twin” evils, however, are a product of the city, suggesting that the riot is not anomalous. The preacher indicts the elite of Atlanta as the instigators and beneficiaries of this riot in his reference to the “greed of greedy men”: those already in power seeking to further ensure their privilege. Du Bois's poem portrays a populace already exploited, in poverty, and vulnerable. The poem relies on stereotypical gender identifications to portray a victimized population--women “naked to shame” and men “who toiled and sweat to save a bit from the pittance paid him” (443).

depicts how an audience might access power through particular modes of active spectatorship in order to become actors.

Restoring order necessitated a policy of containment of white riot, but the institution of “peace” following the riot was haunted by the racist violence which prefigured the riot itself. Following Barber and other black leaders' condemnations of Dixon's incendiary play, in the wake of the riot white Atlanta leaders conceded its propagation of terror. A performance of *The Clansman* scheduled for the fall immediately following the riot was canceled due to fears that it might incite further riot. *The Constitution* offered this salient explanation for the cancellation: “It [*The Clansman*] is calculated to inflame the most elemental passions of race against race, and, through suggestion, is a passionate incentive to riot and murder.”<sup>85</sup> These leaders, then, acknowledged the link between the imagined lynching off stage, the spectacle of white power, and the enactment of violence on the streets.<sup>86</sup> Their acknowledgment of this dynamic, however, in no way indicated an integrationist political stance or a denunciation of the riot itself. This effort to limit a culture of violence ought rather to be read as the white elite's reigning in of a populace which necessitated containment as much as manipulation. White power was then redirected back to the legal sphere of courts and law enforcement in the immediate aftermath of the devastation done by the play and the riot. Both play and riot worked to maintain and restore the pre-existing order of segregation, with the white commercial-civic elite in control of the city's (and the state's) economic,

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85 Qtd. in Baureline 218

86 Their characterization of the play seems to contradict the press's previous participation in building the violent racist sentiments which fueled the riot; however this type of convenient gesturing towards anti-racist politics was typical of many local, regional, and national institutions. This afterthought of disapproval of violence in no way explicitly indicts white violence, but the attitude conveyed here does explain how Atlanta had come to be a city which allowed for some degree of black autonomy to begin with. Gestures toward anti-racist rhetoric had largely been a result of decades of black resistance to exclusionary policies.



political, and social structures.

### **Restaging the Past: DJ Spooky and the Politics of Resistant Remix**

Race riot and play would ultimately continue to be deployed strategically as cultural memory and through ongoing performances of white power. In the years following the Atlanta riots, Thomas Dixon and D.W. Griffith collaborated to produce the cinematic neoplantation spectacle *Birth of a Nation*, making use of the burgeoning medium of film as a political platform. With the advent of film technology and the birth of the movie theater came a means to reach even wider viewing audiences. *The Clansman's* narrative of white victimhood and black violence went national with Griffith's 1915 release of *Birth of a Nation*, and this shift was reflected in more ways than the change in the titles of these influential texts. The technological development of modern cinema combined with the narrative revision of Dixon's play resulted in a text which fostered increasingly nationalist white supremacist identifications. Dixon's performance had offered the promise of national unification through Northern Elsie Stoneman's marriage to Southern Klansman Ben Cameron and an end to Reconstruction-era gains for African Americans. Griffith's film multiplied and extended nearly every instance of symbolic white national unity.<sup>87</sup>

Responses to Griffith's film in the form of urban riots in various cities across the U.S. also

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<sup>87</sup> I will refrain from an analysis of the many ways in which the film extended the narrative to a broader national audience as many other valuable studies have done this work before me, including Michael Rogin's aforementioned chapter. However, it is worth including Linda Williams' description of the transformative impact of Griffith's film: "Dixon's novels and plays are full of speeches about sectional reunion. His ride of the Clan to save northerner Phil Stoneman at the end of his *Clansman* novel and Elsie Stoneman at the end of his play enacts a common purpose between North and South. Nevertheless, it was Griffith's film, and not Dixon's novel and play, that achieved the "moving picture" felt by many whites to heal national divisions. For it was not until Griffith's much grander ride to "save a nation" managed a much more effective form of racial exclusion than Dixon's lurid race hatred that audiences most deeply felt a sense of national rebirth in the empowering of the film's white hero" (113).

indicate that the genealogies of these coeval performances--riot and play--can be characterized by continuity and expansion.

The twenty-first century ushered in a new era of U.S. imperialism, national surveillance, and racial profiling. Such exercises in state-sponsored violence are increasingly justified through an amorphous figuration of terror and terrorism. This figuration hinges on the U.S.'s post-9/11 status as victim and is used to sanction pre-emptive war, the detainment of Middle Eastern and Islamic peoples, and the policing and censorship of voices of dissent. The spectacle of American trauma effectively attempts to cloak the U.S.'s own policies of terrorization, which range from the hyper-visible “shock and awe” campaigns to unlocatable torture camps. It is crucial, then, that we understand, historicize, and re-deploy the meaning and rhetoric of “terror.” This is particularly important as we see the U.S. position itself as victim to global violence, a representation that has increased its political capital, even as we see disillusionment by the public with the current administration’s war against terror.<sup>88</sup>

U.S. national victimhood is predicated on an imagined loss of power. *Nationalism* is fueled by claims to retribution for that loss and the need to sustain power. Scholars have traced the expression of this loss of power and the containment of continuous threats to that power to other significant eras in U.S. history, namely the Cold War and the Civil Rights eras. For example, this post 9/11 national(ist) discourse of victimhood strategically borrows the language of late twentieth-century identity politics and its emphasis on oppression and injury. As scholars have noted, many versions of identitarian politics, both individual and

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<sup>88</sup> Recent polls indicate that the President's low approval ratings are due largely to his perceived mishandling of the war in Iraq, a war which was justified by the administration as part of the larger “war on terror”. Similarly, recent criticism of the administration's use of wiretapping as a “weapon” in their war on terror indicates disapproval of the tactics of this ongoing, ambiguous war.

collective, have long been grounded in injury.<sup>89</sup> In order to gain access to the rights of citizenship in a liberal democracy, groups that organized around a collective identity often worked to provide evidence of injury in order to claim victim status. Victimhood became a means to pursue legal and social redress. Current nationalist (and white supremacist) projects then coopt that rhetoric in order to construct an injured national body which has the “right” to defend itself. Additionally, the contemporary rhetoric of terror is often associated with the development of a “culture of fear,” a kind of return to a Cold-War “red scare” climate, with its connotations of panic and anxiety over impending attack from a perceived *outside*.<sup>90</sup> In the current moment however this “outside” relies on constructions of an anti-American other that is *racialized*. Though comparisons between the current moment and the discourses of the McCarthy-era and post-Civil Rights multiculturalism can be generative, I have sketched a broader historicization of the deployment of a rhetoric of terror, one which allows for further consideration of how terror has contributed to the production of race in U.S. history.

Resistant spectatorship to these performances of terror continues today. African-American activist artists like the underground music pioneer, DJ Spooky (aka That Subliminal Kid, aka Paul D. Miller) remind us of the legacies of these genealogies and their influence on contemporary U.S. American cultures. In his recent project, DJ Spooky remixes not just music but DVDs of *Birth of a Nation* interspersed with photo stills of *The*

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89 See Wendy Brown's “Wounded Attachments” from *States of Injury* in which she problematizes how identity politics foregrounding injury rely on the state as the power which has the authority to rectify those injuries: *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1995); see Judith Butler's “Afterword” from *Loss*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (London: U California P, 2003); Linda Williams's *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 2001).

90 See Lauren Berlant: “The Epistemology of State Emotion,” in *Dissent in Dangerous Times*, ed. Austin Sarat (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2005) 46-78.

*Clansman* players. DJ Spooky's remixed revisionist performance *Rebirth of a Nation* interrupts and rewrites Dixon and Griffith's visual and discursive terror. His project counters the intertwined narratives of white supremacy by revealing the interstitial violence that becomes visible when the narratives are disconnected and reordered. In describing his project, Spooky says: "By remixing the film along the lines of dj culture, I hoped to create a counter-narrative, one where the story implodes on itself, one where new stories arise out the ashes of that explosion."<sup>91</sup> As Dixon and Griffith's stories compelled melodramatic affect, namely "race feeling" and patriotism, Spooky's emergent stories implicitly attempt to defy such sentiments and to produce new ones by undoing the affective qualities of this genealogy of racial melodrama. He importantly resists the ongoing surrogation of white nationalism within this genealogy by destabilizing the continuities of racial and national identity it relies upon. In doing so, DJ Spooky's digital project of resistant spectatorship breaks apart the elements which order and construct the white supremacist melodrama and calls for the ongoing need to interrogate genealogies of terror.<sup>92</sup> In particular, he disrupts the narrative of rape and rescue so crucial to Dixon and Griffith's affective techniques. Instead he remixes the formulas upon which racialization and sexualization rely.

Spooky self-consciously acknowledges *Rebirth's* place in the extended genealogy of this performance. *Rebirth* lingers on the playbills and newspaper articles which constituted the media hype for the theatrical staging. The remix features stills from Dixon's play and focuses on the title page of his play script before centering on *Birth of a Nation's* movie

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91 All of DJ Spooky's quotes are taken from <<http://djspooky.com/art.html>> unless otherwise noted.

92 Other African-American artists have similarly taken up Griffith's film recently as an important reference point for resistance to ongoing struggles against racism, class oppression, and histories of violence. See Aaron McGruder's graphic novel "Birth of a Nation," which begins with the all-black city of East St. Louis, Illinois, seceding from the U.S. in the wake of the 2000 election.

poster. Each generation of the text is represented and placed within the context of its aggrandized marketing strategies. *The Clansman's* press heralds it as an absolute “success.” Its photo stills feature a terrorized Gus lying prone at the feet of robed Klansman who surround him but are not touching him, while *Birth's* film poster features a hooded klansman on horseback in a pose of authority and unchecked power. The thread which links these initial images is not only the continuity of narrative and white supremacist righteousness but the media's role in institutionalizing and perpetuating such archetypal depictions. *Rebirth* expresses concern with how the media of the respective eras represented cultivate a specific kind of acquiescent spectatorship. Spooky has commented that the film's role as propaganda is of particular interest to him as popular culture continues to take such uncritical stances on issues of race, gender, and nation today.<sup>93</sup>

Spooky has a stage presence as did Thomas Dixon—one which reflects his personal and political investment in the performance.<sup>94</sup> Like Dixon, he relates the historical to the contemporary and asserts the inability to completely sever past from present. This relates to many of Spooky's interests in the role of time, as both an abstract concept and a structuring force in history. He begins by making links to the current U.S. war in Iraq and connects the “War on Terrorism” to the history of the KKK as the first U.S. terrorist organization.<sup>95</sup> In making this link, Spooky reappropriates a contemporary rhetoric of terror and sets up

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93 See Ana Finel Honigman, “Birth Pains,” *Artnet* June 2004, October 10, 2005  
<<http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/>.

94 However, in the November 2005 issue of *Artforum* magazine, Michael Stadler critiques Spooky for his stage presence, or lack thereof: “Miller was there physically, yes, but he was entirely absent, awash in decontextualized information. . . In this frictionless environment, it was difficult to see the contours of his choices, and so he vanished into the vastness of his own unlimited agency”. (“Remote Viewing: Matthew Stadler on the Time-Based Art Festival [Portland, Oregon]” 77)

95 My analysis is limited to DJ Spooky's March 2005 performance of *Rebirth* in San Francisco and to the sample of the remix available on his website. Each performance consists of a new mix of music and images and no two are exactly the same. *Rebirth* in many ways both accesses and occupies a place in the archive while also functioning as part of the more ephemeral repertoire.

*Rebirth*, like Willie King's blues song "Terrorized," as a critique of the persistent naming of "terrorism" as a threat that exists outside the U.S. He then reminds the audience that Griffith's film was the first to be screened in the White House. Then president Woodrow Wilson, a former college friend of both Griffith and Dixon, arranged a private screening of the film, and famously deemed it a work without precedent-- "like writing history with lightning." Spooky's introduction resituates the U.S. national body as one which has espoused, rather than negated, racial violence, and brings to relief a(nother) moment when national leadership effectively sanctioned the historic practice of racially motivated domestic terror as an appropriate response to a perceived threat. This works as an implicit indictment of contemporary U.S. political rhetoric which mobilizes around a perpetual threat in order to justify ongoing warfare against Islam. *Rebirth* signals yet another revision of the terrorist/terrorized dichotomy, exposing the affectivity and flexibility of this discourse throughout U.S. history, and throughout these performances in particular.

Ultimately, Spooky's onstage presence becomes eclipsed and subsumed in the visual and musical experience of *Rebirth*. Spooky's dj tables are dwarfed by three large screens. The performance initially begins with images displayed on one screen, then uses all three—usually the two screens on outside display the same image while the center screen differs. This presentation invokes the ways in which the many seemingly peripheral narratives support Griffith's central ideological project. The technique calls attention to the idea that the dominant narrative of racial (i.e., *national*) purity is undergirded by supporting narratives of Reconstruction history and domesticity, which depend upon race, gender, and class norms, as well as sexual narratives. It's a distracting technique, making it difficult for viewers to focus, thereby working to disrupt Griffith's logic as well as the development of

melodramatic narrative constraint, since a central convention of melodrama involves the role of time in building affective sentiment. Spooky constructs a kind of alternate time structure—defying cohesive narrative and disrupting narratives that Griffith presented as parallel.

As Michael Rogin observes in “The Sword Became a Flashing Vision,” Griffith's cinematic achievement was his ability to manipulate events and images separated in time and space through his use of flashback and cutback: “By juxtaposing events widely separated in space, he overcame barriers of distance (barriers overcome in the film plot by the [Klan's] ride to the rescue). Griffith created an art of simultaneities and juxtapositions rather than traditions and conventions.”<sup>96</sup> In *Birth of a Nation*, the potentially conflicting portraits of romanticized, regional plantation life, divisive Civil War, and Reconstruction Klan rides are all aligned to create a portrait of racial and national unity. The eras referenced are separated by decades but are brought together to construct a central cinematic narrative. Spooky's remixing, then, involves another layer of juxtapositions and simultaneities which rely on *Birth's* images. Though a part of the genealogy of Dixon's earlier performance, its inheritance represents reiteration with a marked difference. Where Griffith famously used the camera eye (or “fish eye”) to transition between scenes, Spooky uses digital “bleeding,” which has a sort of watercolor effect, in order to move between remixed scenes. The contrasts of color upon which *Birth* relies so heavily to define racial character are literally washed out by this remixing effect—whites, blacks, and brown blur and become indistinguishable. Spooky then stops/freezes action in middle of the scene in order to point to particular racial dynamics—such as the scene in which Stoneman's

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96 Rogin 199.

mulatto mistress is depicted in *Birth* as using her sexual powers to influence politics. By stopping the action in mid-frame as the mistress (with ulterior motives) suspiciously hands the distinguished Stevenson his hat, Spooky interrupts the flow of the narrative and highlights the film's dependency on racist identity constructions in order for plot progression to occur.<sup>97</sup>

Spooky establishes this as a revisionist project through recontextualization. At the performance's start, Jimi Hendrix's rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" accompanies a montage of flashing flags—the U.S. flag, the U.N. flag, followed by many national flags, including notably the Confederate flag, and finally arriving at the image of the dollar sign. His use of Hendrix's famous blown-out rock-n-roll national anthem evokes a moment when anti-war culture appropriated symbols of patriotism as a means of critique. The transition from national symbols to monetary symbols places capitalism in relation to the construction of the nation-state and national identities. Specifically, *Rebirth's* anti-war context informs a reading of this sequencing—war-time nationalism becomes fuel for war-time profiteering.<sup>98</sup> Spooky draws on Griffith's emphasis on the tragedy of the Civil War, using *Birth's* battle scenes, the burning of Atlanta, and the death of Union and Confederate soldiers in his remix. This inevitably invokes the bombing and sieges of various Iraqi cities as well as the deaths of American soldiers in the current war. Spooky, like Hendrix, coopts a text historically meant to represent unconditional national loyalty as fodder for a culture

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97 Oscar Micheaux, the early twentieth century African-American filmmaker, similarly took up the narrative of sexual victimization of black women in order to counter Griffith's film narrative in his 1919 film *Within Our Gates*.

98 This montage involves images from another of his projects centering around maps/longitude/latitude and time zones. Spooky describes one of his other projects as such: "The 'Standard Time' project is essentially an exercise in what I like to call 'planetary dynamics' - it explores how we hold an artificial sense of time and space together with the socially constructed frames of reference we like to call the 'nation state'." (<djspooky.com/art.html>)



of dissent.

Spooky's rather ironic use of Griffith's own anti-war language is foregrounded at the end of the remix as all three screens display *Birth's* original title card: "If in this work we have conveyed to the mind the ravages of war to the end that war may be held in abhorrence, this effort will not have been in vain." Griffith and Dixon were intent on condemning sectional division only as civil war was subsumed by the larger project of absolute racial segregation and exclusion. In short, war between regions was abhorrent, while war between the races was inevitable. The elections of 2004 revealed a nation deeply divided, and along regional lines that many pundits compared to Mason-Dixon era political geography. We might imagine, then, that Spooky reworks Griffith's plea for national unity in a commitment to anti-war politics through resignification and recontextualization. Spooky's redeployment of Griffith's "plea" is paradoxically both ironic commentary and a political call to action. In these final moments, *Rebirth* departs from a deconstruction of *Birth of a Nation's* fictive historicity to resignify and reappropriate its anti-war message.

In general, the progression of his remix follows the progression of Griffith's film—beginning with scenes of slaves being brought to America; Lincoln's assassination; the negro militia; some war scenes with the two white "brothers" of North and South fighting each other; blacks insisting on equality; a depiction of Gus; the origins of the Klan; the lynched body of Gus; the Klan presiding over the elections, etc. However, Spooky repeats certain images and title cards throughout, often overlapping images and placing disparate parts of the narrative side-by-side (or flanked) by two screens on either side of center screen. For instance, at the end there is a montage of the lynching of Gus and the wedding of the North/South white couples with an image of a computer motherboard overlay. This

positioning calls up themes of racial violence, white nationalism, and modernity, forcing visual associations surrounding networks of power. In particular, Spooky here invokes the paradigmatic relationship between white heterosexual union and the constructed threat and consequent subjugation of black men, a relationship made intelligible in the cultural and material conditions produced by the various incarnations of this narrative, not limited to, but certainly including, the performances surrounding the Atlanta white riot of 1906. The innovations of computer technology, referenced in the remixed scenes' inclusion of a motherboard, are then posited in the genealogy of the technological advancements of modern cinema so often linked with film icons such as Griffith. Spooky thus implicitly connects these histories to a current moment in which cultures of technology continue to violently further identity constructions.

Spooky imposes his own formal innovations throughout, often using filters and techniques that challenge the “realism” of *Birth of a Nation* and emphasize Griffith's use of visual and narrative distortion. For instance, some scenes appear as if the viewer is looking through a dirty window or lens. Within frames, Spooky inverts, doubles, and creates kaleidoscopic and mirror images from Griffith's original, singular images. One image in particular which is oft-repeated is the initial image of an African slave in shackles being presented (presumably) to white slave buyers. The slave bows, bent over, as a white minister figure seems to bless him or pronounce him as property. Initially, Spooky contextualizes the scene as Griffith did with the title card: “The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion.” But in re-presenting the image at various moments in the remix, it stands alone without the text and becomes subject to distortion and manipulation. The image is mirrored and then doubled so that the figure of the bowing

slave virtually disappears, or visually implodes, and the scene is virtually unrecognizable. Here, Spooky's remix challenges Griffith's assertion of white victimhood by exposing how that fiction depends upon the total disappearing of the humanity of black slaves and the injustice of their exploitation. In the repetition of this image, Spooky foregrounds and re-remembers the enslavement of Africans, returning to the scene as one of subjugation, divorcing the image from Griffith's initial characterization of the slave as the destructive agent. The doubling of the scene in a diptych image invokes Du Bois's famous explanation of African Americans' experience of "double-consciousness"—the African American is always reconciling the conception one has of oneself with the (racist) image of self imposed by American society. For Du Bois, this double-consciousness allows a unique position for critique as the African American is both a part of the U.S. but is constantly experiencing exclusion. The doubling of this image of initial enslavement points to the binaristic frame through which race has historically been viewed in the U.S.

While *Rebirth* redeploys Griffith's images in order to undo the formal and narrative aspects of that genealogy of racist performance, it also incorporates an anti-racist genealogy of performance. For example, Spooky's live remixings of music involve a soundtrack composed around Robert Johnson licks. Johnson is widely known as one of the most influential blues guitarists of the twentieth century, despite the relatively small body of work he left behind. Two major recordings of his music were done before his untimely death in his early 30s.<sup>99</sup> Johnson, significantly, grew up on a plantation in the Mississippi Delta and learned how to play the blues from what has now become a famous cadre of

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<sup>99</sup> The difficulties Johnson faced in getting record contracts (or in ever receiving payment for his work) serve as a counterpoint to Griffith's successes within the film industry and the plethora of films which survive him.

laboring Delta blues musicians. A well-known story surrounds Johnson's musical talent: he supposedly made a deal with the devil, offering his soul in exchange for musical genius. Spooky's use of Johnson's music reflects more than simply an aesthetic decision, but references an artist who was Griffith's contemporary and who is associated with an art form racialized from its inception, and who is also now widely recognized for his stylistic and formal innovations. However, Johnson's music served as a critique of the brutal and exploitative plantation economy and hierarchy which Griffith and Dixon glorified. Music such as Johnson's was a dangerous resistance from within a society and a culture that continually silenced dissent with violence. In choosing Johnson's music as the foundation for his score, Spooky disrupts sound and image, memory and history. He references elements of Griffith's soundtrack (which has changed significantly since the film's first release), but shifts the musical tone throughout. For instance, he mixes somber melodies to accompany shots of slaves working in plantation cotton fields, while *Birth's* music underscored scenes such as those of white Southern women left alone and destitute during the Civil War as tragic. Johnson's music is part of Spooky's representation of the contradictions and complexities associated with cultural memory.

Though Griffith and Dixon may have presumed their claims to history and memory as definitive, *Rebirth's* performance enacts a cultural memory of resistance that betrays that memory as always elusive and nuanced. In addition to Robert Johnson's music, Spooky includes one image that is his own singular addition to Griffith's archive—the image of a black dancer, appearing at times with a ballet bar and alone. The dancer, though not identified explicitly in the context of the performance, is Andrea Woods and the image is

taken from a performance of Bill T Jones's "And the Maiden" performed in 1993.<sup>100</sup> Jones, a celebrated African American, HIV positive, queer artist, is famous for his performance "Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/Promised Land" (1990), images from which DJ Spooky also samples in some of his *Rebirth* performances. The repetition of this image, a woman's body poised elegantly in balletic attire, functions in some ways similarly to Spooky's use of Robert Johnson's music. He is inserting an image of African-American women's participation in the performing arts and disrupting the racialized aesthetic which constitutes Griffith and Dixon's works. Traditional dance forms and ballet in particular were historically seen as white European art forms and professional dance troupes excluded people of color from their rank. Andrea Woods serves as a distinct interruption in the remix of *Birth* as a relatively static image removed from Griffith's racist plot. This interruption acts as a part of Spooky's counter-narrative and contradicts in particular Griffith's (and Dixon's) portrayal of black and mulatta female characters as lascivious and manipulative. Griffith and Dixon always situated black women in relation to white characters, while Spooky's dancer stands apart with poise, grace, and agency. The black dancer's subtle complexity counters the reductive foil characters of *The Clansman* and *Birth of a Nation* who either threaten or protect the whites who possess qualities which they lack. The figure of the African-American woman is not a victim, but an agent. She, like Robert Johnson, acts as part of a resistant genealogy of performance which exists as parallel to and in dialogue with performances such as Dixon's and Griffith's.

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100 The performance used music by Bessie Jones of the Georgia Sea Island Singers, a group of folk singers famous for their preservation of Gullah culture which maintained strong links to African music and was recorded by folk music archivist Alan Lomax in the late 1950s. Spooky's *Rebirth* here references a text which similarly incorporated an African-American artistic tradition which endured (as repertoire) in spite of seemingly insurmountable odds and which is now considered precious to the American archive of folk music. <<http://www.billtjones.org/choreography/works.html>>

### Melodramatic Endings and (Re)Naming Riot

The introduction of counter-genealogies, the disruption of affective plot and formal techniques, and the use of new media, are just some of the ways in which *Rebirth* challenges the narrative of *Birth of a Nation* (and consequently, *The Clansman*). *Rebirth* is ultimately a performance which resists a simple narrative of victimization and complicates a discourse of terror. Does *Rebirth* then effectively break with the tradition of American racial melodrama? Does this performance signal an end to the deployment of the melodramatic elements of this performance genealogy and how might that be productive? Bill Nichols calls for a “break with identificatory frame that binds us as spectators to a crime in terms of moral outrage rather than social change.” He critiques the continuous deployment of narrative strategy that develops “suspense, anxiety, and catharsis rather than investigation, contextualization, and transformation.”<sup>101</sup> Linda Williams, however, contends that “the melodrama of black and white is so deeply embedded in the structure of American popular culture that the kind of break Nichols calls for inevitably amounts to a break with the popular itself.”<sup>102</sup> DJ Spooky's project does attempt to do that which Williams deems impossible—to re-deploy *and* deconstruct a seminal U.S. American racial melodrama *through* an emergent popular culture. After all, while DJ Spooky represents various subcultures and avant-garde intellectual art forms, he employs media which are embedded in the popular mainstream. DJ culture is no longer relegated to underground clubs and performers like Spooky have the potential to draw a wide audience. Furthermore, *Rebirth* has enjoyed widespread success, traveling nationally and internationally to sold-out

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101 Qtd. in Williams 309.

102 Williams 309-310.

audiences. Spooky attempts to provide his audiences with new ways of experiencing popular culture and critiquing cultural iconography.

However, does this remixed melodrama carry affective weight or encourage audiences to engage in critique? Do the stories which emerge from Spooky's undoing and re-ordering of these iconic texts compel further resistant performances and spectatorships? Perhaps, partly due to their infamy, *Birth of a Nation* and *The Clansman* are texts which contemporary viewers find it all too easy to distance themselves from. One *New York Times* critic, for instance, caustically dismissed the performance as a less than crucial anti-racist project: "Mr. Miller, who is black, is against racism. So are we all, or at least most of us. Mr. Miller took D. W. Griffith's 1915 film "The Birth of a Nation," which for all its other credentials (masterpiece, milestone in the history of cinema, etc.) is indeed racist and tried to transform it into a statement against racism. Without dwelling unduly on what I consider to be a piece of bad art, he didn't make his case very imaginatively."<sup>103</sup> Miller's critique of *Rebirth* betrays the ongoing reluctance to address the discourses of sexuality and nationalism that work in concert with "race." In the end, Griffith's and Dixon's project is reduced to an overly simplistic view of "racism" rather than a more thorough consideration of the texts' melodramatic affectations regarding intimacy, violation, and neoplantation visions of the nation's future. Furthermore, Rockwell considers himself to be part of a "we" which has transcended barriers of racism, and so sees no place for didacticism in anti-racist art, but assumptions such as his that "most of us" have moved beyond racism are a dangerous product of post-Civil Rights era multiculturalism. Does Spooky's un/re-doing of this melodrama call for social change or does it allow for a spectatorship of comfortable

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<sup>103</sup> John Rockwell, "Can't Wash Politics Out of Art, but You Can Avoid a Hard Sell," *New York Times*.(Late Edition (East Coast). New York, N.Y.: Jul 30, 2004. pg.E.1:4

denial rather than resistance? Though the success or failure of DJ Spooky's project as a break from the powerful history of racial melodrama remains in question, what seems certain is his commitment to re-membering the history of these performances and images. DJ Spooky's performance reveals how digital media have expanded the possibilities and scope of the archive and the repertoire in the transferal of cultural memory.

DJ Spooky's project indicates the *continued* relevance of historical conceptions of race and nation in a new era of technology and communication. In taking the long view of these texts and performances, patterns emerge, and we see that destabilization and continuity within performed surrogations are not only phenomena of the contemporary moment. An analysis of performance and riots as relational encourages a critique of how “terror” functions vis-a-vis cultural memory and political strategy. Performances of surrogation continue to construct local, regional, and national identities as uniform, while a rhetoric of terror depicts the external threat of the “Other” as oppositional to those identities. Like DJ Spooky’s project of revisiting the relevance of *The Clansman* and *Birth of a Nation*, our view of performances such as *The Clansman* must be read in relation to enacted violence. In particular, we must consider how racialized communities continue to be sites of staged violence. Genealogies of these white supremacist performances of terror can be mapped not only in these cultural texts and theatrical productions but on the racialized bodies and communities which they terrorized.<sup>104</sup>

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104 The racist sentiments fostered by *The Clansman* and *Birth of a Nation*, after all, continue to resonate. The performances endure as commodities and cultural memories. Today, you still can buy an original playbill for *The Clansman* on Ku Klux Klan websites. These playbills remain in circulation but are valued for their rarity and advertised as such: The price has been considerably inflated from its original fifty cent value: “Very rare 4 page promotional for stage play, "The Clansman,"6 pictures, play scenes and Thomas Dixon, gives press tributes, endorsement by Gov. Glenn, N. Carolina, probable date 1906-08. Some tape repair. Items like this are rare and hard to find. \$130.00”: at <http://www.kkklan.com/collectibles.htm>. This particular playbill testifies to yet another prominent politician's (the Governor of North Carolina) ringing endorsement of the play. Structures of white



As we then look critically to the deployment of discourses of terror, so too must we critically alter the ways in which we name the violences of history. As Dixon racialized terror as black and blackness as violent, so too have histories of riots such as this implicitly obscured the centrality of white violence. I wish to highlight the need to consider the Atlanta riot of 1906 as a *white riot* and in this consideration to recognize the generative effects of returning to the local and the historicized performance in our ongoing attempts to act as resistant spectators. This chapter, like DJ Spooky's *Rebirth* performance, has attempted to distill the role that cultural representation has played in the proliferation of that violence and terror as political strategy. State-led neoplantation-building projects I will consider in subsequent chapters were furthered by the twentieth-century invention of the plantation as a new site of identification for whites who had never had direct claims to plantation power and who were not even Southerners. Neoplantation cultural texts provided an ennobled and sanitized justification for spectacles and structures of violence. In the Atlanta riot and in contemporary contexts, cultural institutions have both scripted and (mis)named those practices of violence. But from J.Max Barber to DJ Spooky, we are provided with examples of the ways in which the terrains of media and cultural critique might be reclaimed in order to complicate and counter such performances and policies.

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power, then and now, identify with Dixon's negrophobic rhetoric and its deployment in the performance of terror. This particular website prefaced its listing of memorabilia by saying that this material is difficult to explicitly market today: "KKK items can not be freely advertised or easily sold in this "free" country of ours. . .". Clearly the Klan continues to realize the power of positioning itself as victim.

## **Chapter 2: (Almost) Black, (Almost) Queer: The U.S. Occupation of Haiti and the Shifting of Southern Boundaries**

If the fantasy of American imperialism aspires to a borderless world where it finds its own reflection everywhere, then the fruition of this dream shatters the coherence of national identity, as the boundaries that distinguish it from the outside world promise to collapse.

--Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*

In this chapter, I examine how cultural and historical texts published during the waning years of the U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) produced racialized and queered depictions of (neo)plantation subjects. The fascinations, desires, and tensions surrounding the ongoing reproduction of plantation empire in Haiti and in the U.S. South were particularly exemplified in the portrait of dangerous and desired Haitians. I consider the figure of the queered Haitian in relation to contestations over cultural memory, plantation narratives, and the politics of U.S. imperialism. First, though, I will address how representations of plantation empire were circumscribed by larger debates regarding the racial and sexual excesses associated with plantations past and present and the development of capitalism. During this era, cultural battles were being staged and waged on both fictionalized and actual plantations. Countless texts took up plantation histories set in the U.S. South or in Haiti during the nearly twenty-year US occupation of Haiti. I am interested in how the U.S. imperial presence in Haiti informed representations that sought to reinforce or to counter the dominant depiction of the plantation (and its inhabitants) as tranquil and ordered. The cultural interrogation of plantation structures and plantation memories sparked a series of intersecting movements that undermined the stability of white supremacist plantation models like that espoused by the subject of my first chapter, Thomas Dixon. Broadly, those counter-narratives were influenced by transnational anti-

imperialist movements, the organized radicalization of race and labor politics, and the invigoration of “high” and “low” modernist literary forms and aesthetics in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> From the works of anti-imperialist, anti-racist cultural workers like W.E.B. Du Bois to the literary (if perhaps not intentionally political) modernism of William Faulkner, the “dark house” of the plantation became a target for inquiry and outrage, an example of devolution and degeneracy. Though the texts I will examine did not necessarily enjoy a wide circulation, they compelled ongoing practices of resistant memory and cultural critique. I look at a range of occupation-era texts, with an extended analysis of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which the plantation (and sometimes the wilderness it tamed) frames depictions that actively complicated dominant tropes. As Faulkner put it, there was a deliberate intention to “keep the hoop skirts and plug hats,” so familiar to U.S. audiences, out of the picture.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than remembering the plantation as a space where whites always triumph and the patriarchal system is always restored, the plantation was dramatically rendered as a dangerous building block of empire, doomed to be undone by its obsession with an already compromised order. Far from acting as a bastion for normativity—where whites, blacks, women, men, masters and workers all knew their place—it was constructed as a space of disorder, both pathological and systemic. As W.E.B. Du Bois put it:

This whole system [of plantation slavery] and plan of development failed. . .the South turned the most beautiful section of the nation into a

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997); Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Walter Kalaidjian *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> This was Faulkner’s comment to his editor in his description of his new novel *Dark House*, which would later become *Absalom, Absalom!*, qtd. in Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974) 327.

center of poverty and suffering, of drinking, gambling and brawling; an abode of ignorance among black and white more abysmal than in any modern land; and a system of industry so humanly unjust and economically inefficient that if it had not committed suicide in civil war, it would have disintegrated of its own weight.<sup>3</sup>

From revisionist histories such as *Black Reconstruction* to stories of zombies working the fields of Haiti, the plantation was explored as a site of violent contradiction, excess, and deterioration. What seemed most evident was that those excesses remained uncontained. As Faulkner's fiction would famously represent, the “suicidal” plantation South, or the perennial “Lost Cause” mentality, was a phenomenon inevitable in the face of the region's many evident contradictions. Not least of these are the contradictions inherent within an idealized (if always compromised) plantocratic myth, endogamous and racially pure. As in Du Bois's indictment here, 1930s texts, Faulkner's fiction included, assert that black and white Southerners (and Haitians) were corrupted by the structure of the slave plantation, an “abode” lavish in its ignorance of the terms of justice.

At times the plantation seems to resist a modernizing narrative, but Du Bois and others were uneasy about this “ghosting” of the plantation, suspecting (or hoping, depending on their ideological stance) that the plantation was very much a part of the modern, capitalist present. After all, the era of the occupation saw U.S. corporate “neoplantations” established in Haiti, while sharecroppers in the South endured a system of peonage that preserved the economic and social structures of plantation slavery.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, even the most “historical” of fictions in some way invoked or spoke to a neplantation present. From Margaret Mitchell's unwavering melodrama *Gone With the*

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<sup>3</sup> *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1935) 53.

<sup>4</sup> This era saw the development of the plantation prison as well as the institutionalization of the prison chain gang, effectively creating an unfree neplantation labor force that I will address in my third chapter.

*Wind to Black Thunder*, Arna Bontemps's resonant tale of slave revolution, the plantation emerges as a pivotal technology in the realization of these cultural workers' competing visions of progress and change.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I want to focus on the obfuscated moments and contexts when the historicized plantation narratives implicate a neplantation present.<sup>6</sup> In this dialectic between plantations past and present, like that between the "New" and the "Old" Souths, spaces of discord and desire opened up within and between texts. Those desires were manifested in the genre of the plantation "romance," a genre that, in the period of the 1930s, contained wildly varying visions of who ought to wield plantation power and how romantic union, dissolution, or deferral might serve to consolidate that power or to compromise it forever. In my analysis, I focus on the fictionalized plantation and its desired and desiring racialized sexual subjects in order to disrupt the narrative that the development of capitalism and empire has been linear and fixed, or a teleological march toward progress. In other words, I assert that a critique of the plantation necessarily entails a critique of the architectures of normativity that support U.S. empire. The neplantation, as a site of cultural analysis, is key for considering how structures of power are revised and adapted through the proliferation of discourses, and for considering how "free" and "unfree" laborers co-exist within capitalist economies.

To illustrate the plantation's role in producing twentieth-century racialized sexual

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5 In Mitchell's novel, Scarlett succeeds as a capitalist businesswoman and uses that capital to revitalize the vanquished plantation of Tara. In Bontemps's retelling of the nearly successful Gabriel Prosser slave revolt of 1800, he imagines the possibilities of a black labor resistance that begins in Haiti with Toussaint L'Ouverture and spreads to the U.S. South. Both authors' texts suggest investments in twentieth-century social order, whether through their concern over the role of white womanhood or the potential for transnational black solidarities.

6 As I argue in my introduction, the model of the slave plantation was adapted for the twentieth century through technologies of agricultural industrialization, policed labor, extralegal violence, and regulated citizenship. I argue that neplantation formations furthered regional and imperial "modernizing projects" and that culture played a key role in how racial and sexual formations were produced and contested in relation to the neplantation.

formations, I build on Roderick Ferguson's queer of color critique, which assumes that capital, as it exceeds boundaries in the production of surplus labor, operates in tension with the state. The expansion of capitalist structures like the (neo)plantation brings new workers (Haitians, in this case) into the state's purview. The state then delimits citizenship and inclusion in direct response to capital's expansion. As Ferguson puts it:

While capital can only reproduce itself by ultimately transgressing the boundaries of neighborhood, home, and region, the state positions itself as the protector of those boundaries. . . .As capital disrupts social hierarchies in the production of surplus labor, it disrupts gender ideals and sexual norms that are indices of racial difference. Disrupting those ideals often leads to new racialized gender and sexual formations.<sup>7</sup>

As the U.S. continued its nearly twenty-year long occupation of Haiti, the neoplantation present sought to advance the goals of capital, while attempting to preserve the racial and sexual codes mandated by the imperial state. A structure of empire, the neoplantation of the Haitian occupation disrupted U.S. concepts of racial difference, gender ideals, and sexual norms. The disruption of those norms and the implicit tensions between the state and capital were played out in cultural spheres—on the stage, in novels, poems, songs, and travel narratives. The “Southern” plantation had both cultural and material mobility. U.S. businessmen operated neoplantation ventures in Haiti, U.S. Marines instituted Southern Jim Crow policies, and U.S. cultural workers, from Faulkner to Langston Hughes to the Federal Theater project, moved the (dystopic) plantation “romance” from the U.S. South to Haiti and back again. The black(ened) Haitian subject, and the ongoing plantation history

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<sup>7</sup> *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 17. His queer of color critique seeks to redefine the relationship between the nation-state and capital: “Marxism and revolutionary nationalism, respectively, have often figured nation and property as the transparent outcome of class and racial exclusions. Relatedly, liberal pluralism has traditionally constructed *the home* as the obvious site of accommodation and affirmation. Queer of color analysis, on the other hand eschews the transparency of all these formations and opts instead for an understanding of nation and capital as the outcome of manifold intersections that contradict the idea of a liberal nation-state and capital as sites of resolution, perfection, progress, and confirmation.” (3) (ital mine)

of the Haitian republic, occupied a place of exotic, and revolutionary, intrigue for U.S. cultural consumers. In effect, the imagined Haitian often struck a very queer pose as U.S. Americans confronted the incoherence of national identity in the wake of shifting Southern boundaries.

In this chapter, I envision a reading as one that “queers” those moments of disruption and revision. The “queer” is often identified in terms of excess, liminality, the “inverted,” and the nonnormative. I want to consider how, within plantation texts, queerness works on different registers to suggest aberrations and (often doomed) kinships. Because the South and Haiti were both historically and paradoxically marked as aberrations (in terms of racial and sexual violence, failure to industrialize) and as exemplary (in terms of wealth and revolutionary zeal) a queer analysis of these decades of imperialism and nationalisms may be particularly generative. In calling attention to queer representations of Haitians (and Southerners), I am not positing or assuming an essentialized concept of “queer” (or “homosexual”), but rather I am examining the “queering” of subjects as a complex process through which subjects are declared antithetical to or outside of “regimes of the normal.”<sup>8</sup> I consider how the disruption of racialized sexual norms and the ways in which capital exceeds boundaries renders plantation players unlocatable and therefore ineligible for inclusion into the Southern (or national) plantocracy or the privileges of citizenship. In my analysis, I seek to highlight those queer dislocations, to consider how queerness “disrupts the repressive surface of language,”<sup>9</sup> particularly the language that seeks to explain or define the limits of race, sexuality, and region. Drawing from the work

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Warner, qtd in “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?” *Social Text* 84-85, Vol. 23, Nos. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2005) 3.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 176.

of Ferguson and Siobhan Somerville, I use the concept of “racialized sexuality” because it indicates that norms surrounding sexual behavior, identity, and practices were developed in conjunction with the flexible discourses and epistemological foundations of race and vice versa.<sup>10</sup> It assumes that neither “race” nor “sexuality” has been lived without the structuring force of the other. This intersectional analysis inherently sees gender as a crossroads for these co-constitutive discourses. My interest here is in how formations of racialized sexuality within neoplatation empire result in dangerous and desired subjects.

To consider how these dangerous subjects were animated by the cultures of empire, I first examine the historical circumstances of the occupation and the African-American political critique of the occupation as a white supremacist imperial project. I examine how the mobilization of the white South in the nation's project of neoplatation militarization was countered with a backlash against the “southernization” of U.S. militarism. I argue that the cultural texts which responded to neoplatation empire-building took up historical counter-narratives of revolution and war and transnational studies of folklore, while sympathetic portrayals of empire restaged colonial tropes of encounters with “natives,” rife with the discourse of primitivism and exoticism. In putting these disparate texts in conversation with one another, I reconstruct the era of the occupation as a time when “the South” and “Haiti” were imbricated in the racial, sexual, and regional drama of an extended imperial moment. As such, I then examine how sexuality, and queerness, in particular, figured in the anthropological studies, travel narratives, plays and newspaper editorials that negotiated perceptions of Haitian difference from U.S. American perspectives.

Finally, I turn to Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* to argue that as its U.S. Southern

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<sup>10</sup> See Somerville's *Queering the Color Line* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000).



narrators queer and racialize Haitian difference they inevitably queer and racialize the Southern plantation.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the other texts I consider, *Absalom* most directly implicates the twentieth-century Jim Crow-era South in the ongoing history of plantation imperialism in Haiti, despite the fact that its story “ends” in 1909, six years before the occupation of Haiti officially begins. Though the novel ostensibly focuses on the antebellum plantation *pasts* of both Mississippi and Haiti, I argue that the novel must be read as transhistorical, and as an “unreadable” temporal and spatial literary map that both invokes and represses material histories of plantation empire and revolution it purports to represent.<sup>12</sup> The plantation, as the primary architecture of the U.S. South and the Caribbean, produces racialized and gendered sexual formations that exceed and challenge the perceived boundaries of the normative.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, this chapter hopes to contribute to the critique, begun by earlier works, of neoplantation formations, by situating Faulkner's modernist

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11 As I will argue, notions of “sameness” and “difference” are entirely suspect, yet entirely empowered, designations in this novel. The project and process of differentiation, which relies on strategic (his)storytelling, is represented as central to plantation slavery and to neoplantation segregation.

12 I read Faulkner's text as a kind of flawed composite—it almost contains all of the history that its characters retell—spanning from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century—yet it fails. For example, one of its key characters Thomas Sutpen quells a Haitian slave rebellion in 1830s, when in fact there would have been no “slaves” as such in Haiti at that time. The Haitian Revolution, after all, ended colonial slavery in 1804. Richard Godden argues that Faulkner's characters repress this revolution as a strategic anachronism: “Given that Faulkner wishes to foreground the continuous potential for revolution within the institution of slavery, he needs Haiti, the only successful black revolution. Given that he wishes to characterize the plantocracy as a class who suppress revolution, he requires that his ur-planter suppress the Haitian revolution, and go on doing so.” I extend Godden's argument on the other end of the timeline, then, to argue that Faulkner's novel represses the imperial moment in which he was writing because neoplantation forms of slavery continued to depend upon the repression of revolutionary Haitians. The novel's timeline must be read as unreliable, just as the novel trains us to see the narrators as unreliable, but in that unreliability, there lies the relevance. “*Absalom, Absalom!*, Haiti and Labor History: Reading Unreadable Revolutions” *ELH* 61.3 (1994) 685-720.

13 Faulkner's text has seldom been regarded as a queer text, and certainly not as a text consumed with how economies and ideologies of empire-building produce racialized queer subjects. Some notable research has been done highlighting the queer themes in the novel, and recently a few published articles address queerness in the novel in relation to “history.” None of these, however, treats queerness as an aspect of the imperial relationship that links the U.S. South to Haiti in the novel's twentieth-century context. Furthermore, Faulkner's work has long been regarded as singular or exemplary in relation to a larger context of cultural production.

plantation “romance” within the context of the era's obsession with Haiti as a site of (dis)identification and (anti)imperial desires. I close with a look at the zombie, a cultural icon introduced by way of U.S. imperial contact with Haitian culture, to consider how the traveling neplantation produced a composite subject formation that was both alive and dead, of the U.S. and of Haiti, and most certainly both liminal and queer.

Like *Absalom, Absalom!*, Arna Bontemps' 1939 novel *Drums At Dusk* is one of the many texts published in the years surrounding the U.S. occupation of Haiti that returns to an earlier moment of conflict and bloodshed as a means to historicize narratives of empire in Haiti. His novel circumscribes the revolutionary origins of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the French Creole plantation world that the slaves made and then dismantled at the turn of the nineteenth century. A tale of revolution and romance, the novel ends with French Creole planters escaping the vengeance of their slaves for “New Orleans by way of Port-au-Prince” (save one cruel mistress who cannot make the trip because she sits at her dressing table with a knife in her back).<sup>14</sup> The migration of the French Creoles of Saint Domingue to Louisiana results from the necessary violence of slave insurrection. Surrounded by burning plantations, the Creoles remain resolved to prevail, and the U.S. South will be their new home. The novel suggests that their plantation structures would be as migratory as their colonial decadence. However, the novel ends without resolution and readers are left to imagine how these early ties between the U.S. and Haiti lived on in the violence of the U.S. occupation.

Bontemps's historical novel situates the history of the Haitian Revolution within the consciousness of a transnational African America. The histories of slave uprising and

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<sup>14</sup> *Drums at Dusk: A Novel* (New York: Macmillan, 1939).

postcolonial independence had migrated to the U.S. in many forms nearly a century before but his novel exemplifies a “counter-memory” which sought to preserve and learn from Haiti’s anti-colonial narrative. My interest is in how cultural memories survive and are re-shaped to address contemporary desires for revolutionary resistance or for empire. Arna Bontemps, William Faulkner and many others situated their occupation-era representations of Haiti in a century previous to their moment. Yet the literary memory they constructed bore relevance to cultural understandings of their lived moment. Faulkner’s novel insists that cultural memories are unreliable sediment and yet catalyze emotions and relationships in entirely unexpected ways. As he is often quoted: “The past is never dead. In fact, it’s not even past.”<sup>15</sup> During the occupation era, cultural memory surrounding Haiti became a tool for contesting the terms of imperialism and consequently for reevaluating the U.S.’s ongoing investment in the subjugation of people of color and postcolonial nations. In this chapter, I assume that the historical narrative is inevitably informed by the contemporary context of its production. In the dialectic between “history” and “the present,” composite and diffuse cultural memory and counter-memory animate new understandings of region, race, and sexuality. In this conjuncture, the neoplantation becomes a space of critical inquiry.

Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* is similarly a global tale of cross-migrations mapped onto scenes of intimacy. Again, in this 1936 novel, New Orleans is the next stop from Port-au-Prince, and this route facilitates the maintenance of the plantation as well as the conditions for its undoing. In this novel, Faulkner’s penchant for blurring lines of longitude and latitude, for merging stories with histories, has far-reaching implications. My focus

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<sup>15</sup> *Requiem for a Nun*, Act I, Scene III.

here is on that tension between the intimate and the worldly, the local and the foreign, which structures how and where Haitian characters come to be locatable within this text. Desire and narrative work to produce one another, both within the novel and in the larger historical context that frames it. This dialectical relationship between desire and the discursive has particular implications for two of the novel's most crucial elements: Haiti, on the one hand, and the son who results from a white Southerner's conquest in Haiti, Charles Bon, on the other. Through Haiti and Bon, Faulkner constructs narratives of desire that work to queer the relationship between the local and the foreign(er). Like the novel's narrators, in this chapter I will return to Bon throughout as the cosmopolitan queer who evades an easy reading.<sup>16</sup> As the product of a colonial Haitian plantation, Bon is a kind of meta-discursive character who undergoes constant revision and unravels this sutured body of stories throughout.

The character of Charles Bon never directly speaks or acts in the novel. He is only spoken of or speculated about by the narrators who consciously construct him as an object of interest and a catalyst for plantation doom. Information about Bon is always in question and certainty is only proclaimed by the most remote narrator, Shreve McCannon (who is not from the South or from the West Indies, but from Canada). What they determine is this: Bon is the unrecognized son of Thomas Sutpen, a man who transcends his working class roots on the backs of Haitian slave labor and colonial capital to become a wealthy Mississippi planter in the 1830s. Bon is the product of Sutpen's marriage to a Spanish planter's daughter in Haiti, whom Sutpen once saw as key to his "designs." Like the French

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<sup>16</sup> Other recent generative queer readings of this novel include Norman Jones' "Coming Out through History's Hidden Love Letters in *Absalom, Absalom!*" *American Literature* 76.2 (2004) 339-366. Like Jones, I argue that queerness is not characterized as ontological in this novel and that the discursive and flexible nature of queer desire in the novel is what makes it so interesting theoretically and historically.

Creoles of Bontemps's novel, Sutpen leaves revolutionary Haiti for the U.S. plantation South. He annuls his marriage to his Creole bride, though, after the birth of his son, Charles Bon, in order to marry again, this time in Mississippi as he builds a plantation dynasty, the "island" of "Sutpen's Hundred" (79).<sup>17</sup> The reasons for Sutpen's disassociation with his Creole wife and son become the obsession of the novel's narrators.

But, from a different perspective, the narrative I've just outlined is created to satisfy the initial question, which is: who is Charles Bon and where did he come from? Bon is somehow exemplary of "all boy flesh that walked and breathed stemming from that one ambiguous eluded dark featherhead and so brothered perennial and ubiquitous everywhere under the sun----" (240). Though he is "all boy flesh," he is ambiguous, a queer aberration, both "seducer and seduced," "brothered perennial," who seems to put all around him under a kind of charmed spell. His most significant seduction, however, is of Henry Sutpen, whom the readers (and presumably the characters) eventually learn is his half-brother. By the end of the novel, our narrators have further concluded that Bon's Haitian ancestry must also suggest his "blackness," despite his having "passed" throughout the novel.<sup>18</sup> In positioning Charles Bon as an object of white male desire, Faulkner rewrites the white heterosexual plantocracy as a homoerotic, incestuous, racially mixed family whose disassociations and intimacies are thoroughly saturated with the stains of competing empires. With this portrait, he suggests that the Southern neoplantation's racial and sexual order cannot withstand the challenge of its own "origins," nor can it be sustained in the

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<sup>17</sup> All citations that follow are taken from: *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage International Edition, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> I will argue that the queering of Bon was always racialized, despite the fact that his "blackness" was not explicitly articulated until the infamous, inflammatory end of the novel. Furthermore, that racialization is always related to his "outsider" status. In other words, his characterization is always overdetermined by his status as a racialized imperial subject.

face of French and Spanish colonial legacies. And by extension, the U.S.'s neoplantation desires for twentieth-century Haiti were destined to fail.

That is where I take up Charles Bon as a subterfuge, whose historicization has obscured his relevance for the occupation era. My discussion of Charles Bon necessarily begins, then, with a recontextualization. Bon is typically read as a kind of ghost of the South's past, but what if he's read as a much more contemporary product of a 1930s imperialist moment? Storytelling functions in the novel as a kind of possession in which the return of the ghosts of the Civil War "occupation" are reanimated by characters on the verge of the imperial "occupation" of Haiti.<sup>19</sup> I argue that the novel should be situated in its contemporary context, in "that place. . . where objects of the outrage and of the commiseration also are no longer ghosts but are actual people" (302). *Absalom, Absalom!* was published just two years after the official withdrawal of U.S. troops from Haiti. Mary Renda asserts that during this era "U.S. Americans who presided over, visited, or read about Haiti found opportunities to reimagine their own nation and their own lives as they appeared to be reflected by and refracted through Haitian history and culture."<sup>20</sup> Like *Drums at Dusk*, *Absalom* importantly represented Haiti as historically linked to the development of the U.S. South and to the accumulation of imperial wealth. Faulkner's character Thomas Sutpen goes to Haiti (like the U.S. corporations that sought to establish plantations and infrastructure in occupied Haiti) to begin his plantation dynasty after being taught about "a place called the West Indies to which poor men went in ships and became rich" (195).<sup>21</sup> In all of these ways, Haiti and its colonial and revolutionary plantation

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19 The story is framed by Quentin's first visit to Miss Rosa in 1909, five years before the U.S. invasion of Haiti, but well into the U.S. imperial ventures into the Caribbean.

20 Renda 20.

21 John Matthews critiques the previous "overlooking" of New World contexts in Faulkner: "Like its

legacies are depicted as foundational to U.S. discourses, cultures, and organizations of capital and modes of production in this text.

### **The Militarization of the Neoplantation and African-American Anti-Imperialism**

Twentieth-century neoplantation designs were cloaked in the rhetoric of protection and benevolence. When the marines invaded Port-au-Prince in 1915, they did so under the auspices of protecting U.S. investments and protecting the Haitian people (from themselves). The invasion followed the assassination of President Guillaume Sam, whose alleged involvement in the massacre of Haitian political prisoners resulted in a public spectacle of his death and dismemberment.<sup>22</sup> But the circumstances surrounding Sam's death, what James Weldon Johnson called “alleged anarchy,” merely provided the justification for a U.S. military intervention long anticipated and planned by the State Department.<sup>23</sup> Citing fears about the growing power of German investors and bankers in Germany, the marines landed and Haiti joined Puerto Rico, Cuba, and a year later, the Dominican Republic and the islands of the former Danish West Indies as sites under U.S. economic and political control in the Caribbean. Woodrow Wilson's military interventions were an extension of earlier imperialist economic practices of the Roosevelt administration.

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narrators, readers of *Absalom*, I shall contend, have always had before their eyes Faulkner's evidence that the plantation South derives its design from new-world models, owes a founding debt to West Indian slave-based agriculture, extracted labor and profit from African-Caribbean slave trade, and practiced forms of racial and sexual control common to other hemispheric colonial regimes” (239). Similarly, I believe that Faulkner's historical revisionism in this novel is connected to anxieties that the plantation empire was being mobilized in his contemporary context. As Matthews puts it: “...Faulkner's plantation fiction resonates with alarm about the Southernizing designs of American empire” (240). “Recalling the West Indies: From Yoknapatawpha to Haiti and Back,” *American Literary History* 16.2 (2004), 238-262.

<sup>22</sup> This initial justification for U.S. intervention depended on (and perpetuated) the construction of Haitians as excessively violent and ruled by guerilla politics. See Brenda Plummer, *Haiti and the United States: The Psychological Moment* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> “The Truth About Haiti: An NAACP Investigation” (1920) <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5018>

The Roosevelt Corollary of 1904 assured that the U.S. would supplant European colonial legacies by assuming the role of hemispheric debt-collector. Like other independent Caribbean and Latin-American nations, Haiti first experienced U.S. imperialism through the institution of a long-term financial dependency. Haiti's debt to France (which dated back to reparations Haiti was forced to pay to French planters in the wake of the successful slave revolution of 1804) was transferred to U.S. banks in the guise of protecting “unstable” Haiti from the threat of menacing European invaders (i.e., Germany).<sup>24</sup> Military rule, coupled with financial dependency, allowed U.S. businesses to take control over Haitian banana, coffee, and sugar cane plantations; to contract and regulate the development of the country's infrastructure; and to re-establish a system of forced labor known as the “corvée,” which amounted to a system of plantation slavery.

Twenty-first century military analysts who trace the history of worldwide “occupations” cite the temporary nature of the invasion and the sovereignty granted to the occupied nation as the key circumstances that distinguish it from colonialism or annexation.<sup>25</sup> The politics of naming conflicts, wars, occupations, peace-keeping missions, etc., clearly differ based on their historical moment. “Occupation” carries with it the tone of benevolent supremacy outlined in the Monroe Doctrine and then the modifications made to suit the military and financial projects deployed by Woodrow Wilson's administration in shoring up U.S. hemispheric and extrahemispheric reach. “Occupation” rests on the idea that a nation controls another through military might and remains there until a stable state has been restored. In the case of Haiti, this also involved the denial of organized, armed

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24 Hans Schmidt, *The U.S. Occupation of Haiti: 1915-1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1971) 44.

25 David Edelstein, “Occupational Hazards: Why Military Occupations Succeed or Fail” *International Security* 29.1 (2004) 52.



resistance by the anti-imperialist Caco armies.<sup>26</sup> Rather, the occupied state's perceived potential for (imposed) order and independence was central to debates surrounding Haiti. As Renda asserts, this discourse involves implicit and explicit paternalism. What that paternalism disavows first and foremost, however, is the occupied nation's immediate right to self-rule and the subsequent violence done to populations and infrastructure. According to analysts, occupations become unpopular when they become too costly or when the reasons for occupation are no longer viable. Because of the length of the occupation, nearly two decades, and the ongoing resistance it inspired on the part of Haitians, the Occupation is regarded as a “failure” by military analysts.<sup>27</sup>

At the time, however, the grounds on which the Occupation was justified and the terms by which it was identified were diagnosed by anti-imperialists as symptomatic of the failures of democracy, not military strategy. W.E.B. Du Bois, for example, issued this corrective editorial about the U.S. presence in Haiti:

The United States is at war with Haiti. Congress has never sanctioned this war. Josephus Daniels has illegally and unjustly occupied a free foreign land and murdered its inhabitants by the thousands. He has deposed its officials and dispersed its legally elected representatives. He is carrying a reign of terror, brow-beating, and cruelty, at the hands of southern white naval officers and today the Island is in open rebellion. The greatest single question before the parties at the next election is the Freedom of Haiti.<sup>28</sup>

For Du Bois, it was crucial to change the terms of debate and to emphasize not only Haiti's

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<sup>26</sup> Not only did military reports refuse to recognize the Cacos as a legitimate armed resistance, they also denied the casualties that resulted from conflicts between the Cacos and the Marines. Haitian civilian casualties were also often not reported, or were not made public. See Schmidt's *The U.S. Occupation of Haiti* and Plummer's *Haiti and the United States: The Psychological Moment* (Athens: UGA Press, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> David Edelstein, contemporary military historian and analyst states: “By contrast, the failed U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 demonstrates how an occupation can fail when the occupied territory is geopolitically insignificant and faces few external threats. Although the occupation of Haiti was initially premised on a potential threat from Germany, the United States withdrew in 1934 when it was clear that no geopolitical threat warranted a continuing U.S. presence and the situation in Haiti appeared to be deteriorating rather than improving.” (“Occupational Hazards,” 63)

<sup>28</sup> *The Crisis*, April 1920.

deserved “freedom” but its foreign sovereignty—in other words, to denaturalize the U.S.’s longstanding claims on the hemisphere and on the island republics of the Caribbean in particular. The rhetoric used by Du Bois here is similar to that of his critiques of the Ku Klux Klan and the anti-democratic, racist policies of the U.S. government. “Reign of terror” was a phrase often used by anti-racist activists (which was then coopted by white supremacists) to denounce racially motivated violence during this period. In identifying the U.S. military leaders as murderers and terrorists who undermine Haiti’s democracy, its “legally elected representatives,” he rejects the imperialist narrative of protection in the service of democratization. Du Bois’s investment was in exposing the link between the legal and the extralegal in U.S. policies, condemning the inherent violence in each. Du Bois importantly identifies the agents of empire as “southern white naval officers,” thereby associating the U.S. military’s war on Haiti with the white South’s tactics of violently blocking black Americans’ access to citizenship. Like many other cultural leaders during this era, Du Bois’s critique of empire and world war was inseparable from his critique of the uneven distribution of rights and citizenship within nation-states. Domestic policies promoted the technologies of empire and “open rebellion” was the inevitable and justified result.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Du Bois’s proclamation that the U.S. was “at war” was a refutation of the terms of military invasion and white supremacy, both at home and abroad. His editorial duly notes the conscription of the white South into the project of U.S. empire and the effects this has on not only black Americans but also black Haitians.

As Du Bois suggests, categorizing the invasion of Haiti as an “occupation” rather than as a war also allowed for its military procedures to evade the democratic process.

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<sup>29</sup> In this editorial, Du Bois echoes his “anarchy of empire” critique, taken up by Amy Kaplan in *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.,: Harvard U P, 2005).

Following Du Bois's argument, in "White Shadows in a Black Land" Langston Hughes insists that: "American Marines are kept in the country through an illegal treaty thrust upon Haiti by force and yet never ratified by the United States senate." On a trip to Haiti facilitated by proponents of empire (such as William Seabrook, a figure to be discussed later), Hughes expects to find relief from racism in the black republic, not a segregated police-state:

Imagine a country where the entire national population is colored, and you will have Haiti—the first of the black republics, and that much discussed little land to the South of us. . . In the country districts, the peasants who make up the bulk of the population, will smile at him from kind black faces, and the dark visitor from America will feel at home and unafraid. . .It is doubly disappointing then, to discover, if you have not already known, how the white shadows have fallen on this land of color. Before you can go ashore, a white American Marine has been on board ship to examine your passport, and maybe you will see a U.S. gunboat at anchor in the harbor. You will discover that the Banque d'Haiti, with its Negro cashiers and tellers, is really under control of the National City Bank of New York. . .<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to Faulkner's black(ened) Haitian visitor to Mississippi, whose "shadowyness" renders him unintelligible within the stark boundaries of the U.S. plantation South, Hughes portrays himself as instantly recognizable and welcomed by black Haitians. Though we might question how his affiliations (though vexed) with the imperial U.S. might have allowed him to experience Haiti as a "homeland," he assumes that he is welcomed as a fellow man of color. And inverting familiar tropes, he describes the various imperialist military and financial controls as "white shadows" dependent upon black labor and the uneven regulation of imperial citizenship, here signified by the examined passport.

Consequently, remapping cultural distances and desires becomes a crucial means by which to complicate or undermine colonial relationships. By the 1930s, many cultural

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<sup>30</sup> "White Shadows in a Black Land" (1932) from *Langston Hughes in the Hispanic world and Haiti*, Ed. Edward J. Mullen (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1977).

workers viewed the U.S. imperial presence in the Caribbean as yet another indication that those perceived hemispheric (and colony vs. metropole) distances needed to be challenged and reconstituted. Three Occupation-era movements worked to complicate the dominant narratives of U.S. empire in Haiti: black internationalism (evidenced by the writings of Du Bois, Hughes, and many others), the field of cultural anthropology, and literary modernism. The cultural politics of black internationalism-- which included unifying concepts such as *négritude* and which furthered global anticolonial resistance—had begun to remap colonial distances and plans for decolonization.<sup>31</sup> The anti-imperial cultural workers of the Harlem Renaissance as well as West Indian and African decolonization movements often challenged (or strategically collapsed) the cultural and political distances that separated the U.S. South from the West Indies and, by extension, the U.S. from Africa.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Transnational Region, the Anthropological Plantation, and Black Anti-Imperialism**

During the period of the occupation, both the U.S. South and Haiti were involved in processes of cultural conscription into the larger U.S. imperial project, suggesting one of many important comparative points of transnational perspective. This chapter's particular aim is to examine the relationship between cultural representations of the U.S. South and Haiti during the period surrounding the Occupation as the revision of an already mapped set of trade routes, migration patterns, and cultural histories. The South had long been

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31 Authors such as Richard Wright and Langston Hughes participated in international conversations, initiated by intellectuals and leaders such as Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor, which considered the potential of activists in the African diaspora uniting under the auspices of *négritude*.

32 See, for example, W.E.B. Du Bois, "Souls of White Folk," *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* (New York: Dover, 1999) or C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1963).

implicated in Haiti's fate; however, the imperial relationship between the U.S. and Haiti fostered a reimagining of their respective plantation cultures. In designating these reimaginings as neoplantations, I want to highlight how even those representations which looked back to the events of the Haitian Revolution, or sought to focus solely on historical accounts of the early nineteenth century, inevitably bore the weight of the plantation realities of the early twentieth century. Historical linkages between the South and Haiti in effect created a transnational regionalism, bound by an interchangeable set of commonalities, most significantly a history of race-based slavery that served to create an opulent white/creole planter class, a tradition of black labor resistance, a dependence on foreign (or Northern) capital, and a struggling (or failed) attempt at nation-building upon the troubled foundations of that plantation legacy. As Ralph Woodward puts it, "a cycle of the rise and decline of plantations therefore characterizes the history of the region, not only of the Caribbean islands, but in much of plantation America from Brazil to Maryland."<sup>33</sup> In my analysis of cultural texts surrounding the occupation, I argue for a comparative, regional perspective based on cyclical, and adaptable, plantation structures, rather than on some assumption of parallel, linear trajectories of development or modernization.<sup>34</sup>

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33 In his historicization of the transnational plantation, Woodward asserts: "Technology and exploitation with government collaboration became characteristic of more modern plantation economies. They were also characterized by dependence on foreign markets and investment. Inevitably, soil exhaustion, labor problems, and political opposition to foreign control would diminish the value of many Caribbean plantations. A cycle of the rise and decline of plantations in different regions therefore characterizes the history of the region, not only of the Caribbean islands, but in much of plantation America from Brazil to Maryland. The strong tendency of plantation owners (corporate or individual) to ignore the needs of local inhabitants and the interests of a more diversified regional economy is another characteristic endemic to the region. Although plantation agriculture produced impressive profits for the owners and contributed to capital investment in a wide variety of economic development beyond the region, there remains a strong heritage of its failures in the region itself. The legacy of the plantation remains a heavy burden on most of the Caribbean even to the present day" (144-5). "The Political Economy of the Caribbean," in *The South and the Caribbean: Essays and Commentaries*, eds. Douglass Sullivan-González and Charles Wilson (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001).

34 Most importantly, I do not want to elide the important historical differences that distinguish the U.S. South and Haiti—such as the distinct histories of colonialism, slavery, and revolution. What I am interested

During the occupation, political leaders and cultural texts often introduced commonalities between the U.S. and Haiti only to ultimately undermine those cultural confluences and to establish a position of imperial supremacy. Proximity and distance between the histories and cultures of the U.S. South and Haiti always operate in tension with one another and result in contradictory ideological and representational ends. Representations of Haiti during this era incorporated visions of the black-ruled republic into popular and elite U.S. culture, and reinforced by imperial guns, this culture of empire worked, as Renda suggests, to “ingest a territory, or another nation in the case of Haiti, without allowing it to become too obviously a part of the nation or the national culture.”<sup>35</sup> This chapter is structured around the intimacies forged and disavowed within those representations of Haiti and the U.S. South, especially as they configure discourses of race, gender and sexuality in their iterations of empire and colonialism. The occupation of Haiti provided an occasion to reinvent the lore of “the Old South” in order to sustain “New South” visions. However, the discourses of Haiti's revolution also served to bolster anti-imperialist and anti-racist calls for reform at home and abroad.

In Melville Herskovits's 1937 anthropological study of Haiti, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, he surmises that the mythic plantation arises from the colonial constraints imposed on space and time. In doing so, he parallels Haiti's colonial history with that of the U.S. South: “The distance of Haiti from Paris, or, in a later period, the time which had elapsed since the French loss of Haiti, has, however, lent an enchantment to “Creole life” which is reflected in an idealized portrayal of this existence, much in the manner of the effusions on

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in are the benefits of an analysis of the cultural texts that saw symbolic/imagined and material linkages between the two regions, particularly during the era of imperial occupation.

35 Renda 22.

the graciousness and glamor of life in what is termed “the old South.”<sup>36</sup> Herskovits here conflates “the distance of Haiti from Paris” (and by implication the distance between the South and the Northern metropole) with the antebellum discursive geographies that rendered the New World as antithetical to the Old. But he does importantly gesture to the continuities between the mythic plantation of the colonial era and those produced by postbellum (or postcolonial, in the case of the French) nostalgia. That the plantation is a fantasy of excess—effusive and glamorous—produced (at least in part) by the “distant” colonial metropole begins to explain how the postcolonial or postbellum audiences of the metropole, in Paris or New York, remain drawn to the mythic plantation past though they might imagine it as remote from their own realities. The manufacturing of that distance, which is compounded by “loss,” elides the extent to which the metropole continues to depend on the exotic “Creole” plantation economically and culturally. That fictional distance incites desires and produces new colonial relationships via familiar imperial tropes.

Cultural anthropologists such as Herskovitz and Franz Boas sought to map the migration of African cultural practices in the Americas through studies of retention and adaptation within African-American and Afro-Caribbean cultures. For instance, in Boas's introduction to Zora Neale Hurston's 1935 folkloric study of the U.S. Gulf South region, *Mules and Men*, he argued that the value of her work derived from its ability to “throw(s) into relief also the peculiar amalgamation of African and European tradition which is so important for understanding historically the character of American Negro life, with its strong African background in the West Indies, the importance of which diminishes with

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<sup>36</sup> *Life in a Haitian Valley* (New York: Octagon Books, 1964) 40.

increasing distance from the south.”<sup>37</sup> Boas suggests an important set of imagined and material proximities, deploying assumptions about race and culture to map a region. In his formulation, the U.S. South is brought closer to the West Indies by a shared and ongoing African tradition. While this indicates his discipline's attempts to locate (and contain) the “African” in the post-slavery societies of the Americas, Hurston's work complicates any unifying or essentializing constructions of blackness in the Americas. However, *Mules and Men* and her study of Haiti and Jamaica, *Tell My Horse*, written while she was living in Haiti, suggest that the boundaries drawn by empire and by her discipline had a powerful effect on her conception of how race and culture were shaped across historical and national boundaries. For Hurston, and many other cultural workers of the occupation era, Haiti served as a locus for questions of race, region, and the cultures of empire that made those questions imperative.

The processes involved in marketing and consuming “Haiti” as a complex and contradictory object of study, and of cultural appropriation, are what Renda calls processes of “cultural conscription.” In particular, the profusion of narratives that sensationalized Haiti as an exotic and voodoo-fueled land “reinforced official discourses and strengthened their ability to conscript ordinary citizens into the logic of empire.”<sup>38</sup> By the late 1930s, the “magic island” of Haiti had amassed tremendous cultural currency in U.S. culture, if as fantasy more than as a respected republic. That currency most often worked to further the Caribbean nation's status as proximate to U.S. desires and “protections” but distant from the reality of self-rule. Depictions of Haitians as primitive or pre-modern (it was commonplace to note that Haitian peasants were shoeless, for example) fed notions of the

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<sup>37</sup> Forward, *Mules and Men* from *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1995).

<sup>38</sup> Renda 21.



U.S. as the arbiter of order and democracy. Haiti had become fully and violently enmeshed in what Ann Stoler and others have called the “intimacies of empire,” or the regulating regimes of race, gender, and sexuality that empire furthers “at home” and “abroad.” Those regulating regimes had, in many cases, been first practiced in the segregated South.

As the occupation endured, however, the debates about empire shifted and expanded to a broader cultural terrain. Zora Neale Hurston and others, for instance, criticized the cultural exploitation of Haiti in U.S. American popular culture. The political battles over representation and commodification raised questions about the “civilizing discourses” that justified imperialism. As Brian Carr and Tara Cooper have argued, Hurston's brand of modernism elevated folk culture and resisted the exoticization and marketing of those cultures for profit. This regard for rural Southern storytelling extended to Caribbean cultural traditions, and her documentation of those traditions added to a public archive that aimed to refute the commodified stereotypes of rural blacks. In her dismissal of cooptation and sensationalized voodoo in U.S. culture, she explained: “That is why these voodoo ritualistic orgies of Broadway and popular fiction are so laughable. The profound silence of the initiated remains what it is. Hoodoo is not drum beating and dancing. There are no moon-worshippers among the Negroes in America.”<sup>39</sup> Her reference to the “ritualistic orgies of Broadway” could have easily been directed at the ritualistic orgies in popular literature and travel narratives of Haiti, which were often dramatically rendered as white fantasy in the “blood-maddened, sex-maddened,” illustrations of such salacious texts.<sup>40</sup> Carr and Cooper remark that Hurston does not offer a revision of the “hoodoo”

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39 *Mules and Men* 178. Carr, Brian and Cooper, Tova. “Zora Neale Hurston and Modernism at the Critical Limit.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 48.2, Summer 2002, 285-313.

40 William Seabrook's 1929 *The Magic Island* is typical in its portrayal of “voodoo” as a practice of sexualized savagery. His narrative is framed by the role of white fantasy: “And now the literary-traditional

narrative; instead she opts for “profound silence.”<sup>41</sup> Even in her text directly addressing Haitian vodoun practices, *Tell My Horse*, she limits the potentially imperial gaze of the reader by refusing to tell stories of her training as a voodoo practitioner. Hurston suggests that popular references to Haiti, “hoodoo,” and black sexuality had reached a point of discursive saturation, and that discretion alone could resist a racist narrative so easily embraced by U.S. audiences. She positioned herself to embrace “primitivist” folk cultures in the service of validating those forms rather than exploiting cultural difference as a means to justify occupation-era violence and the proliferation of negative constructions of black subjectivity in the Caribbean and the U.S. South.

### **The U.S. and Haiti: Revolution and the Legacy of Imperial Design**

What Hurston's work traced were the diasporic folk cultures that had developed under colonial slavery and its aftermath. What many critics of the occupation of Haiti saw, on the other hand, was the continuation of those structures in the form of neocolonialism and neoplantation formations. The history of Haiti's revolutionary 1804 overthrow of the French colonial plantation powerfully called forth the U.S.'s own plantation mythologies to renew the foundations of a white paternalism that justified imperialism and domestic policies of segregation. When U.S. Marines landed in Haiti in 1915 and signaled the start of what would be a nearly twenty-year long military occupation, they were not the first sign of U.S. imperial presence in the struggling republic. Rather, they mobilized a long legacy

white stranger who spied from hiding in the forest, had such a one lurked by, would have seen all the wildest tales of Voodoo fiction justified. . .” He disassociates from the “white stranger” role only to claim a more intimate perspective and to distinguish his work as fact rather than as “literary-traditional.” (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929) 47.

41 In *Mules*, she then proceeds to describe her training into practices of voodoo doctor, but remains discreet about the details of that practice, as a prohibition against its exploitation and out of reverence for its practitioners.

of U.S. desires and policies intended to re-map and subjugate the first black republic of the New World into a position of abject dependency.<sup>42</sup> Dating back to Haiti's successful slave overthrow of French colonial rule and the subsequent dissolution of the plantation system, Haiti signified the threat of revolution and the potential of black rule, a concept continuously undermined by antebellum pro-slavery advocates and later by the policies which enabled the U.S. Occupation and which continue to motivate early twenty-first century U.S. control over Haitian political affairs. The U.S. followed Europe's lead in refusing to recognize Haiti as a formally independent nation in the years following the overthrow of colonial slavery and French rule at the turn of the nineteenth century. However, the U.S. pursued a trading relationship with Haiti that would establish a long history of uneven financial control.<sup>43</sup> When the U.S. invaded Haiti in 1915, Haiti was already heavily dependent on U.S. imports, while Haiti only accounted for a tiny percentage of U.S. export revenues.<sup>44</sup> Nineteenth-century policies, grounded in widespread fears about black labor resistance, worked to supplant (and supplement) France's historic ties to Haiti with U.S. diplomatic and economic influence.<sup>45</sup>

The aftermath of the Haitian Revolution took a particular toll on the fiction of absolute planter power that tenuously maintained the social and economic order of the U.S. South. Though the U.S. initially welcomed the white Creole planters who sought safety,

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42 Just in terms of U.S. naval presence in Haitian waters in the years preceding the occupation, U.S. ships had patrolled Haitian waters many times. See Schmidt, *The U.S. Occupation of Haiti: 1915-1934*.

43 See Plummer, *Haiti and the United States: The Psychological Moment*.

44 As post-revolutionary characters in Langston Hughes's 1930 play *Troubled Island* reminded their audiences, "We [Haitians] have very few markets, sire." Their leader, Jean Jacques Dessalines responds: "Why doesn't he plant pineapples? There's always a market for them in the States" (38).

<http://www.alexanderstreet4.com/cgi-bin/asp/blldr/navigate?/projects/artfla/databases/asp/blldr/fulltext/IMAGE/104>.

45 U.S. diplomacy was a more complex factor over time, however, with activist leaders like Frederick Douglass serving as U.S. ambassadors to Haiti, following the eventual recognition of Haiti's independence in 1862.

fears of the spread of revolution led to more restrictions on immigration and the importation of dangerous human “property.” In particular, St. Domingue Creole planters were limited in the amount of slaves they could bring with them as history had taught Louisiana and other slave states that slave populations were susceptible to insurrectionist entreaties.<sup>46</sup> But despite the acknowledgment that slave resistance was already a reality in the Southern states, slave owners, in a remarkable display of denial and disavowal, used the example of Haiti to further entrench a belief in the necessity of slavery for self-protection against race war and also to protect the “uncivilized” slaves from their own barbarism, from converting “these beautiful plantations into an African wilderness.”<sup>47</sup> For the South, both those inspired slave leaders and the white plantocracy, Haiti was believed to be prophetic, a model for what freedom from slavery meant to blacks and whites.<sup>48</sup> For the antebellum U.S., and the proslavery South in particular, Haiti, as a historic trading partner, plantation slave society, and cultural icon, became a crucial symbol with which to both identify and dis-identify.

For African-American and progressive cultural workers associated with the Harlem Renaissance and the 1930s Cultural Front, the Haitian Revolution represented a complex revolutionary history and a narrative for racialized subjectivity that challenged the black-white binary upon which imperial intervention and Jim Crow segregation depended. The story of the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath was taken up in plays, novels, and essays such as Bontemps' *Drums at Dusk*, Orson Welles (“Voodoo” *Macbeth*, 1936), Langston Hughes (*Troubled Island*, 1930), William Du Bois (*Haiti*, performed by the Federal Theatre

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46 Hunt, Alfred. *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America : Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1988) 120.

47 Qtd in Hunt, 133.

48 Hunt 132.

Project, 1938), and James Weldon Johnson (“The Truth about Haiti. An N.A.A.C.P. Investigation,” 1920). In these texts, the late eighteenth-century anti-colonial struggle of black and mulatto Haitians is presented as both a model for revolution and a cautionary tale about the corrupting effects of power and the divisive legacy of colonial racial divisions. In *Troubled Island*, for instance, Hughes tells the story of Jean Jacques Dessalines, the former slave who ascended to the position of emperor of Haiti after the overthrow of the French colonial plantocracy. In the play Dessalines's mistake is that he abandons his slave past, betrays his race and class origins by allowing himself to be seduced by the mulatto elite, and is ultimately assassinated. Though his nationalism purports to be for the benefit of all Haitians, he has come to be seen as a “tyrant.”<sup>49</sup> Rather than celebrating the black revolutionary hero archetype, Hughes' play paints peasants, former slave men and women dependent upon an economy of survival, as the most sympathetic. Their allegiance to the original ideological motivations for the anticolonial uprising lives on despite the impoverished position it guarantees them.

Though I will return to these texts in detail later in this chapter, I want to assert that the Haitian Revolution served as an occupation-era counter-narrative for the dominant historic narrative that interpreted the events of the revolution as evidence of black barbarism. Central to these counter-narratives was a critique of long-lasting racial hierarchy, the redeployment of white empire in Haiti (this time led by the U.S.), and the exportation of the neoplantation. Instead, I demonstrate, journalistic accounts and fictional

<sup>49</sup> Hughes portrays him as a self-reflexive leader, aware of both his position and what his goals have compromised. He tells his faithful aid (and moral counselor): “I have a dream for Haiti, Martel. I mean to see it true. That's why I made a law that all of us must work all day, and those who own land pay a tax that Haiti may have roads, and docks and harbors fine as any country in the world. The peasants do not understand. They think I'd make them slaves again. And those to whom I gave the land, they call me tyrant now” (*Troubled Island*, 42). Here Hughes situates Haiti as trapped between an anticolonial nationalism and the necessity of entering the capitalist world market in order to survive.

narratives asserted the rights of the Haitian working class to self-governance and the necessity of a complex critique of power that transcended race. In particular, these narratives redeployed racialized depictions of sexuality to a different end, with the goal of debunking the paternalist myths that undergirded both the U.S. occupation of Haiti and structural racism on the domestic front. These narratives implicitly and explicitly suggest that twentieth-century U.S. imperialism reawakened the ghosts of a transnational slave past and consequently the need for a transnational spirit of revolutionary change. In Hughes' play, Martel, advisor to Dessalines and former slave, dreams of a liberation as yet unrealized for twentieth-century Haitians or African Americans, saying: "I dream of an island where not only blacks are free but every man who comes to Haitian shores. Jean Jacques, I'm an old man. But in my old age, I dream of a world where no man hurts another. Where all know freedom, and black and white alike will share this earth in peace. Of such I dream, Jean Jacques."<sup>50</sup>

In the process of culturally conscripting the "ordinary citizens" of the South into the project of U.S. empire, white voters sought particular reassurance that structures of racial order would remain intact. White southern democrats maintained suspicions dating back to the Reconstruction Era about the militarization of the rest of the country and about "interventionist" foreign policies (which they likened to the Northern "occupation" of the South). Consequently, Woodrow Wilson, the first southern president since the Civil War, began a project to conscript the South into his vision of the place of the US in the global order. As Anthony Gaughan has argued, his challenge was to get resistant southern politicians and voters to support his foreign policies, particularly those that mobilized

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<sup>50</sup> *Troubled Island*, 44.

imperial armies.<sup>51</sup> What Wilson offered was a chance for the South to prove their loyalty to a white national and imperial project. Wilson's brand of nationalism did not extinguish a still secessionist regionalism. In fact, it offered a broader articulation of Southern concerns, a chance for the South to raise another war-cry, this time on behalf of the nation. Wilson offered the opportunity to resurrect regionalism through imperialist activities once embraced by the Confederacy as well as the Union. This presumably appealed to crowds eager to imagine Southern defeat as a claim to righteousness. Through Wilson and his military, the South could lead the nation.<sup>52</sup>

James Weldon Johnson was an outspoken critic of the “southernization” of U.S. imperial policies. The place of the U.S. South in Haiti was key to his critique of the occupation's benevolent paternalism. In his 1920 article for *The Crisis*, “The Truth about Haiti. An N.A.A.C.P. Investigation,” he writes:

A great deal of this prejudice has been brought about because the Administration has seen fit to send southern white men to Haiti. . . And the mere idea of white Mississippians going down to civilize Haitians and teach them law and order would be laughable except for the fact that the attempt is actually being made to put the idea into execution. . . These Southerners have found Haiti to be the veritable promised land. . .<sup>53</sup>

Like Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen, Johnson portrays white Southern Marines in search of colonial wealth and power in Haiti, dependent upon the exportation of the structures of racism and violence learned in the U.S. South. This inversion of colonial tropes indicts the

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51 “Woodrow Wilson and the Rise of Militant Interventionism,” *Journal of Southern History*, 65.4 (Nov., 1999), 771-808. Previous to Wilson's loyalty campaign, several leading Southern governors had been outspoken opponents of the development of the federal military and policies of intervention. Gaughan attributes the rise of “belligerent internationalism” to Wilson's incorporation of the South into the national project (774).

52 This did not mean that Southern narratives of defeat and of “Northern Aggression” died, as we will see with Faulkner's novel (and with the countless cultural references glorifying Southern secession that survive today). On the other hand, many dominant national narratives have strategically relegated the South to outsider status.

53 <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5018>.

imperial South as barbaric and uncivilized.

Policy men like John Craige responded to anti-imperialist politics and charges of Marines brutality against Haitians as “unfounded,” and based on “a few isolated instances of inhumanity by madmen and brutes.”<sup>54</sup> In trying to understand the position of “Haiti” as both a distant site of justified military intervention and a powerful signifier within the domestic realities of race and power, he can only conclude that Haiti forges a “queer conjunction of circumstances.” Craige's experience of watching the intersection of Haitian conflict and U.S. politics gives him:

. . . a creepy feeling at times, as though I were sitting backstage at a performance, with Destiny on the boards. Its sequence forms a chapter of the Haitian drama that has never been told before. The Black Republic has always been a football of fate, and there has never been a stronger, more melodramatic instance than that revealed by the complicated events which brought her into international notice in the closing days of the Caco Rebellion.<sup>55</sup>

In Craige's construction, Haiti becomes an unlikely stage for debates about politics and policies that he sees as discrete. When the “negrophile” movement (which included national newspapers, the NAACP, and white anti-imperialists) in the U.S charged Marines in Haiti with atrocities against innocent Haitians and asserted that the homefront and the occupied nation were connected by white supremacist violence, those like Craige became nervous about the “football of fate.” Craige's “creepy feeling” seems to stem from the fact that he is “backstage” but not in control of the drama on stage (i.e., the realm of imperial discourse and policy). Instead, “Destiny” braids the events of Haiti with the politics of the U.S. He seems to suspect that Destiny may not be on the side of empire, despite his own conviction of American righteousness. For Craige, “queer” is often his uneasy

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<sup>54</sup> *Cannibal Cousins* (New York: Minton, Balch & company, 1934) 87.

<sup>55</sup> Craige 75.



characterization for the unexpected ways in which Haiti compels an interrogation of the U.S. As we will see with the cultural texts that represented Haiti during this era, queer Haiti signified the unease with which U.S. Americans questioned their own role in imperial performances as well as the place that imperial Haiti might have within the U.S.

### **Queered Haitians**

But my captain with the Nordic blue eyes took the matter of eating hearts quite seriously. He remained convinced that in Haiti fearful things might happen to the hearts of white men. He was credulous because it is so easy to believe what has been countless times said; to believe what many before you have credited, for repetition greases the ways of belief.

--Blair Niles, *Black Haiti: Africa's Eldest Daughter*

Many cultural texts during the occupation suggest ambivalent or even conflicted attitudes about U.S. imperial presence in Haiti, with anti-imperialist or anti-racist critiques such as Johnson's or Hughes's being far outnumbered by tales of “voodoo” cannibalism and orgiastic chaos. No texts representing Haiti during this era, however, fail to articulate the anxieties produced by the contact between U.S. and Haitian formations of race, gender, and sexuality. Many travel narratives imagine this contact as a replaying of the proverbial New World scene where the civilizing colonizer meets the backwards savage. “Nordic” captains tell stories of proverbial heart-eating cannibals. Narrators compare their own “native encounters” with those they have already heard about Haiti. Repetition of these stories had indeed “greased the ways of belief.” In these exoticized tales Haitians are often described as “queer” and gender, race, and sexuality defy white heteronormative colonial categorizations. U.S. Marines stationed in Haiti sang songs degrading Haitian men through the symbolism of dress, mocking the Cacos (fighters who resisted the occupation) because

“the men don't wear pants.”<sup>56</sup> Haiti posed many threats to the symbolic “hearts of white men”--the myth of heroic white “American” masculinity--and affronts like these songs articulated those threats through the narration of moments of encounter between white observers and local Haitians. As Renda has argued, this was often described as the danger of white men “going native” in the jungle of Haiti never to return and forever compromised by their distance from the civilizing effects of white heterosexuality. I would argue, however, that this “cannibalist” fear is also intrinsically linked to the threat that imperial subjects posed to the domestic front, or to the fear that the empire had in a sense, already come “home.”

U.S. narrators in particular noted Haiti's “inverted,” nonnormative gender roles and emphasized the effects this had on Haitian society as a whole. For example, much is made of how gendered economic positions in Haiti afforded women a prominent status as traders in the market and as responsible for their families’ financial affairs. This fact is often followed by representations of Haitian women as sexually promiscuous as well. In general, Haitian peasants are described as pre-Christian and as unencumbered by patriarchal religious mandates. This passage in Blair Niles's purportedly anti-imperialist 1926 travel narrative *Black Haiti: Africa's Oldest Daughter* mocks that female independence but also seems to long for it, to be uninfluenced by the patriarchal damning of biblical Eve. Haitian women are “economically independent. That fact has given to the peasant women of Haiti a sort of queenliness, an unconscious arrogance of freedom. She sits on her donkey as on a throne. . . She dances with abandon, and her morals are as much her own affair as before there was any apple from forbidden tree.”<sup>57</sup> Through her hyperbolic depiction, Niles mocks

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<sup>56</sup> Renda 234.

<sup>57</sup> *Black Haiti: Africa's Oldest Daughter* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1926) 29.

the Haitian woman's "freedom" and relegates her to a pre-Christian state of civilization, as an Eve before there were any mandates against temptation or "forbidden tree" of knowledge. Niles's sexualization of the independent black woman is loaded with imperial desire, with a kind of envy of the woman's "abandon," her control over her body and her reputation, that Niles echoes throughout her narrative. Niles always seeks to become closer to Haitian society, to participate rather than simply observe. U.S. imperialism facilitates the intimacy between the U.S.-American woman and Haitian women, and imperialism's concomitant discourses of primitivism and exoticization produce the distance and desire articulated by Niles. As she implicitly interrogates her own relationship to gender and sexuality, she further solidifies the construction of the Haitian as nonnormative.

Richard Loederer's 1935 *Voodoo Fire in Haiti*, considered to be the most sensational in the genre of Haitian travel narratives, begins with his initial contact with a "queer crowd" of Haitians: a "fine lot of boys, their skins a delicate coffee color" with faces "powdered to a startling whiteness from which stood out a pair of black-rimmed, soft brown eyes and unnaturally strawberry-red lips."<sup>58</sup> Loederer erotically paints these boys as racially and gender -ambiguous, as strange beings who theatrically mime white beauty but whose bodily racial status is categorized by the coffee bean that their plantations produce. "Some of them leant over the rails and made faces at their reflections in the water, or, alternatively, admired each other. The latter seemed more to their liking. . ."<sup>59</sup> Their "unnatural" appearances are compounded by queer desires that manifest in self-eroticization of their own mirror image and then in the visages of their companions.

Loederer distinguishes between their racial identities and those that they perform, as well

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58 First published in German in 1932, then in English translation in 1935 (Garden City, NY: Double Day).

59 Loederer 27.

as the concomitant dangerous “sameness” of their curious bodies. As Judith Butler has argued, queerness can function to expose racial passing within narratives.<sup>60</sup> From Loederer's observation, the nonnormative gender performance of the boys calls attention to their attempts to pass as white(r) than they are. Loederer emphasizes the homoerotic bond between them and depicts Haitian masculinity as a perverse, if erotic performance, of simulated white femininity. If, as Amy Kaplan suggests, the imperial gaze seeks to find its reflection everywhere, this queer performance of the boys looking at their own reflections and then at each other speaks to Loederer's desire to see the boys' whiteness. However, there is for Loederer an unsettling prospect that perhaps the empire does not map all boundaries of performance or desire in Haiti.

Queer Haiti was an element of texts that set out to counter the sensationalist accounts as well. In his anthropological study of the Mirebalais region of Haiti, Melville Herskovits chooses the region due to its isolation from the larger urban centers of Haiti, leaving the African cultural influences more intact, in his account. Herskovits's study relies heavily on notions of African authenticity and aims for a totalizing picture of regional Haitian culture, despite the long history of slavery, cultural disruption, and multiplicity. Unlike most other narratives of the era, he addresses Haitian queerness directly, and relates homosexuality to the African tradition of polygamy. In identifying a cause for queerness, he relies on assumptions of heterosexuality:

A certain number of unmarried men result from this system of plural matings, some of whom remain single by preference, particularly in the cities, where the incidence of homosexuality far exceeds that found in the country. In Mirebalais itself, when the final withdrawal of the American

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<sup>60</sup> See *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*: “Queering is what upsets and exposes passing; it is the act by which the racially and sexually repressive surface of conversation is exploded, by rage, by sexuality, by the insistence on color” (New York: Routledge, 1993) 177.

Marines from Haiti was being celebrated, a dance called manuba, significantly enough the only one held indoors, was one in which male dancers danced together in couples.<sup>61</sup>

Significantly, Herskovits locates the practice of queer behaviors and lifestyles in the urban centers and in the context of anti-imperialist celebration. Homosexuality, then, is not associated with an “African” cultural tradition but with the metropole, built by one empire and then invaded by another. He implies that structures of empire, or “modernization,” produce nonnormative sexualities, while more Africanized cultures remain heterosexual (thus reinforcing the notion that heterosexuality is somehow more “natural” or primitive). On the other hand, the freedom from imperial control and the “final withdrawal of the American Marines” also is liberating on multiple levels. Dance (most often depicted as a kind of freedom from social constraints in these texts) couples with queerness to indicate what Haitians might do without the paternal presence of the colonizer.

As he explains the phenomenon of lesbianism in Haiti, he speaks of queerness more in terms of failed gender performance: “Frigidity is a principal cause for female homosexuality, and, because of a wife's reluctance to satisfy her husband, it not infrequently happens that she is sent back to her parents, where she may seek out other women.”<sup>62</sup> In this passage a heteronormative bias is articulated through a dismissal of female sexual autonomy. What he indicates here, though, is that female queer relationships persist despite opprobrium. He ends his discussion of queerness by reducing the multifarious characterizations of Haitian sexual expression to one queer figure, the effeminate man who is thought of as “like his mother:” “The most prevalent Haitian

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61 *Life in a Haitian Valley* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937) 117.

62 Herskovits 117.

attitude toward homosexuality in either sex. . . is one of derision rather than vindictiveness, as the term applied to effeminate men, *commères*, may suggest.”<sup>63</sup> Perhaps indicating more about U.S.-American attitudes toward homosexuality, as well as the prohibitions of U.S. imperial influence, Herskovits portrays Haitian queerness as both commonplace and commonly derided.<sup>64</sup> Haitian attitudes toward homosexuality and gender variance are diverse. But in his analysis, he deploys U.S.-centric ideas about gender and sexuality by suggesting that ultimately queerness must be seen by Haitians as weakness because it is associated with the feminine.

Zora Neale Hurston's consideration of “Voodoo and Voodoo Gods” in her folkloric study of Haitian culture also gestures toward variations in gender performance and sexual desires as both commonplace and nonnormative. In contrast, she complicates Herskovits's assumptions regarding gender and sexuality, not in a definitive way but in a perhaps strategically ambiguous way. As with Hurston's stance on the U.S. occupation of Haiti, she seems to equivocate on matters of gender and sexual variance. Her investigation into the role of gods and goddesses in the lives of everyday Haitians occasions a subtle critique of the “phallic” nature of most religions, including Voodoo, and seems to celebrate the latter's fundamental subversions of patriarchal order. “What is the truth?” is answered by Voodoo with an empowered embodiment: “Mambo, that is the priestess, richly dressed is asked this question ritualistically. She replies by throwing back her veil and revealing her sex organs.

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63 Ibid.

64 Herskovitz is very critical of the U.S. Marines, and throughout his study redirects the charges of excess against agents of empire. For example, he details the story of a drunk Marine carving into a symbolic Haitian palm tree of liberty, “which in Haiti is the emblem of its attainment of freedom and independence, and near it a rostrum symbolizing the authority of the central government. . . Cut so deeply into the 'tree of liberty' that not even the red and blue paint of the national colors with which its base is repainted annually can conceal it, and contrasting with the ornate inscription on the near-by tomb, is the following legend: L. MARLOW AUG. 13, 1920 U.S.M.C. DRUNK AS HELL J.F. BROWN” (13).

The ceremony means that this is the infinite, the ultimate truth.”<sup>65</sup> Unlike the writings of Loederer and even Blair, Hurston's anthropological methodology entails an anti-essentialist, anti-colonial approach to race, sex, and gender. Her analysis does not presuppose a heteropatriarchal order, but allows for variations from that. For example, in a characterization of the jealous and desiring female mulatto goddess Erzulie, Hurston notes that Erzulie is “implacable” toward women. Women, she says, do not attempt to woo the jealous goddess or “bestow her food” “unless they tend toward the hermaphrodite or are elderly women who are widows or have already abandoned the hope of mating.”<sup>66</sup> That a differently gendered body or a performance of gender might vary with context (male/female, young/old) suggests an exceptional relationship to the goddess that does not render the hermaphrodite as “othered,” in Hurston's summation, but includes this subject position as one of many.

In another instance of rendering a more complex Haitian sexual subjectivity, Hurston retells the story of a “mount,” or an instance when a person temporarily becomes the mouthpiece for Guede, a spirit of the black peasant class, who exists “to burlesque a society that crushed him.” Ignored by the upper class mulattos, Guede “comes as near social criticism of classes by the masses as anything at all in Haiti.”<sup>67</sup> The phrase “tell my horse” marks the start of Guede's possession of the human speaker. Unlike the comic others, one account is “tragic”:

A woman known to be a lesbian was 'mounted' one afternoon. The spirit announced through her mouth 'Tell my horse I have told this woman repeatedly to stop making love to women. It is a vile thing and I object to it. . . Tell my horse to tell that woman that I am going to kill her today. She will

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65 Hurston 376.

66 Hurston 384.

67 Hurston 494.

not lie again.' The woman pranced and galloped like a horse to a great mango tree, climbed it far up among the top limbs and dived off and broke her neck.<sup>68</sup>

In this retelling, Hurston implies something of the social attitudes toward lesbian women (that it is vile and objectionable), but she also outlines at length that the parodic or “burlesque” voice of Guede is a kind of ventriloquism for otherwise unutterable grievances against injustice within a social or class system. In other words, the Guede is usually a voice that empowers the speaker. In this case, however, Guede has prohibited her love of other women and she has repeatedly disobeyed him. What might be read as the common trope of the suicidal queer who is driven by an internalized homophobia or engaged in an act of self-policing could also be read as a multilayered grievance against the gods as sexual and moral police. Because her voice is a subterfuge for Guede, it is difficult to access how lesbian practice is being rendered. Though Hurston seems to be furthering the familiar narrative of the “tragic” lesbian and a portrait of Haitian folk culture that supports heteronormativity, the layers of mediation render the woman's voice unintelligible. Hurston investment overall, though, is in respecting the function of folk practice within its given context and this story represents a rare moment when Guede is portrayed by Hurston as destructive, rather than socially conscious “plus a touch of burlesque and slapstick.”<sup>69</sup>

### **The Southern Queer, Deferred:**

For some, the notion of a “southern queer” is an oxymoron. . .For others, the term southern queer is redundant: Since the South is already an aberration, what is a southern queer but deviance multiplied?

--Deborah Smith, *qtd. in Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*

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68 Hurston 497.

69 Ibid.



Deborah Smith reminds us that the queer South is a familiar, perhaps even “redundant” construct. Dating back to antebellum abolitionists' declarations that “the Slave States are Sodoms and almost every village family is a brothel,”<sup>70</sup> the region has often been castigated for immoral (un-Christian) sexual practices and licentiousness.<sup>71</sup> In the history of the queered South, discourses of race and sexuality are always interconnected and co-constitutive. The “slave state” and the “sodoms” often acted as interchangeable markers of nonnormativity. In Woodrow Wilson's project to conscript the so-called “New South” into the larger U.S. imperial project, he sought to promote the South as the norm. White supremacists were desperate to prove that the “village family” was organized around a white, heterosexual norm and that the institutionalized practices of sexual exploitation and rape within slavery had never happened, let alone resulted in progeny who defied strict racial categorization.<sup>72</sup> At the start of Faulkner's literary career, Southern cultural identity was being revised and characterized by Southerners, more and more, in terms of “eccentricity,” contributing to what Merrim calls “self-exoticism” in arguing for the region's distinct contributions (its opposition to the normativizing North). This queering works to different ends in different texts. At times, queering or self-marginalization sought to obfuscate the South's capitalist foundations (as with the Southern Agrarians) and its regulatory (rather than heroic) structures. In other words, its interiorization, the turning

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70 1836 *Anti-Slavery Record*, qtd in Hunt, 6.

71 For abolitionists, this did not necessarily indicate a critique of how race was used to justify and maintain slavery. Often, the damnation of slavery was based on the damnation of interracial sex or “racial mixture.”

72 During this same era, the Southern Agrarians, in a refutation of H.L. Mencken's claim that the South was a cultural desert, intentionally constructed the region's culture as both anomalous and marginalized in relation to the rest of the U.S. In other words, they engaged in a kind of “self-queering” project that valorized and fetishized a feminine, pastoral, pre-capitalist South that spoke more to the position of the white literary community than to the economic realities of the region.

inward to the hyperbolically tight-knit Southern family as the organizing principle, works to cast slavery and the plantation as naturalized, pastoral and anti/non-capitalist economies. In *Absalom*, queering exposes the ways in which Southern capital depended upon the violent production of nonnormative sexualized racial formations.

In *Absalom*, intimacy is characterized by the ability or inability to “escape, uncouple, return.”<sup>73</sup> In Faulkner's novel, verbose speculations and the endlessly reproduced and revised stories of the white South work to dissect official narratives of union, kinship, and affiliation. In this obsessive reworking of plantation origins and legacies, language structures desire and scripts moments of intimate contradiction. *Absalom*, then, engages with both the larger national/imperial depictions of black Haitians and with U.S. regional political and social constructions of race and sexuality. Edouard Glissant has called *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner's most successful example of his technique of deferral; however, he rules out the deferral of homosexuality in the novel: “The seeds of fraternal incest, the temptation of homosexuality: these are not really 'deferred,' they do not enter into the 'stream of consciousness,' and we only intuit their presence.”<sup>74</sup> I would argue, however, that the seemingly peripheral suggestions of incest and homosexuality operate as structuring forces. If they are *always* deferred and never directly resolved, then they are that much more central to Faulkner's overall project of narrative ambiguity. In my reading, the seeds of incest and intimations of homosexuality queer both the deferral (and then revelation) of Bon's racial status and his Haitian origin, thereby in a larger sense precluding finality or conclusiveness in regards to the neoplantation's many “ways of knowing.” The

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73 Faulkner 259. Shreve speculates about how sin complicates love, desire, and sex. His concern at this moment is why and how Bon came to be excluded from the Sutpen family, and more specifically, why this exclusion takes the form of murder.

74 *Faulkner, Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 178.

result is that the heteronormative is never realized in this novel.<sup>75</sup> Queered intimacies represent respite from those norms and they structure the novel with a kind of “queer time” that spoils a heteropatriarchal chronology organized around reproduction and inheritance.<sup>76</sup> Charles Bon, the “cerebral Don Juan” reversed “the order, {he} had learned to love what he had injured” (86). Queer intimacy between Bon and Henry, unlike any other relationships in the novel, has the potential to oppose the standard “ordered” narrative (of love transforming into injury). The queered Bon breaks the progressions of intimacy assumed by the novel’s narrators and is said to love Henry “in a deeper sense” than he might have loved Henry's sister.

Bon is first figured as a cosmopolitan subject, ambiguously identified with the creole Louisiana and with the world. Already then, his “foreign” origin and worldly experiences are unintelligible within the white Southern framework of rural Mississippi. In Rosa Coldfield’s early narration to Quentin, Bon is written/told as:

Charles Bon of New Orleans, —a young man of a worldly elegance and assurance beyond his years, handsome, apparently wealthy and with for background the shadowy figure of a legal guardian rather than any parents —a personage who in the remote Mississippi of that time must have appeared almost phoenix-like, fullsprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time.... (58)

Narrators throughout the novel continually attempt to locate Bon, but like Rosa here, they often find Bon to be a paradoxical figure. In this passage, Rosa first identifies Bon with the creolized, transnational port city of New Orleans, destination for many post-Revolution white Haitians and creoles of color.<sup>77</sup> New Orleans is representative of the more stratified

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<sup>75</sup> Heterosexual marriage is painstakingly described as a burden which one must flee, 250.

<sup>76</sup> I am borrowing here from Judith Halberstam’s formulation of a postmodern queer time that “leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance.” *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005) 6.

<sup>77</sup> In her reading of *Absalom*, Barbara Ladd situates New Orleans as the pivotal locus for white southern

codes of race and gender prevalent under French colonial culture and the European colonizations of the extended Caribbean south. Then Bon is prefigured as someone too old, too cosmopolitan to be in this “New World,” whose status in the world will be determined not by birthparents but by the law. That a man of no known origin or parentage, “who had travelled too far,” must be guarded by the law is indicative of the ways that U.S. and southern laws appropriate racial taxonomies in order to delineate those who will have access to legal rights and citizenship and those who will not (86). By aging Bon, then, Rosa is articulating multiple anxieties: that those more elastic conceptualizations of race still linger and are traveling via Bon outside New Orleans into “remote Mississippi;” and further, that Bon, parentless and motherless, seems not to have been produced by normative heterosexual union. Instead, Bon's origins here are queer and mythic. This queering, though, makes him open to being racialized in any way that the narrators see fit. Because he is not anchored by a known familial heritage or “home” but nonetheless displays the trappings of privilege, he occupies a queered position within heteropatriarchal systems of knowledge. Here he is associated in Rosa's narrative as a member of the Creole colonial elite, and while he is as yet beyond definitive racial categorization, this identity did carry with it a certain suspect ambiguity and freedom.

Notably, the trope of the ambiguously racialized and gendered “mulatto” was a staple of this era's representations of Haitian creole elites. Rosa's figuration of Bon ironically complements the mulatto characters featured in black radical texts of the era. In

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(and US national) contestation of strategies of assimilation versus segregation of colonized populations of color. The structures of political, economic, and social power under French colonialism allowed for more diversified constructions of race and gender than the strict black/white binaries of US and southern codified systems of power. ‘The Direction of the Howling’: Nationalism and the Color Line in *Absalom, Absalom!*” *Subjects and Citizens: Nation, Race, and Gender from Oroonoko to Anita Hill*, eds. Michael Moon and Cathy Davidson, (Durham: Duke UP, 1995).

the Occupation-era texts that represented the Haitian Revolution, for example, mulatto Haitian characters are positioned between the white colonial planter class (or the “grand blancs”) and the revolutionary black slaves. Because they stood to gain power from the maintenance of the colonial plantation system, the mulatto with a French education is a suspicious character in plays such as Hughes' *Troubled Island*. “Mulatto” was a racialized caste position created by the French Code Noir, which allowed white planters to acknowledge their paternity in the children produced from sexual relations with black female slaves. This meant that planters could leave plantations to their mulatto offspring, who could then go on to become slaveholders themselves.<sup>78</sup> In Hughes' play, Azelia, a revolutionary slave, defines the mulatto as: “Black mother, white father, free.” A qualifying exchange follows, however, between her and a fellow revolutionary:

CONGO: Free or not, their white fathers treat 'em almost as bad as us  
slaves.

AZELIA: But they sometimes leave them land and money.

CONGO: Then the mulattoes think they're white for sure!

AZELIA: And look down on us for being black.

CONGO: And for being slaves.<sup>79</sup>

As this example suggests, the narrative of the Haitian Revolution and the events following independence became a means for writers like Hughes to explore how colonial racial stratifications (the division of mulatto elites from black former slaves, in this case) endure and preclude a true social revolution or a coherent national unity. Before and after the revolution, black slave characters are suspicious that the educated mulattos are only loyal to their desires for power and that they had been corrupted by white colonial markers of class privilege. In Hughes's play, the dark-skinned, scar-covered Dessalines slave-turned-

<sup>78</sup> See Barbara Ladd, *Nationalism and the Color Line*.

<sup>79</sup> Hughes 19-20.

king is manipulated and seduced by mulatto cultural capital. In the final scenes, Dessalines has been killed as a result of his compromise and his weakness for mulatto sensuality.<sup>80</sup> His black former slave wife alone mourns him and says over his dead body: “Our freedom, Jean Jacques! That took you away from me--to a palace with a throne of gold, and silken pillows for your head, and women fairer than flowers who made you forget how much we'd shared together. Once we slept in a slave corral, together, you and I. But when you slept in a palace, you didn't need Azelia.”<sup>81</sup> In his indictment of the conniving mulatto elites and Dessalines in this drama, Hughes seems to play into the depiction of the mulatto as a race traitor, but more importantly, he is concerned with how power has corrupted all of the differently racialized post-independence leaders. In other words, his primary critique is of Dessalines for renouncing the anti-slavery, anti-plantation ideology that motivated the Revolution (here personified by Azelia and symbolized by their lost romantic union.) His insistence that the peasants continue to labor on plantations in the service of the state is as damning as his attraction to mulatto cultural capital.

Like the mulatto elites of Hughes's drama, Charles Bon's “Haitianness” is dangerously indeterminate. Though Bon is initially associated with New Orleans, his origins eventually shift and retrace transnational migrations from the West Indies to the U.S. South. The extended south is made to include Haiti which, like Bon, is depicted as “too old” in some sense to fit neatly into a U.S. national framework and so its imperial ingestion is marked by violence.<sup>82</sup> Quentin's grandfather depicts Haiti (via Mr. Compson

<sup>80</sup> Once Dessalines takes power, the literate mulatto aide Stenio whom he relies on for communication with other leaders uses a mulatto seductress from Paris to compromise his integrity: “That's why we brought her back from Paris. I knew he'd fall for her. A mulatto Empress in a black Empire! That's enough to make him the laughing stock of the peasantry” (47-8).

<sup>81</sup> Hughes 96.

<sup>82</sup> As Vera Kutzinski states: “New Orleans has functioned historically and imaginatively as link between the United States and the West Indies, that problematic territory even more south than the 'South.’” “Bodies

and later Quentin) as unmoored and mobile, as “of the Americas” and then as “a little lost island in a latitude which would require ten thousand years of equatorial heritage to bear its climate, a soil manured with black blood from two hundred years of oppression and exploitation” (202).<sup>83</sup> Charles Bon, as part-Haitian, part-Southern progeny is similarly unlocatable in time or space. Rosa's depiction of him as “phoenix-like” ultimately aligns him with the mythical legacy of the burnt ashes of post-plantation Haiti, which “impervious to time,” continued to challenge U.S. imperialism in the twentieth century just as it resisted nineteenth-century French colonial rule. Through the miscegenated, queered, transnational figure of Bon, racial paradigms that undergirded imperial designs are destabilized and disrupted by histories of contestation. In *Absalom*, New Orleans, then, becomes a kind of surrogate for an unmoored, mobile Haiti, as it is geographically (if dubiously) intelligible within U.S. American borders.<sup>84</sup> The city serves as a link between the U.S. South and the extended south—those sites of plantation slavery that were historically connected through circuits of commerce and culture.

Bon's notions of race and gender are constructed in direct relation to French colonial sex practices in this New Orleans context. In a scene in which Henry and Bon visit a New Orleans brothel, a symbolic impenetrable wall is opened for Bon by a “swarthy man resembling a creature out of an old woodcut of the French Revolution” with whom

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and Borders: The United States, America, and the Caribbean.” *The New Centennial Review* 1.2 (2001), 66.

83 Kutzinski asserts: “Haiti, unable to be contained geographically and temporally, becomes an archetype grafted onto those other spaces where it leaves traces of Jacobean rebellion and spreads cultural Africanisms of various kinds that, surreptitiously but persistently, call into doubt paradigms that encode and disseminate beliefs in racial purity, as well as attempts to separate the edifice of white culture from its foundation of slave labor” (66).

84 1930s folklorist and Africanist scholars were invested in tracing the many cultural migrations between the Caribbean and the Gulf South. Zora Neale Hurston proclaims New Orleans to be “hoodoo capital of America. Great names in rites that vie with those of Hayti in deeds that keep alive the powers of Africa” (*Mules and Men* 176).

Bon speaks French, a language incomprehensible to Henry (89). He is designated as “an American,” distinctly foreign in this New Orleans space. Bon considers Henry to be a guest, rather than a native of this place, and so negates the assumption that this territory has been, or is being, Americanized, placed within US national borders. According to our narrators, Henry, as the American Southerner, struggles when confronted with these differences, with experiences that are outside of his limited knowledge, while Bon moves about the world with relative ease. For example, Henry is unable to fathom Bon's relationship with a quadroon woman. Consequently, Henry and Bon's experience together in New Orleans results in apprehension and a crisis of logic: “You give me two and two and you tell me it makes five and it does make five” (94). Bon has shown Henry a space in which relationships and constructions of identity are ordered quite differently from “granite-bound” Jefferson, Mississippi, and Henry assumes that something is missing from that equation (86). The narrators will ultimately suggest that what is missing is Bon's “true” black identity in the previous constructions of Bon as as surrogate for New Orleans, and therefore West Indian/Haitian, creole identity. As the surrogate, Bon carries with him the traces of these cultural locations and identities, but never definitively embodies them.<sup>85</sup> In declaring his blackness at the end of the novel, this presumably explains Bon as no other characterizations have done. Shreve in particular concludes that without “blackness,” Henry's South is without order or logic. However, the sameness of the homosocial bond between the two men presents no such crisis for Henry. Therefore, we might also consider that the one piece missing from the two plus two equals five equation is the place which

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<sup>85</sup> I'm borrowing Joseph Roach's theorization of surrogation from *Cities of the Dead*. As I have previously suggested, he defines surrogation as an ongoing process that is predicated on a failure to replace that which has been lost, or failure to arrive at an unattainable origin. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1996) 2.



might be occupied, if unnamed, by the love between Henry and Bon.

In the case of the U.S. twentieth-century discourse on Haiti, Renda argues: “With regard to sexuality, the discourse of exoticism, so essential to resolving the tension between nation and empire, contributed to the reshaping of sexual norms and representations.”<sup>86</sup> As the desired Other in the novel, Bon exemplifies this discursive tension between the domestic and the foreign. He functions as the magnetic, influential figure whose difference is acknowledged and initially welcomed. He becomes objectified and feminized by the Sutpen family and by the students at the University of Mississippi, who seem dangerously drawn to him. Rosa tells Quentin that Ellen Sutpen:

spoke of Bon as if he were three inanimate objects in one or perhaps one inanimate object for which she and her family would find three concordant uses: a garment which Judith might wear as she would a riding habit or a ball gown, a piece of furniture which would complement and complete the furnishing of her house and position, and mentor and example to correct Henry’s provincial manners and speech and clothing. (59)

If Bon is a garment, a dress, for Judith, then he is a feminized object, transgressing normative gender roles, while significantly being positioned as Henry’s mentor/role model. As a piece of furniture which would insure Judith’s class status, Bon might be read as both exoticized and racialized other: as property, he functions to buttress white plantation culture as did slave labor; as fetishized object, he becomes a sexualized adornment to white culture as did “mulattos” and “quadroons” in the colonial Caribbean and New Orleans. Beyond Sutpen’s Hundred, at Ole Miss, he is likewise described as “reclining in a flowered, almost feminised gown,” object of wonderment for the “entire undergraduate body of that small new provincial college” (76).<sup>87</sup> Bon, “almost feminine” throughout much of the novel,

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<sup>86</sup> Renda 22.

<sup>87</sup> Henry suggests the queered tension that results from him longing to be Bon and longing for Bon. Consider here the double entendre of his influencing both the collective “undergraduate body” and the

challenges constructions of masculinity held by the untraveled “country boys,” and so becomes dangerous, not simply because of his presence beyond the boundaries of New Orleans, but because the “hinterlands” are impressionable. He is literally traveling from the metropole to the marginal space of the newly developed white South. If New Orleans represents colonial decadence, it also represents a space where the theatricality of gender is called attention to in festivals that celebrate masking and cross-dressing.<sup>88</sup> The extravagance and wealth implicit in Bon’s feminization seems to be a component of the influence he wields, but significantly he also importantly challenges normative constructions of southern masculinity.

This queering, though, serves to reinforce the narrators’ divergent racializations of Bon, while Henry’s whiteness ensures an unquestioned positionality. In Rosa’s narrative, Bon is identified as a member of the Creole colonial elite. The progression that follows is that he is racialized and classed as a Haitian mulatto of the planter class, and then finally is depicted as the “blackest” and as a sexual threat, more in line with the Caco peasants of Haiti who rebelled against the U.S. marine presence in Haiti. The transmutations of Bon from one gendered object-position to another are a product of imperial desires that vary based on the position of the viewer. Faulkner here complicates representations of Haitians during this era that more often attributed gender and sexual mutability to the power of exotic voodoo. Such narratives were permeated with accounts of gender inversions and conversions as evidence of African diasporic traditions. For example, Alan Lomax’s folkloric documentation of 1930s Haitian music and religion yielded these observations: “I

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literal male bodies of its students. We might also consider how Faulkner queers the commonplace relationships between older boy mentors and freshmen mentees in the all boys world of the university.  
88 See Roach, *Cities of the Dead*.

have seen vaudou dancers in Haiti become snakes and coil round the rafters, men become women and in giggling sopranos demand comfits and perfume, and women take masculine personae and call for black cheroots and rum laced with bull's blood."<sup>89</sup> This discussion of how religious ecstasy compels a reversal of gendered affectations interrupts Lomax's larger discussion of gender roles in 1940s black evangelical "Holy Roller" churches of the Mississippi Delta. According to Lomax, the Holy Roller churches act as "community theaters in which the women, most notably, could act out their troubles in a supportive setting. They called it getting happy, shouting."<sup>90</sup> Lomax, who traveled with Zora Neale Hurston on a folkloric mission in 1935, ascribed to the "Africanization" theories laid out by Boas and Herskovits as he draws parallels between the religious ceremonies of Haiti and Mississippi. Lomax forges these cultural connections to make sense of how these spaces allow for or produce non-normative articulations of gender—spaces where men speak in sopranos and women gain voices. Lomax's sympathetic portrayal of black women in Mississippi, however, comes at the expense of a sensationalized portrait of Haitian worshippers.

Though Bon's heterosexuality and masculinity would potentially be restored and stabilized via his engagement to Judith Sutpen, his ties to Judith are called into question even as they are established. Though Rosa tells Quentin that she and Ellen Sutpen assumed Bon and Judith were engaged, "Ellen did not once mention love between Judith and Bon..." (59). This heterosexual union is precluded by an unknown, unspoken event, an unnamed "something" that "happened": "Nobody knew what: whether something between

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<sup>89</sup> *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993) 71. Significantly, Lomax's account was published years later in 1993 and was a composite of his early twentieth-century research and recordings.

<sup>90</sup> Lomax 70.

Henry and Bon on one hand and Judith on the other, or between the three young people on one hand and the parents on the other” (62). The supposition that the unknown event may have actually occurred between Henry and Bon, not between Judith and Bon, is reinforced by the homoerotic intimacy between the two men. From the start, the storytellers remind the listeners that Henry ultimately sacrificed all his inheritance and privilege for Bon, and this is paired with assurances that the monumental seduction occurred between Bon and Henry: “Yes, he loved Bon, who seduced him as surely as he seduced Judith—the country boy born and bred who, with the five or six others of that small undergraduate body composed of other planters’ sons whom Bon permitted to become intimate with him...” (76). Though as we have seen, the love and seduction between Judith and Bon has already been called into question, the love between Bon and Henry (at least Bon’s seduction of Henry, and Henry’s resultant love for Bon) is reinforced by multiple layerings of narration, while Judith’s role is effectively evacuated. Instead, Bon renders the planters’ sons vulnerable, suggesting that the inheritors of the plantation continue to be seduced by the charms of the imperial subject. The neplantation is fueled by ongoing constructions of the exotic other.

Just as the male homoerotic component of nineteenth century British literature, according to Eve Sedgwick, collapsed into competition for the love of a woman, so the relationship between Bon and Henry is transposed onto the abstraction of Judith. As Mr. Compson suggests to Quentin:

She was just the blank shape, the empty vessel in which each of them strove to preserve, not the illusion of himself nor his illusion of the other but what each conceived the other to believe him to be—the man and the youth, seducer and seduced, who had known one another, seduced and been seduced, victimised in turn each by the other, conquerer vanquished by his

own strength, vanquished conquering by his own weakness, before Judith came into their joint lives even by so much as girlname. (95)

In considering this as a moment in which “Bon” and “Henry” are destabilized, Judith Butler’s reading of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* provides an important context for the role of queering in literature: “queering works as the exposure within language—an exposure that disrupts the repressive surface of language—of both sexuality and race”.<sup>91</sup> Much of the laborious writing/rewriting, telling/retelling in this novel calls attention to the inadequacies of language, to the epistemological fissures that occur when attempting to render identities and relationships that signify illusory rather than solid boundaries. Judith, who could be any “girlname,” becomes the space in which Henry and Bon preserve their union, the seduction which necessarily is as much a struggle as the words that try to convey that union.

Because Bon is ultimately racialized as a black character who has “passed,” we have to re-read (as the novel is constantly requiring the reader to do) the desire that Judith and Henry project onto Bon as racialized as well. As a modernist text, this novel is very much concerned with what Martin Jay calls “ocularcentrism” and the ways in which vision, in concert with desire, is racialized and gendered.<sup>92</sup> In other words, narrators of this novel return to how those who *saw* Bon must have *known* him in ways that they, in the present, cannot. The “seeing is believing” truism that dominates Western thought, however, is disturbed by the fact that the vision of Bon was always more fantasy than fact. Henry’s vision is transposed onto Judith’s and together they create an image of Bon:

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91 *Bodies that Matter*, 176.

92 As Jay puts it, “The tenacious hold of ocularcentrism over Western culture. . . was abetted by oscillation among models of speculation, observation, and revelation.” *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1993) 236.

She must have seen him in fact with exactly the same eyes that Henry saw him with. And it would be hard to say to which of them he appeared the more splendid —to the one with hope, even though unconscious, of making the image hers through possession; to the other with the knowledge, even though subconscious to the desire, of the insurmountable barrier which the similarity of gender hopelessly intervened. (75,76)

This typical disjointed Faulknerian syntax disallows a “straight,” or linear, reading of Judith’s or Henry’s desire for Bon. Again, Butler’s reading of passing in Larsen’s novel is useful in examining the relationships among race, sexuality and language: “Queering is what upsets and exposes passing; it is the act by which the racially and sexually repressive surface of conversation is exploded, by rage, by sexuality, by the insistence on color.”<sup>93</sup> In many ways “knowledge” seems to be the “other” in this passage, constituted by an unnamed “insurmountable barrier” which may or may not be defied by or constitutive of “the similarity of gender.” If Henry’s desire for Bon is subconscious, then he has in some way access to knowledge of that desire, but compulsory heterosexuality would disallow for its conscious realization. Because Bon is “that black son of a bitch” at the conclusion of the novel, we must re-read this passage as queering the familial and engaging in the typical sexualization and eroticization of many “mulatto” and racialized others in the twentieth-century literature of empire. Like Loederer’s “queer crowd” of powder-faced and strawberry-lipped boys, Faulkner’s Bon as “almost (mulatto) feminine,” then, is figured as an object of desire to be possessed. In these ways, Bon begins to share the characteristics of the New Orleans quadroons deemed degenerate by Henry. What we “know” at the conclusion of the novel is that the insurmountable barrier between Henry and Bon is potentially built upon familial, racial, sexual, and national boundaries. What “queering” upsets in this passage is the “repressive surface of conversation” that prevents speaking

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93 Butler 177.

directly of those who challenge normative constructions of identity. Queering, in other words, exposes Bon's multiple "passings" and calls attention to the instability and fallibility of those boundaries.

Even Bon's funeral is cast as a queer performance, attended by his exoticized octoroon "wife" and child. In this tableau, Faulkner summons the ghosts of the turn-of-the-century's notorious queer artists:

It must have resembled a garden scene by the Irish poet, Wilde. . .the pageant, the scene, the act, entering upon the stage—the magnolia-faced woman a little plumper now, a woman created of by and for darkness whom the artist Beardsley might have dressed, in a soft flowing gown designed. . .to dress some. . .passionate and inexorable hunger of the flesh. . .leading by the hand the little boy whom Beardsley might not only have dressed by drawn. . . (157).

In connecting the performative qualities associated with an Oscar Wilde play to the aesthetic and artwork of Aubrey Beardsley, Faulkner cloaks the scene and players in Bon's funeral in the trappings of an arrogantly queer, flagrant late nineteenth-century British art scene. Wilde and Beardsley were both associated with decadence, effeminacy, and an eroticism that flew in the face of Victorian prohibitions on sexuality.<sup>94</sup> At his trial, Wilde himself had attempted to defend the love between men and boys through the Biblical parable of David and Jonathan. As critic Joseph Boone points out, David, of course, was the father of Absalom. Faulkner's biographers have discussed his longstanding reverence for Wilde, and so it is not impossible to think that Faulkner might have also been thinking of that other author's invocation of biblical queers and the symbolic ties between murdering

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<sup>94</sup> For more on the relationship between Wilde and the South, see Ellen Crowell's "The Picture of Charles Bon: Oscar Wilde's Trip through Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha," *Modern Fiction Studies* 50.3 (2004) 595-631. She argues convincingly: "Wilde's presence in *Absalom, Absalom!* also draws attention to the way another dandy-aristocrat exposes the equally theatrical category of southern whiteness. . . Reading Charles Bon against the Wildean dandy—both fictional and biographical—highlights the similar way Bon's relative 'whiteness' or 'blackness' is 'read' by the narrators of *Absalom, Absalom!*." (598).

fathers and errant sons in his construction of Bon in this novel.<sup>95</sup> The references to Wilde and Beardsley are compounded by the scandalous (by Mississippi standards) interracial concubinage, represented by his octoroon mistress and her child. Bon's death, then, would seem to be the inevitable result, like Wilde's conviction, of having defied the boundaries of the “puritan” South. This South, importantly, is perhaps even more characteristic of the twentieth-century post-slavery South, driven by the segregationist goals of policing race and sexuality to the death. Bon as outsider/other is narrated as forebodingly fatalistic throughout. As Ellen Crowell argues: “By reading Faulkner through Wilde, we can see that Faulkner does not use miscegenation to symbolize homosexuality, or homosexuality to symbolize miscegenation. Rather, he presents the two transgressions as imbricated in order to highlight the particular fear of “sameness” each breach of southern morality engenders.”<sup>96</sup>

The white planter's son has seen in Bon what he imagines to be a “worldliness” which he might acquire. He constantly “apes” Bon, desiring to be him. The novel makes it quite clear why Henry seeks the distinguishing markers of empire. Henry is “only in the surface matter of food and clothing and daily occupation any different from the negro slaves who supported them—the same sweat, the only difference being that on the one hand it went for labor in fields where on the other it went as the price of spartan and meagre pleasures which were available to them because they did not have to sweat in the fields” (78). What else separates the planter's son from the slave? The “big house” and “the dirt-floored cabins,” the means by which they gamble and what they gamble for.

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<sup>95</sup> For further consideration of Beardsley's aesthetic influence of Faulkner's aesthetics, see Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974) 93.

<sup>96</sup> Crowell 599.



Otherwise, they have “the same parties,” “the identical music from identical instruments,” “the smoking pine knots and calico and water sweetened with molasses” (78). This is a rural regional culture, which, in terms of music, sport, and pleasure, is not bifurcated along racial lines.<sup>97</sup> Racial distinction is, then, measured in terms of labor, access to capital, and the goods to which they assign value. The plantation structure and landscape work here to distinguish Henry from his slaves, to designate who labors and remains at leisure. What Bon offers, however, is additional cultural capital, which is signified by his associations with European colonial cultures and the currency of culture “creolization” which “puritan,” “Anglo-Saxon” Henry sorely lacks. Bon, “elegant and indolent esoteric hothouse bloom” lounges around in “almost feminine garments of his sybaritic privacy” (76).<sup>98</sup> It is as if Bon has walked out of the pages of Moreau de Saint-Mery's eighteenth-century depictions of Haiti.<sup>99</sup> The 1904 Roosevelt Corollary initiated an era of U.S. imperialism in Latin America and the Caribbean, which self-consciously took up the mantle of European colonial power. The U.S. occupation of Haiti circumscribes the overdetermined relationship between Henry and Bon, who in the novel perform the allegorical desires of the U.S. to incorporate and “ingest” a French colonial history that ultimately defies the logic of the twentieth-century neplantation order.

Quentin, as the narrator/ventriloquist in these passages, is positioned as a character

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97 Saidiya Hartman's discussion of “pleasure” for slaves would certainly contest this depiction. See *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* for a discussion of how scenes of pleasure were deeply implicated in the maintenance of slavery's power structure (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997).

98 We might also look at Bon in relation to the queer dandy figure of Harlem Renaissance literature. For more on “black dandies” in this era, see Elisa F. Glicks' “Harlem's Queer Dandy: African-American Modernism and the Artifice of Blackness.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 49. 3, Fall 2003, 414-442.

99 See Moreau's project of racial categorization and examination of “Creole” lifestyle, “A topographical, political description of St. Domingo: its climate, population, character, manners of the inhabitants, and government” (Boston: J. Bumstead, 1808).

who envies Bon's liminality, his distance from a haunted homeland, and the attendant absence of an oppressive paternal model, the codes of white Southern masculinity which he is continually being called to uphold and carry on. His companion narrator, Shreve, as Canadian, is somewhat removed from those norms and from the histories of slavery and defeat that enshroud Quentin. Faulkner represents Shreve's self-righteousness as a product of his home being more north than "the North." This meditation on Bon's relationship to an origin prefigures the final scenes of the novel in which Shreve muses: "Why do you hate the South?," and Quentin, in a fit of classic denial, screams, "I dont hate it! I dont hate it!" (303). Quentin is always denied the refuge of an unambivalent relationship to place/home/origin. He views Bon as someone who could disidentify with Haiti and that, for Quentin, would represent a kind of refuge.

Bon's relationship to Haiti contrasts with Quentin's relationship to the South in terms of "knowing" a sense of home and its relationship to his own life, but Bon's deep ambivalence, and his ultimate disassociation with his "origins," parallel Quentin's. Lacking the sense of place instilled in Quentin throughout his life, Bon creates:

his own vague notion of that Porto Rico or Haiti or wherever it was he understood vaguely that he had come from like orthodox children do of heaven or the cabbage patch or wherever it was they came from, except that his was different in that you were not supposed (your mother didn't intend to, anyway) to ever go back there (and maybe when you got as old as she was you would be horrified too every time you found hidden in your thoughts anything that just smelled or tasted like it might be a wish to go back there). . . (239)

At this point, in the novel, Bon's origins (as articulated through Quentin) are potentially in "Porto Rico" or Haiti, both sites of U.S. imperialism. As Amy Kaplan has argued, Puerto Rico set an important precedent for imperial policy and the delimiting of citizenship. The

Supreme Court's decision to designate Puerto Rico as controlled by but not incorporated into the U.S. “represented a double vision of U.S. imperialism as both expansive and contracting, on the hand, constitutionally capable of boundless expansion, on the other, narrowly protective of its own borders.”<sup>100</sup> Though Bon here is clearly not like “orthodox children,” he does share with them a sense of the imagined, innocuous origin and destination (heaven or the cabbage patch), but like the constitutional status of the “unorthodox” occupied territory, it remains purposefully vague and abject. The longing for home is triggered by smells and tastes, and the repressed desires hiding in the unconscious must be rendered abject. Unlike Quentin who can only ever return to the South, Bon can only disassociate, and any trace of desire to return must be converted into revilement and disgust with the “horrrifying” place of origin.<sup>101</sup> The imperialist's desire for the exotic Haitian “other,” which played itself out in Sutpen's marriage to Bon's mother, seems to inevitably be transformed into the baseness and rejection Sutpen ultimately shows them. His own desire to gain wealth, a wife, and laboring slaves from his conquest of Haiti—to become the ur-capitalist—has resulted in an excess (a son whose race, gender, and sexuality are always in flux) that is beyond his control.

Furthermore, Bon now is recast as the child of an immigrant mother who has instilled in him the belief that the “home country” is profoundly inferior to their new home in the U.S. In deploying a trope of traditional U.S. immigrant narratives, Faulkner conjures up the ideologies that buttress assimilation, as Bon (through Quentin's narration) speculates

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100 *Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005) 12.

101 This passage is laden with Quentin's own repressions of the ongoing memory of the South that has followed him to Harvard. He does return to the South, both in practice and in memory, and his ceaseless return becomes to the cycle of his own self-destruction. Ultimately, this results in his suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*.

about the Caribbean home as that “which you were not supposed to know when or why you had left but only that you had escaped, that whatever power had created the place for you to hate it had likewise got you away from the place so you could hate it good and never forgive it in quiet and monotony (though not exactly in what you would call peace). . .” (239). This passage articulates Haiti as a place that “whatever power” created as a source of hatred and desire. Bon lives the paradox of “hating it good.” Though he does not name “empire,” he interrogates the tensions that fuel imperialist exoticism and paternalism as well as the identifications and disidentifications lived by the subaltern immigrant.<sup>102</sup> “The place” of origin here, like the symbolic nationalist “fatherland,” is at times indistinguishable from his father/origin, whom he must hate too. Sutpen, the imperial father, who refuses to recognize him, is a power who both directs hatred and who incites hatred.

But the lingering central question of the novel still remains difficult to answer: why did Charles Bon have to die? More specifically, why did Henry Sutpen have to kill him? As John Howard reminds us: “historically the notion of brotherhood often stood in for, or alongside, queer desire.”<sup>103</sup> However, even when coded as “brotherhood,” representations of queer desire often end in the deaths of characters who act upon those desires. Faulkner's novel, while it complicates this conventionally tragic narrative, also employs its central conventions. Henry and Bon find themselves in an emotional and physical duel upon their return to Sutpen's Hundred at the close of the Civil War.<sup>104</sup> Wartime is often represented as

<sup>102</sup> Faulkner returns to this tension obsessively in these passages. Later Bon (via Quentin/Shreve's narration) says he thinks immigrant children experience “a kind of busted water pipe of incomprehensible fury and fierce yearning and vindictiveness and jealous rage was a part of childhood which all mothers of children received in turn from their mothers and from their mothers in turn from that Porto Rico or Haiti. . .” (239).

<sup>103</sup> *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 190.

<sup>104</sup> The Civil War did not resolve the conflict for them, as perhaps the fatalist Bon imagined that it might.

a time of crisis in which race, gender, sexuality, and class are thrown into chaos.<sup>105</sup> The constructed nature of gender and sexual norms reveals itself in relief (one has only to think of the famous female Civil War soldiers who passed as men in order to fight). Henry hoped that the end of the war would resolve the crisis of Bon and his own desires to incorporate Bon into his family. But the war has spared Bon, Judith, and Henry, the momentum of “coupling” remains, and resolution (or definitive preclusion) remains elusive. If we think of “the war” as the unresolved imperial war with Haiti, then this conflict between Bon and Henry takes on larger significance. War has only created further scenes of intimacy between Henry and Bon. In the novel, moments saturated with “sameness” represent a break, a kind of calm and functional interregnum in an atmosphere otherwise afflicted with an obsessive ordering based on difference. The homo-seductions and stasis occur in the war years—between Henry and Bon, and among Judith, Clytie, and Rosa.<sup>106</sup> In Stephanie Merrim's analysis, “Absalom's epicene characters live in their difference (black/white, master/slave, masculine/feminine, North/South) but are pregnant with the potential for a desired indifferenciation. . . .”<sup>107</sup> Desire and intimacy deconstruct the discursive constraints of difference. In those moments, “let flesh touch with flesh, and watch the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color too” (112). Henry, knowing that the intimacy and deferral

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We might also think about Bon's war service in relation to the proliferation of “conscription” and militaristic discourses surrounding the twentieth century U.S. occupation of Haiti. See Renda.

105 Without the presence of men, women take on “masculine” roles by force and by choice. For more on this see Elizabeth Young, *Disarming the Nation: Women's Writing and the American Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

106 Stephanie Merrim notes: “The 'triumvirate' or trinity of Clytie, Judith, and Rosa achieve that utopian state during the war--'with no distinction among the three of us of age or color; 'It was as though we were one being, interchangeable and indiscriminate'--only to have it break down, as ever due to Sutpen's intervention.” “Southern Economies of Excess: Narrative Expenditure in William Faulkner and Carlos Fuentes,” *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies*, eds., Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 125.

107 Ibid.

created by war will inevitably end, knows that his complex desires will not end with the war, but only with the death of either him or Bon.

The potential marriage between Bon and Judith now presumably signifies miscegenation and incest to Henry, but also a repudiation of the beyond-brotherly love between the two men. “*Think of her. Not of me: of her,*” Henry urges Bon.<sup>108</sup> Bon replies: “*I have. For four years. Of you and her. Now I am thinking of myself*” (285).<sup>109</sup> If heteronormativity relies on the assertion of gender difference, this scene reveals a certain defiance of that. Henry seems to require Bon to separate his concern for him (Henry) from his concern for Judith, but Bon sees them as intrinsically linked. Henry reasserts their fraternity and consequently their “similarity of gender:” “*You are my brother,*” but Bon responds: “*No I’m not. I’m the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister Unless you stop me, Henry*” (286). In Shreve and Quentin’s telling, as Henry affirms his possession of Bon, Bon disavows their bond and instead acknowledges his status as twin threat to Henry: he will be guilty of miscegenation and he will be intimate with her who is ultimately *not-Henry*.<sup>110</sup> Up until this point, Henry has sacrificed all to keep Bon close and has cultivated their homo-familial intimacy of brother/lover. In this climactic scene however, the “shibboleth,” or the language that arbitrarily distinguishes one group from another, is the

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108 I would argue that the implicit plea is a repeat of Henry’s earlier plea to Bon: “*I did that for love of you; do this for love of me*” (92).

109 When Quentin finds dying Henry at Sutpen’s Hundred in 1909, the “four years” refrain is repeated (298). Henry has been in hiding there for the duration of four years, like the duration of the Civil War, the presumed duration of Quentin and Shreve’s time at Harvard, waiting for the final resolution of death.

110 A few articles have articulately addressed the twin-coupling of Quentin-Shreve and Henry-Bon and the compounding of queer desires as the narrators build dorm room ambiguity and intimacy in their recreation of the Henry-Bon love-lust-death quandary. Then the narrative returns to Quentin and Shreve, the repeated interrupting scene “They stared at one another—glared rather. . . There was something curious and quiet and profoundly intent, not at all as two young men might look at each other but almost as a youth and a very young girl might out of virginity itself. . .” (240) See Norman Jones and Joseph Boone for more on the erotics of these pairings.

racial epithet that symbolically brings Bon's passing to an end and consequently his love life with Henry. In these final moments, Bon forces Henry to acknowledge the conditions under which their intimacy has existed. On one level, the homosocial space of the military has afforded a "cover" for their relationship that they no longer have, but that would not have necessitated such a dramatic "ending" for Bon. In this scene Bon threatens the conditions for their intimacy in ways that simply returning to "civilian" life never would have: Henry's adoration of Bon is predicated upon Bon being white; their homoerotic relationship is dependent upon Bon's loyalty to Henry, which would be shattered if he pursued a marriage with Judith; and furthermore, Henry's privilege as the plantation heir depends upon Bon's repudiation of his rights as Sutpen's first-born son. When Henry kills Bon, he prevents Bon's inclusion into the Sutpen line as brother/husband, and what follows is the dissolution of the dynasty Sutpen built from his imperialist ventures in Haiti.

Faulkner rewrites the U.S. Civil War as a war between brothers in love, who are fighting for the same cause, ultimately for the maintenance of plantation slave society. What by the 1930s had become a familiar Civil War narrative of what Benedict Anderson calls "reassuring fratricide" between North and South was rewritten as a struggle between the plantation South and the plantation Caribbean.<sup>111</sup> The Northern "brother" is conspicuously written out of Faulkner's tale.<sup>112</sup> Mr. Compson describes the war as "mere anti-climax: an attenuation and prolongation of a conclusion already ripe to happen, by the War, by a stupid and bloody aberration in the high (and impossible) destiny of the United States. . ." (94).<sup>113</sup> After four years of the struggle, the fledgling nation of the Confederacy

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111 *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991) 201.

112 Though certainly anti-"Yankee" sentiment is voiced by *Absalom's* narrators, Miss Rosa in particular.

113 Here Mr. Compson implies that the Civil War was unnecessary and in speculating on its causes suggests maybe it was "instigated by the family fatality which possessed, along with all circumstance, that

has been shattered, as a matter of course, according to Mr. Compson. What Faulkner depicts throughout the novel is a region that continue to define itself in terms of an unreliable set of national boundaries (first within its secessionist own Mason-Dixon lines and later within the larger boundaries of the U.S.) that continue to rely on misrepresentations and false constructs of homogeneity. As *Absalom* and other texts such as Bontemps's *Drums at Dusk* indicate, the plantation slave economy depended upon porous national and colonial borders. The Haitian planter and the Haitian slave (as laborer and as leader) had not only affected the South's plantation development by providing models of capital accumulation and revolution, they had themselves been integrated (if contentiously) into the political economy and culture of the U.S. South. The Sutpens and French Creole planters of Bontemps's fiction who escape to New Orleans were mutually dependent within the economy of plantation slavery. What Faulkner's novel unravels is the shibboleth of the coherent nation, the "high" and "impossible" destiny of the nation, be it the failed nation of the U.S. South or the imperial nation of the U.S. in the twentieth century. The two brothers of Faulkner's novel are left standing at the gates of the plantation, each armed with the conviction of his right to inheritance.

But what if we reread Henry's murder of Bon, not in terms of the potential racialized sexual threat Bon poses to Judith, but in terms of Henry's racialized sexual violence against Bon? As I have already suggested, Henry's murder of Bon seems also to be motivated by Henry's own desire to have sole ownership over intimacy with Bon. If we read their relationship through the lens of empire, the white soldier stands to control the sexualized Haitian imperial subject at gunpoint. Sexual violence was, after all, a key curious lack of economy between cause and effect which is always characteristic of fate when reduced to using human beings for tools, material" (94).



component of the U.S. Marines project of imperial domination and its prevalence was cited as evidence in journalistic and congressional investigations during the occupation era. In his NAACP writing, James Weldon Johnson testifies: “I learned from the lips of American marines, themselves, of a number of cases of rape on Haitian women by marines. But, perhaps, the worst phase of American brutality in Haiti is, after all, not in the individual cases of cruelty, but in the American attitude.”<sup>114</sup> That the Marines seem to normalize the occurrence of sexual violence against Haitian women is symptomatic of the Marines' larger imperialist ideology. Johnson importantly implies here that “the American attitude” and the occurrence of rape are inseparable. In other words, the imperial relationship is inherently characterized by sexual violence.<sup>115</sup> Johnson's implicit feminization of Haiti as a *virtuous* woman must be read as a refutation of the gendered discourse that surrounded the U.S. Occupation.<sup>116</sup> His anti-imperial critique was grounded in the assumption that racialized and gendered sexual violence was part and parcel of the intolerable “southernization” of Haiti. We might read Henry's murder of Bon, then, as a representation of the sexualized violence between men in imperial conflict, a phenomenon that is rarely directly addressed.<sup>117</sup>

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114 <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5018>

115 Of course, one might also argue that Johnson here is suggesting that American racism is a bigger injustice than rape; however, I think his obsessive return to the chastity and moral quality of Haitian women suggests that gendered sexual violence is always a part of white supremacist domination. In response to claims that Haitians are “unfit to rule” themselves, Johnson refutes a number of stereotypes and asserts that Haitians are clean, hardworking, and highly “moral.” Against the assumption of Haitian women's sexual “degradation,” he observes: “Port-au-Prince is a city of more than 100,000, but there is no sign of the prostitution that is so flagrant in many Latin-American cities. I was there for six weeks and in all that time, not a single case of a man being accosted by a woman on the street came to my attention. I heard even from the lips of American Marines tributes to the chastity of the Haitian women.” At the expense of Latin Americans, Johnson depicts Haiti as untainted by the trade of sex work, and throughout insists on the purity of Haitian women who do not market themselves as sexually available.

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5018>

116 See Renda for further.

117 While I am not suggesting that Faulkner's intention is to represent a critique of homosexual rape in wartime, I do think that Shreve's reconstruction of Bon as “that black son-of-a-bitch” potential rapist has

Finally, I'd like to suggest that Bon has to die in order to show Henry's dissolution, and conversely, to reveal that Henry's power was predicated on Bon's "possessed" existence. After Bon's death, Henry disappears, forsaking his "birthright" as plantation heir, only to reappear as a dying man discovered by Quentin at Sutpen's Hundred in 1909. If Bon were simply meant to be read as a threat to Sutpen's "design," to Henry's plantation inheritance or to his sister's (white) virginity, then why wouldn't Henry take up Sutpen's mantle as plantation patriarch upon Bon's death? If we consider Bon as the desired imperial subject and Henry as the next generation planter, then Henry's failure to maintain the plantation begins to make more sense. As I've suggested earlier, Bon might be read as a member of Occupation-era Haiti's class of mulatto elites, most of whom were educated in France or other parts of Europe, who were appointed to positions of limited power under the U.S. imperial administration. U.S. leaders notoriously dismissed Haiti's stratified constructs of race in favor of a black-white binary, which they employed in order to subjugate the mulatto elite.<sup>118</sup> The U.S. marines, like Henry, would not have had the cosmopolitan education and wealth afforded to some of Haiti's elite, and so the imposition of a racial binary becomes a way to efface the challenge that their cultural and material capital would pose to the fiction of imperial superiority. What that dynamic suggests, then, is that the white Southern marines (and the nation they represented) desires the colonial capital that the mulatto has access to *and* desires the mulatto him/herself as evidence of neoimperial capital. Likewise, Henry wants to be like Bon and he wants to have Bon.

Following Richard Godden's logic that we should not necessarily focus on causation or

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powerfully (and perhaps strategically) served to distract from the significance of Henry and Bon's much-discussed use of sexualized power as a means to "vanquish" one another time and time again.

118 See Plummer for more on the U.S. military leaders' racism toward Haitians and the institution of Jim Crow in Haiti.

motive in terms of Faulkner's plot scheme, but instead should consider the effects rendered, I argue that we should focus on Bon's death in relation to Henry's subsequent relinquishing of planter power.<sup>119</sup> In the context of the U.S. occupation, the power of the mulatto imperial subject was kept in check by the racialized segregation policies, the threat and practice of murder and rape, and the pervasive discourses of racist “attitude” that James Weldon Johnson references. This is the binary, maintained by sexualized racial violence—a violence wrapped up in desires of dis-identification and submission-- that Bon names just before Henry shoots him. When Bon presents himself as unwilling to be possessed by Henry, he is not allowed to live. While this murder scene is suffused with dangerous intimacy and “love,” the potential for love, of any sort, between Henry and Bon is always in the shadow of race and empire. This, more than “the insurmountable barrier” of gender, overdetermines the death of Bon, the downfall of Henry, and the proliferating excesses of the neoplantation.

### **Neoplantation Heirs: The Zombie as the Scion**

“. . .the zombies shuffled through the marketplace, recognizing neither father nor wife nor mother.”

--William Seabrook, *The Magic Island* (1929)

As heteropatriarchy of the plantation of Faulkner's novel is left in conflagration at the end of the novel, so too did the U.S.'s neoplantation empire fail to establish permanence in Haiti. What we are left with at the end of Faulkner's novel is the figure of the zombie, one of the most lasting queer representations of Haitian culture to emerge from the era of

119 In Godden's argument, Faulkner provides anachronistic slave revolution in order to show how the planter relied on violent suppression in order to create mastery. Mastery (and its preemptive counter-revolution), then, depended upon the threat of revolution. Like the master's white son and the black slave son, Bon and Henry's subject positions are entirely defined in relation to one another.

occupation. William Seabrook's 1929 *The Magic Island* is credited with introducing the zombie to U.S. readers in a perhaps inadvertent critique of U.S. neoplatation industrial practices. He recounts first hearing of the "dead men working in the canefields" of "Hasco." He explains that Hasco is "perhaps the last name anybody would think of connecting with either sorcery or superstition."<sup>120</sup> Zombie-making Hasco is decoded as a euphemism/acronym:

The word is American-commercial-synthetic, like Nabisco, Delco, Socony. It stands for the Haitian-American Sugar Company—an immense factory plant, dominated by a huge chimney, with clanging machinery, steam whistles, freight cars. It is like a chunk of Hoboken... Hasco makes rum when the sugar market is off, pays low wages, a shilling or so a day, and gives steady work. It is modern big business, and it sounds it, looks it, smells it.<sup>121</sup>

Empire has rendered Haiti in its likeness, into an industrialized "chunk of Hoboken" that runs sugarcane plantations and rum factories at the expense of underpaid workers who are considered to be the walking dead. The zombie was quickly taken up by Hollywood and on the New York stage as a ghoulish symbol of Haitian difference. Films like Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) and *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936) and plays such as Kenneth Webb's *Zombie* (1932) represented white Americans, and white women, in particular, as vulnerable tourists to the West Indies. In particular in *White Zombie*, a white woman is forced into zombiedom and sexual slavery by a European planter and then a factory-owner who also use black zombies as unfree, unfeeling labor. The dark European villain, played by Bela Lugosi, deploys the secrets of zombification passed down from African slaves to latter-day "voodoo" practitioners. This drama staged the ultimate fears about Haitian anti-imperial resistance, the dangers of Americans "going native," the corruption of European

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<sup>120</sup> *The Magic Island*, 95.

<sup>121</sup> Seabrook 96.

colonialism, the need to protect and police white women's sexuality, and the anxiety that modern (white) factory laborers might have something in common with the neplantation zombie.

In an uncanny coincidence, *Absalom* ends with the figure of Charles Bon's grandson, Jim Bond, who is the zombie worker of the remains of Sutpen's Hundred, "slack-mouthed," with his "eyes wide and unseeing like a sleepwalker's."<sup>122</sup> Though he is the miscegenated project of doomed imperial design, as the living dead, he defies racialization: "the face which had always been tallow-hued now possessing some still profounder, some almost unbearable, quality of bloodlessness" (296). In this account, bloodlessness is not a liberation from race discourses, but an enduring condition of remaining on the plantation. The novel, then, ends with Bon's legacy, not Sutpen's, in the form of the dire prediction of Jim Bond's profound, unbearable social death. *Absalom's* narrator Mr. Compson earlier characterizes Charles Bon as a zombie figure, a "mental and spiritual orphan whose fate it apparently was to exist in some limbo halfway between where his corporeality was and his mentality and moral equipment desired to be" (98). In the context of 1930s Haitian representations, Faulkner's construction of Bon and his descendant can be read as a kind of zombification.

Like Seabrook's sensationalized zombies, Bon walks throughout the novel recognizing neither father nor wife nor mother. Most importantly perhaps, he is denied recognition by his father in Sutpen's desire to formulate a white plantation legacy within the rigid racial parameters of the U.S. South. In that progression, Seabrook (and Faulkner's narrators) betrays the relationships given credence by a paternalist and patriarchal order.

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<sup>122</sup> There is certainly more work to be done here on the convergence of disability and queer race discourses in the character of Jim Bond.

Bon's relationship to his father in Faulkner's novel is similarly given primacy. Bon never officially “recognizes” his father in the narrator's constructions of him and neither does Sutpen substantively confirm his parentage, as it might confer legitimacy and therefore rights to a plantation inheritance. Consequently, recognizing Bon as his son would invalidate Sutpen's claim to a white familial structure. Secondly, Bon's refusal to recognize a “wife” (either his quadroon mistress in New Orleans or the potential wife of Judith) renders him beyond the pale of intelligibility and citizenship. Because he is not a husband, he has no place within a patriarchal order either. And, finally, he has disidentified with his mother, last in the patriarchal order, because she (according to Shreve and Quentin) signifies material and maternal ties to Haiti and to a suspect racial categorization. Bon, then, is a nonperson, a liminal figure, in the matrix of empire. His death is predetermined as a living one, as he, like Haiti, is unrecognizable within the spheres of normativity and the boundaries of citizenship dictated by empire. As a zombie, doomed to a permanent inbetweenness, Bon, and his legacy symbolize the nonnormative and the monstrous, that which the plantation structure produces but cannot entirely contain. For Faulkner, this was the end result of a suicidal project.

For writers like Arna Bontemps, the zombie never makes an appearance.

Instead, Bontemps and others dwell on the paths worn by the ghosts of slavery.

*Drums At Dusk* begins:

Only ghosts walked on that pathway now. Ghosts-- and people so old they were about to become ghosts. . . Mme Jacques Juvet, once indentured as a house servant at this same Breda, was also attached to the path. . . Her teeth had become fangs. . . She walked with a cane that resembled a corkscrew, and the slaves had already begun to shun her as a witch. Mars Plasair liked the path not because he was old but because he was coughing his lungs out and was perhaps as near his ghosthood as the others who walked there.

Moreover he was a slave and had been badly used.<sup>123</sup>

Bontemps implies that the path of slavery has turned old white planters, servant women, and slaves into ghosts. But it is the badly used body of the slave that he imbues with potential. Slavery has made monsters and witches but the badly used body of the slave ultimately becomes a revolutionary subject. By the novel's end, the slaves are alive with the fervor of a violent liberation.

For Zora Neale Hurston, the zombie serves as a means to understand twentieth-century fears of enslavement. From her standpoint as a cultural outsider, the “whole truth” about zombies cannot be known. She compares the cultural view of death in the U.S. with that in Haiti as a binary versus a more stratified, or ambiguous, view of states of being: “Here in the shadow of the Empire State Building, death and the graveyard are final. It is such a positive end that we use it as a measure of nothingness and eternity. We have the quick and the dead. But in Haiti there is the quick, the dead, and then there are Zombies.”<sup>124</sup> In the shadow of “Empire” and its corporate structures in the U.S., death becomes both meaningless and forever final. Haiti, on the other hand, constructs a culture of death that is indeterminate. The zombie state is feared by Haitian peasants and the upper class alike. For the upper class, it represents the possibility of being reduced to the labor of the peasant, to a state of disempowered servitude:

It is not good for a person who has lived all his life surrounded by a degree of fastidious culture, loved to his last breath by family and friends, to contemplate the probability of his resurrected body being dragged from the vault. . . and set to toiling ceaselessly in the banana fields, working like a beast, unclothed like a beast. . . From an educated, intelligent being to an unthinking, unknowing beast.<sup>125</sup>

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123 Bontemps 1.

124 *Tell My Horse*, 456.

125 *Tell My Horse*, 456-7.

In the zombie state, a person's previous access to power through family and friends is useless: "They may motor past the plantation where the Zombie who was once dear to them is held captive often and again and its soulless eyes may have fallen upon them without thought or recognition." There is no recourse to the crime of zombification. The zombie is under the control of his/her master and is, more often than not, described as a slave to the plantation and its power. Hurston describes a culture perpetually aware of the threat of enslavement.<sup>126</sup> Hurston visited Haiti over a decade after the peasant-led armed resistance to U.S. occupation. The resistance failed, but the fear of the zombie worker remained.

Faulkner's novel ends with Jim Bond, the zombie-like "scion" grandfathered by the queer racialized imperial subject of Charles Bon, as ambiguously triumphant. Alongside Clytie, Sutpen's daughter by a slave mother, he howls ceaselessly as Sutpen's plantation home burns. In this fire, Henry, the long-lost white inheritor of the plantation, dies as well. But as "the open door seemed to explode like powder among the flames as the whole lower hall vanished" the "doomed house" can no longer contain Jim Bond or the "direction of the howling."<sup>127</sup> His fate remains "whereabouts unknown." By Shreve's calculation, however, "in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. . .and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings."<sup>128</sup>

Shreve's prediction is typically read as the articulation of anti-miscegenationist fears that

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126 For more on the significance of the zombie in Hurston's text, see Barbara Ladd, "Zora Neale Hurston's 'I's in Tell My Horse" in *Resisting History: Gender, Modernity, and Authorship in William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, and Eudora Welty* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2007) and John Carlos Rowe, "Opening the Gate to the Other America: The Afro-Caribbean Politics of Hurston's *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*" *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 253-292.

127 300-1.

128 302.



whiteness will be rendered meaningless. His vision also suggests, however, that geographies of imperial conquest will be remapped by “the loins of African kings.” The incendiary plantation house and its attendant fears must not only be read in terms of the white South's cathectic “lost cause” and its ongoing attempts to recreate a neplantation order through segregation, sharecropping, and plantation prisons. For this vision of plantation doom and uncontained racial threat must be also considered in relation to U.S. attempts to subjugate Haitians within an imperial neplantation system and a flawed shibboleth of caste and color. *Absalom, Absalom!* is a cautionary tale of how imperial desire and plantation designs together produce queered subjects who defy the terms of their abjection. Sutpen's Mississippi plantation is inevitably transposed onto its twentieth-century scions. As the region must inevitably confront the incoherence of its normativizing fictions, so must the imperial nation.

### **Conclusion**

Many fascinating readings of Faulkner's novel have explored the causes for Bon's exclusion from the Southern plantocratic dynasty. I have aimed to supplement those readings and to further recontextualize Bon as a transgressive figure through whom competing and complementary discourses are filtered. In this novel, the Sutpen family, which I have suggested that we must consider in light of U.S. empire-building, acts as a symbolic institution within which gender and racial difference structure power. As Butler asserts: “The symbolic domain, the domain of socially instituted norms, is composed of racializing norms, and ...they exist not merely alongside gender norms, but are articulated through one another. Hence it is no longer possible to make sexual difference prior to racial

difference or, for that matter, to make them into fully separable axes of social regulation and power.”<sup>129</sup> Faulkner uses Charles Bon’s character to interrogate those intersecting axes of social regulation and power. As Bon alternately signifies French colonialism/revolution, New Orleans creole, black Haitian, feminized man, seducer of men/women/sister/brother, he crosses the various boundaries imagined by the community of the white South of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In a way, then, his mobility across borders is stopped to prevent his double inclusion into a southern family that denied his right to recognition and privilege. As in Faulkner's novel, the ongoing relationship between the U.S. and Haiti in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and between the U.S. South and this extended south, is undergirded and contested through constant re-imaginings and reformulations of Haiti as child, as threat, and as seducer.

Bon's status as “mysterious stranger” must ultimately be positioned in relation to both nineteenth-century norms as well as twentieth-century discourses of the Haitian imperial subject, as representations of race increasingly hinged upon notions of gender and sexuality. In the novel, Bon's non-normative performance of gender is, then, compounded by a queer sexual performance, rendering his radical alterity inassimilable into the regional or national family. Bon seduces the Southern Sutpen family, but then is construed as a national outsider and ultimately a racial outsider. As the layered narrations progress from Bon's non-normative gender to his sexuality to his national origins and finally to his racial status, all of these classifications are ultimately collapsed into Shreve's pronouncement of Bon's “blackness.” However, the presumed finality of this racial alterity by no means erases the previous constructions of Bon as outside of the national or the heteronormative, and so

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129 Butler 182.

these various transgressions must be re-read as interrelated and intersecting, rather than as explanations consistently offered and then abandoned in favor of the “real” reason for Bon's exclusion.<sup>130</sup> The various narrators' desire to know and to locate Bon continually necessitates a re-telling. Bon's dangerous position as the intimate outsider ultimately works to queer an emergent twentieth-century U.S. imperial discourse that was anything but stable.

As many scholars have noted, Faulkner and other writers have examined white patriarchy's endogamous ideal through the theme of incest. My analysis has complicated this by examining how the white Southern family's incestuous turn inward is simultaneous with its desire (and demand) for the outsider. A history of *queer empire* has already worked to, in Kaplan's words, “shatter the coherence of {in this case, regional} identity, as the boundaries that distinguish it from the outside world promise to collapse.” The Southern families of “New South” literatures examine the nation's production of new labor markets and the subsequent production of nonnormative subjects in its capitalist and imperial development. According to Deborah Smith: “America has long projected its “Queer Other” to the South. And in the national cultural imaginary, definitions of the southern are regularly utilized to maintain myths of American innocence.”<sup>131</sup> In my queering of Bon and the symbolic value of his ties to Haiti, I stress the value of returning to and mining the texts of Faulkner and other members of the Southern canon for their representations of the multiplicity and intersectionality of “southernness,” for thinking of ways in which the “almost” quality which so characterizes Charles Bon might continue to invigorate debates

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130 Rather than see the novel as characterized only by deferral, I see that pattern of deferral as ultimately constructing a queer composite.

131 Deborah Cohn and Jon Smith, Eds., *Look Away! The South in New World Studies* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004) 378.

about Southern cultures and canons. Indeed, the region, far from functioning solely as the “queer” of the U.S., has actually served as a model for nation-formation and capitalist dependencies on varying degrees of “free” and “unfree” labor. Like the plantation-empire of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the U.S. plantation projects depended on historical models of slave economies and were essential to the development of “modern big business.” Though large-scale plantation investment failed largely because of Caco labor resistance, U.S. corporations established exploitative relationships with Haitian leaders and workers.

In an 1893 lecture given by Frederick Douglass on the subject of Haiti, he addresses the U.S. failed attempt to secure a naval base there, saying: “Haiti has no repugnance to losing control over a single inch of her territory. No statesman in Haiti would dare to disregard this sentiment. It could not be done by any government without costing the country revolution and bloodshed.” He thereby spoke to Haiti's refusal to consider any form of imperial control and for explanation provided an account of its revolutionary origins. In his lecture, Douglass addressed the role of anti-colonial struggle in the ongoing tensions between Haiti and aggressors such as the U.S.<sup>132</sup> However, there were also longstanding conflicts within the nation which suggests that the origins of independence were also specifically dependent upon a resistance to the plantation structure. In his

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132 Douglass also raised questions about Haiti's ongoing revolutionary culture by arguing that the U.S. and others profitted from keeping Haiti in a perpetual state of turmoil: “I wish I could say that these are the only conspirators against the peace of Haiti, but I cannot. . . .It so happens that we have men in this country who, to accomplish their personal and selfish ends, will fan the flame of passion between the factions in Haiti and will otherwise assist in setting revolutions afoot. To their shame be it spoken, men in high American quarters have boasted to me of their ability to start a revolution in Haiti at pleasure. They have only to raise sufficient money, they say, with which to arm and otherwise equip the malcontents, of either faction, to effect their object. . . .It gives them a market for their worthless wares. Others of a speculative turn of mind and who have money to lend at high rates of interest are glad to conspire with revolutionary chiefs of either faction, to enable them to start a bloody insurrection. To them, the welfare of Haiti is nothing; the shedding of human blood is nothing; the success of free institutions is nothing, and the ruin of neighboring country is nothing.” <http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/history/1844-1915/douglass.htm>

account of Haitian history and the importance of land and labor, Trouillot states: “. . .the acquisition of family land and the laborers' right to the product of the labor on such land were the terms under which freedom was first formulated in the history of the nation.”<sup>133</sup> Dating from the post-independence attempts of Dessalines to reconstitute Haiti's plantation economy, laborers had resisted what Trouillot calls “militarized agriculture” as a form of enslavement. This struggle between working farmers and post-independence leaders, depicted in narratives such as Langston Hughes' *Troubled Island*, was not unlike the fight later waged between the U.S. Marines and the peasants forced into unfree gang labor in the service of another imperial state. The plantation system and its technologies of unfree labor had always been met with violent resistance. In the years leading up to and then following the U.S. Occupation, the colonial plantations burned in the overthrow of French slavery had been reconstituted in the form of U.S.-run plantations and factories.<sup>134</sup> Unfree Haitian labor was being used to build roads and railroads that would construct modern neoplantations. Empire-building entailed the zombification of a Haitian labor force that fueled the development of U.S. capital.

While my study has been limited to U.S. cultural representations of Haiti and Haitian resistance to imperial control, a more complex consideration of the occupation era necessarily entails a dialogue with cultural studies from Haitian perspectives. Scholars like Michel Trouillot, Joan Dayan, Anna Brickhouse, and Elizabeth McAlister have all done important work on the Haitian response to U.S. empire and the effects of empire on Haitian politics and culture.<sup>135</sup> While a thorough consideration of this scholarship and Haitian-

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133 *Haiti: State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York : Monthly Review Press, 1990) 39-40

134 Trouillot 100-101.

135 See for example: Elizabeth McAlister, *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora*

produced cultural texts is beyond the scope of this project, I have suggested ways in which the knowledge that empire produces has been challenged by U.S. cultural workers. Imperial circuits of power made it possible for U.S. writers and scholars to travel to and develop affinities with a Haitian tradition of resistance. Many of those cultural workers were inspired by and identified with the ongoing struggle of Haitians for liberation from plantation exploitation and imperial threat. With respect for the work being done on Haitian culture and its ongoing history of abject poverty and imperialist intervention, I hope my study of the U.S. South and the neplantation during the occupation era has contributed to a developing transnational critique of U.S. imperialism.

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(Berkeley: U C Press, 2002); Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, And The Gods* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1995); Jana Evans Braziel, "Haiti, Guantánamo, and the 'One Indispensable Nation': U.S. Imperialism, 'Apparent States,' and Postcolonial Problematics of Sovereignty," *Cultural Critique* 64 (2006) 127-160; Kate Ramsey, "Without One Ritual Note: Folklore Performance and the Haitian State, 1935-1946," *Radical History Review* 84 (2002) 7-42; Gérarde Magloire-Danton, "Anténor Firmin and Jean Price-Mars: Revolution, Memory, Humanism," *Small Axe* 9.2 (2005) 150-170; Anna Brickhouse, "L'Ouragan de Flammes" ("The Hurricane of Flames"): New Orleans and Transamerican Catastrophe, 1866/2005," *American Quarterly* 59.4, December 2007, 1097-1127.

### Chapter 3: The Carceral and the Conjugal: Neplantation Prison Resistance Literature and the Problem of Sexuality

We have spoken in the past, for example, and in the context of U.S. history, of miscegenation as a threat that is legitimated not only through a racially proscribed heteronormativity but also through the assumption that the site of reproduction--the "mixed" child--is the site of fear. Prisons teach us that this analysis is insufficient. Perhaps the more reverberating site of fear is that of the reproduction of a social world that would read along and against the boundaries of nation-states, races, genders, and sexualities--the solidarity that is produced and most surveilled in the prison. Isn't that precisely the site of the critical resistance of which we speak?

--Gina Dent, *Prison as a Border: A Conversation on Gender, Globalization, and Punishment* with Angela Davis

We local people explained to others that Parchman was the Devil's Island of the Delta. Sprouting up like a boil between Ruleville and Tutwiler, it was one of the last of the old-style 'penal plantations.' Prisoners wore stripes, just like in the movies, and overseers rode horseback through the cotton fields, wielding bullwhips and cattle prods against anyone who broke a rule or wasn't working hard enough. It was a rock-hard facility for hard-core criminals, the last place on earth any sane person would send detainees whose only crime had been caring too much about injustice.

--Endesha Ida Mae Holland, *From the Mississippi Delta*

In my previous chapter, I argued against reading William Faulkner's character, Charles Bon, as simply a "mixed child" who poses a threat to the racial order of the U.S. South. Instead, I insisted that we must read the discourses and speculation surrounding Bon as a convergence of anxieties surrounding region, race, sexuality, and empire around the time of the U.S. occupation of Haiti. In this chapter, I suggest that the Southern neplantation penitentiary represents a "social world," as Gina Dent denotes it, which "read[s] along and against the boundaries of nation-states, races, genders, and sexualities," to produce new subject formations and cultural geographies of intimacy, conflict and solidarity. In particular, I consider how discourses and practices of sexuality shaped the technologies of the Southern penal system—including chain gang labor, prison architectures, and techniques of surveillance and torture—in order to maintain and adapt the plantation structure to the needs of Southern capital and state-secured order in the 1930s and 1940s. This era saw the birth of new penal reform movements as well as more

radical resistance that implicitly and explicitly indicted the foundations of the Southern carceral industry and the national penitentiary system to which it was wed. During this era of economic depression, entrenched segregation, and international military conflicts, the penal system both expanded and adapted, proving that Southern punishment industries could be made elastic. For example, as prison populations dramatically expanded with higher rates of conviction, systems of parole (in addition to the traditional practice of clemency/pardon) were developed as a kind of strategic release valve.<sup>1</sup> While the prison cast an even wider net over criminalized communities, it also provided evidence of its “humane” practices of treating criminals as reformable individuals. However, the normalization of the prison as an institution of reform or rehabilitation was undermined by a wide range of prison-related cultural texts and documentary projects that invoked plantation slavery's dynamic of mastery and subjection. At the same time, emerging discourses of reformist penology sought to pin the prison's failures on the sexual practices and identities of prisoners themselves. This chapter puts these opposing discourses in conversation with one another to examine how prisoner subjectivity came to be defined in terms of the carceral and the conjugal, as a racialized and often queered homosocial world. In many cases, the “excesses” of the plantation were transposed onto that of the prison system. Its violent mechanisms of control, its production of unruly subjects, and its profit-motivated corruption were all ascribed to the prison by those who used these characterizations to different ends. Some wanted to advocate for more control over its

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<sup>1</sup> The Federal Parole Board was established in 1930, while states had set up parole boards at different moments to meet their specific needs. Martha Meyers argue that rates of incarceration corresponded to the prison's need for a disposable workforce. See her study of Georgia prisons: *Race, Labor, and Punishment in the New South* (Columbus: Ohio State U P, 1998) and Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (London: Verso, 1995).



prisoners, others for a more humane system of punishment, and still others had goals of radical upheaval.

When Endesha Mae Holland, a native of Greenwood, Mississippi, was imprisoned at Parchman penitentiary for her efforts to register black voters on behalf of the Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1964, a space of infamy became real. As a child, she knew “the farm” as a perverse and abstract place: “As long as I could remember, mothers and preachers had used the place as a bogeyman to threaten wayward children.” Firsthand accounts of the prison, however, were difficult to come by: “People I'd known who had been to other prisons told plain, simple stories about daily life there: work, eat, sleep, over and over again until they were released. Their accounts were as monotonous as prison life itself. But when people told stories of Parchman, they spoke in short grunts and long silences, as if they were trying to forget but could not.”<sup>2</sup> While she suggests that the prison experience at Parchman was always, if indirectly, a memory that was collectively shared by black communities of the Mississippi Delta, she indicates that language or a simple story cannot contain that cultural memory. And yet more than thirty years following her 1964 imprisonment, she tells her own story of Parchman, detailing the subtle and overt violences of her thirty-three day incarceration. As a means to articulate profound ongoing collective trauma, she lingers on specific memories—her body in pain, her refusal to “go soft,” and her confrontation with Earnestine Whitehead:

In the dingy holding tank, where we'd been segregated by sex, stripped, showered, and sprayed with lice killer, we were assigned a 'top sergeant' to tell us the rules and make sure we knew what would happen if we violated even the smallest of them. Earnestine Whitehead was a colored inmate who was rumored to have killed a white man, so she knew Parchman was her home for life. She'd decided long ago that it was better by far to be 'one of

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2 *From the Mississippi Delta: A Memoir* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997) 255-6.

them' than one of us. As a result, she was meaner than any hired guard and more trustworthy than the cons—she simply had nothing to lose.<sup>3</sup>

Holland remembers that Whitehead was responsible for probing their body cavities for weapons and contraband and that in this role she perpetrated physical and sexual violations of the female civil rights workers. But in her account Whitehead is not a violent agent, but a defeated instrument of state torture. With the view of hindsight, Holland suggests that only the temporary nature of her time in prison allowed her to maintain a resistant stance, to prevent her own total subjection and transformation into another Earnestine Whitehead. This chapter returns to an earlier moment in the region's cultural history, to a moment that informs what Holland describes as a memory of “short grunts and long silences,” to account for the construction of prison subjects who, like Earnestine Whitehead, “with nothing to lose” became wholly entrenched in the hierarchies of the prison. As in Holland's narrative of prison, many of the texts I will consider speak to the nearly impossible task of maintaining a sense of self in the face of totalizing psychic and bodily violation. In earlier male-authored texts, prison violation and the disintegration of self are manifested in the anxieties surrounding prison masculinity and sexuality. In what follows, I examine how these anxieties relate to the neoplantation structure depicted by Holland in which prisoners are made to police one another and in which “intimacy” is always within the purview of the plantation state.

By taking up films, nonfiction narratives, novels, and prisoner-produced narratives, I address intersecting formations of race and sexuality endemic to carceral regimes, while broadening the temporal and spatial terrain of what we consider “the prison.” I am

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<sup>3</sup> Holland 256.

particularly interested in how cultural representations of the Southern prison invoked the living spectre of the slave plantation as an omnipresent history that frames the production and preclusion of intimacy. Throughout this chapter, I look at texts that convey anxieties about freedom, democracy, and citizenship in relation to modes of incarceration and their direct ascendancy from (and debt to) plantation models of discipline and punishment. In his pathbreaking work on the history of prison narratives in the U.S., H. Bruce Franklin realized that he had not just stumbled upon “some peripheral cultural phenomenon but something close to the center of our historical experience as a nation-state.” Rather, “from the viewpoint of the people creating these works, America is itself a prison, and the main lines of American literature can be traced from the plantation to the penitentiary.”<sup>4</sup> As Franklin suggests, narratives of incarceration have been central to the development of a national literature, but that literature has often been excluded from the canon because articulations of prisoner subjectivity and the abject world they depict more often than not trouble the narratives of progress, modernity, and normativity upon which the nation and its ideal citizen-subject are founded. Consequently, the path from the plantation to the penitentiary has long been the target of historical erasure on the part of state and cultural institutions. My study highlights both texts that have been anthologized within surveys of prison literature and some that rest outside the traditional bounds of the literary, and so aims to both expand and deepen an understanding of a resistant tradition. In bringing a (Southern) cultural studies approach and a queer of color theoretical framework to these texts, I seek to contribute to prison studies a concentrated view of how moments of sexual crisis figure in counter-narratives. In doing so, I argue that the neoplantation prisoner is

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<sup>4</sup> *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978) xxii.

represented as a subject who marks the constitutive boundaries of the modern liberal subject in the particular cultural moment of the Jim Crow South. Modern liberal discourse and political practice defined the citizen-subject as a propertied white heterosexual male. The prison defined the boundaries of an ultimate segregation—of the criminal from society, of white prisoners from black, men from women. In constructing the neoplantation prison as an abject, sexualized space, the texts I consider inevitably negotiate segregationist structures of difference as modes of subjection.

I look at the Southern penal plantation in three different forms: that of the “mobile” carceral mode of the chain gang; the stationary, walled, urban Southern prison; and the unwalled plantation or “farm” prison. These texts differ in terms of their stated or unstated intent—to advocate for reform, prisoners' rights, the restructuring of the prison, rehabilitative practices, or to perhaps suggest a wholesale indictment of the neoplantation state—and in terms of their form—autobiography, muckracking novel, newspaper editorial, or naturalist/gothic fiction. What they have in common, however, is that each of these texts intertwines sexuality and a plantation past as structuring forces in ongoing cultures of incarceration and conditions of unfreedom. In my analysis of these critical representations, I often read “against-the-grain,” or against the dominant narrative voice or structure, in order to argue that during the 1930s and 1940s, crises surrounding race and sexuality coalesced in the politicized vision of the Southern prison and its product—the unfree laborer. Texts that told the backbreaking conditions of sunrise to sunset roadwork were filled with many sweaty bodies whose every intimate and laborious act was rendered property of the state. I look at the ways that prison voices contest that level of control, as well as the ways in which institutional authorities spoke to/about the anxieties of these new

subject formations that were produced from state-prisoner intimacy. The Southern prison was a function of a white supremacist racial and economic hierarchy that claimed to be a sanitized institution of discipline but that nonetheless produced excesses never fully transparent to the public it claimed to protect. On the national level as well, the Southern prisoner's body became a highly scrutinized subject for those who would maintain divisions of racial segregation, gender(ed) subordination, and heterosexual primacy.

As H. Bruce Franklin has argued, the prison narrative deploys and adapts tropes and structural elements of the U.S. slave narrative. Crucial to my analysis in this chapter is how scenes of racialized, sexualized violence characteristic of slave narratives are adapted to the gendered (and often queer, masculine) social world of the neoplantation prison. For example flogging scenes, which denaturalized the white overseer/master's savage power-by-lash, often worked to invert the terms of savage/civilized upon which slavery was justified, as well as to represent paternalism as a sadistic (and often incestuous) system of power in slave narratives. Similarly the prison narrative in the first half of the twentieth century reveals that Southern slavery was maintained on the neoplantation prison through the application of whips and torture devices and the toxic living conditions in which bodily and sexual violation were the stuff of quotidian routine. Therefore, spectacles of racialized and sexualized violence maintained their relevance in the neoslave narrative, but those flogging scenes took on new dimensions, new aggressors and victims, and new contexts. Male prisoners were stripped bare and beaten across the buttocks by male guards, while other convicts were made to watch or listen; female prisoners became victims of often unspecified punishment; wives of prisoners were subject to rape at the hands of their husbands' captors; and, under the watchful eye of the (white) prison guard, the flogging

scene became one in which (black) male prisoners subjected *one another* to violent interrogation, beatings, and sexual (and gendered) violence. As on the slave plantation, the twentieth-century neplantation prison displaces the violence inflicted by the master/state onto the relationship between prisoners and society and between the prisoners themselves. The prison is heralded as a means to prevent, rather than enact, violence.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I consider spectacles of shocking violence in relation to more subtle enactments of discipline within the carceral continuum. As Saidiya Hartman claims, there were no “innocent amusements” in plantation slaveholding societies; neither are those afforded by the carceral neplantation.<sup>6</sup> In my analysis, I first consider the 1904 testimony of a Georgia peon who portrays convict labor as nearly indistinguishable from dominant forms of coerced, indentured neplantation labor. His narrative suggests how a culture of social incarceration evolved from the convict leasing system to the state-run plantation prison. Next I analyze two versions of the chain gang narrative—Robert Burns's autobiographical *I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang*, which was adapted to film in 1932, and John Spivak's “muckracking” fiction, *Georgia Nigger*, also from 1932. In each, the protagonists resist the degradation of a sexualized prison world by asserting their impulse

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<sup>5</sup> “As a result, justice no longer takes public responsibility for the violence that is bound up in its practice” (9). As Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, the development of the penitentiary system was meant to distance the punisher/torturer from the criminal. In earlier eras, the visible relationship between the convicted person and the agent of sovereign power uncomfortably rendered the distinction between criminal and judge all too blurry. It was then too easy to see that the judge himself was just as much a murderer as the man he condemned to death for murder. See *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Reprint, 1995) 9.

<sup>6</sup> Hartman asserts: “Shocking displays too easily obfuscate the more mundane and socially endurable forms of terror. In the benign scenes of plantation life (which comprised much of the Southern and ironically, abolitionist literature of slavery) reciprocity and recreation obscure the quotidian routine of violence. The bucolic scenes of plantation life and the innocent amusements of the enslaved, contrary to our expectations, succeeded not in mollifying terror but in assuring and sustaining its presence.” *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 42. As Hartman looks to scenes of amusement and or the mundane to examine relations of domination within plantation slavery, I will consider how neplantation prison literature represents scenes of pleasure, intimacy, and the everyday regulation of the body.

to conform to cultural norms. I argue that Spivak's more complex depiction of race, however, initiates a more in-depth look at the neoplantation as foundational to the region's development. I then turn to the walled Atlanta penitentiary as the site of Angelo Herndon's revolutionary autobiography *Let Me Live*, published in 1937, which depicted the struggles of a black Communist to fight white supremacy and to organize racially integrated labor movements. I argue that his critique of the prison social world attests to the neoplantation's ongoing choreography of racialized and sexualized violence, while his representation relies on heteronormative ideals as the basis for his protest. I consider how these texts engage with the era's fixation on prisoners' sexuality, the efficacy of segregation based on race, gender, and gendered sexuality in prison, and attendant penological studies of homosexuality, sex work, the conjugal visit, and heterosexual "readjustment." I argue that "reform" discourses, regardless of their ideological stance or political project, often called upon contradictory discourses of pathology in order to condemn the neoplantation's "excess." Next, I consider how the (relatively) stationary model of the prison farm, Mississippi's Parchman penitentiary, at points considered a model of segregated discipline and enforced heterosexuality, was represented by its inmates when they began their newspaper, the *Inside World*, in the late 1940s. Though the prison was considered a model of prison "reform," on account of its paternalist structure, its profit-making, and its long history of sanctioned conjugal visits, I look to the prisoners' editorials to examine how they articulate the realities of confinement and perpetual surveillance. Finally, I conclude with Carson McCullers's novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, published in 1940, to argue that the injured body of a black chain gang laborer is integral to the narrative's composite depiction of a neoplantation carceral world that regulates race, gender, sexuality, and class

through legal and extralegal means.

In putting these different texts in conversation with one another, I suggest that the neoplantation prisoner functioned as a kind of lens through which to interrogate social control and state criminality. Divergent discourses of critique converged in the construction of a prison subjectivity that was racialized and sexualized by design. While several important cultural studies of prison narratives have addressed the surge of resistant prison voices that gained regional and national attention in the 1930s, my analysis uniquely foregrounds the representation of racialized sexuality in the production of an unfree neoplantation prison population. In doing so, I hope to contribute to an emerging field of critical work being done on the genealogy of queer prison representations and to the ongoing critical work on the cultural normalization of the prison as a violent social world in which race and racism are overdetermined. In addition, I consider how “the South” structures these depictions of race, gender, sexuality, and labor exploitation. Significantly, the South often emerges as a degenerate carceral landscape. As a result, I am interested in how the South--as aberration--works to divorce violent and exploitative prison structures from national narratives of capitalist modernity.

### **The Birth of the Neoplantation Prison: Toward a Genealogy that Accounts for Slavery**

*Discipline and Punish*, Foucault's foundational treatise on the evolution of the modern penitentiary from the eighteenth through the nineteenth century, is credited with initiating a critique of how spectacles of torture were transformed into technologies of discipline. The penitentiary was heralded as a site dedicated to the reformation of the prisoner's “soul” rather than the punishment of the prisoner's body. Foucault's critique



centers on how disciplined bodies proliferated in the regulating regimes of the state while purporting to transform the moral state of the prisoner. His theorization, then, importantly allows for an investigation of how bodies continue to be affected by imprisonment and how divergent discourses worked to construct a myth of the penitentiary as a necessary means to a stable society. Foucault's concern is how disciplines of psychology, criminology, and penology have been integrated into carceral systems as a means to eclipse the violence of state processes of criminalization:

The whole penal operation has taken on extra-judicial elements and personnel. It will be said that there is nothing extraordinary in this, that it is part of the destiny of law to absorb little by little elements that are alien to it. But what is odd about modern criminal justice is the individual prison terms and methods of imprisonment meted out by the criminal justice system and supported by extra-judicial “expert” testimony.

In this chapter, I will consider extra-judicial knowledge systems that both emerged from and worked to produce knowledge about criminality. In particular, I will focus on studies of prison sexuality in order to analyze how discourses of sexology were applied to and generated from penitentiary systems. I then turn to representations of prison life and chain gang life in particular to consider how constructions of non-normative sexuality became intrinsically linked to the homosocial phenomenon of the modern gender and race-segregated prison system. The (violent) homosexual prison scene is a familiar one in today's cultural context, but I connect it to earlier articulations of prison sexuality in order to understand the roles of race, sexuality, and region in this ongoing genealogy.

While it might be tempting to consider discourses of race and racism as “extra-judicial” elements, like those named by Foucault, I instead join in the critique of Foucault's analysis initiated by scholars such as Joy James and Angela Davis. These

contemporary prison abolitionist scholars powerfully argue that Foucault fails to consider how racism (and the history of race-based slavery) was itself foundational to the birth of the prison. Davis states: “Joy James's assertion that 'Foucault's elision of racial bias in historical lynching and contemporary policing predicts his silence on the racialization of prisons' points to the need to move beyond a strictly Foucauldian genealogy in examining histories of punishment.”<sup>7</sup> Davis argues for the continuity between the “prison of slavery” and the “slavery of prison.” In keeping with other abolitionist scholars of imprisonment in the U.S., Davis argues that U.S. law integrated race into its regulation of imprisonment even as it purported to disentangle race (in particular blackness) from the practice of unfree labor: “In fact, there was no reference to imprisonment in the US Constitution until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment declared chattel slavery unconstitutional: 'Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction. The abolition of slavery thus corresponded to the authorization of slavery as punishment.’”<sup>8</sup> “Emancipatory” logic, then, always depended upon the condition and practice of state incarceration, and supplementary discourses of race science must be read as constitutive of legal discourse. I will similarly consider how those discourses of sexuality operated in concert with the integral sexualization of citizenship.

Historians who study the development of the Southern prison system are confronted with the difficulties of noting continuities between slavery and the prison system, at the risk of erasing key distinctions. Like Dennis Childs and others, I highlight the state's role in

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<sup>7</sup> “Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition” from *Angela Y. Davis Reader*, Ed. Joy James (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 1998) 96.

<sup>8</sup> Davis 99.

adapting enslavement for the modern era, first by focusing on the reproduction of the plantation (rather than slavery per se); and, more specifically, on the significance of the plantation as a continuing institution within cultural texts; and finally by emphasizing the role of the state in the implementation of specific aspects of plantation slavery.<sup>9</sup> For example, a “structure of feeling” analysis such as David Brion Davis's reveals something important about the prevalence of plantation discourses within postslavery cultures: “if one has been working on a plantation or in a penal camp for most of one's life, it probably makes little difference whether one got there by the legal fiction of sale as a piece of property or as the result of some alleged civil or political crime that has almost faded from memory.”<sup>10</sup> How might this be particularly true for a laborer for whom the penal camp and the plantation are one and the same? And how then does the plantation come to signify within the cultural histories of a penal system that might be better seen as an agricultural landscape rather than a walled institution?

Historians of the convict leasing system, the chain gang, and the plantation prison have done crucial work in piecing together the economic and social factors that created the laboring prisoner in the decades following the Civil War and in the so-called New South era of the twentieth century. As Foucault argues, labor became a method of prisoner reformation. Davis reminds us that labor “was supposed to assist the imprisoned individual in his (and on occasion her) putative quest for religious penitence and moral re-education.

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<sup>9</sup> Dennis Childs, for instance, argues that the modern prison might best be thought of as a “land based neoslave ship for racial Others, the mentally ill, the poor, undocumented immigrants, and suspected 'terrorists'--except that many of those currently entombed within spaces. . . undergo a perpetual rather than temporary Middle Passage” (223). Therefore, in his argument that the modern U.S. prison represents neoslavery, he notes the strategic adaptation of spaces, durations, and modes of confinement for differently positioned carceral subjects and contexts. *Formations of Neoslavery: The Cultures and Politics of the American Carceral State* UC Berkeley, Fall 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Qtd Mancini 21.

Labor was a means to a moral end.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore in my consideration of the racialized Southern prison laborer, the context of slavery defines the adaptation of penal technologies far more than the context of the moralization of the (white) prisoner of Foucault's study (as well as the dominant criminological discourse). Although prescribed labor has long been the penologists' solution to prisoner discipline, paradoxically, slave labor has long been its foil. In Alexis de Tocqueville's inaugural study of the U.S. penitentiary system in 1833, he negotiates this paradox, advocating prison labor while decrying the violent excesses used to ensure unfree labor under slavery. As he disapproves of the violent discipline in U.S. prisons he connects this with the brutality of slavery: “. . .that this degrading punishment of flogging should still obtain the sanction of so free a people as those of the United States, is not very surprising as at first sight it might appear, for it must not be forgotten, that "The Internal Slave Trade" is still carried on under the sanction of the laws generated in several States of that country.” While De Tocqueville undermines the “freedom” of a democracy that practices torture, he concedes that this paradox is inevitable in a slave society. His explanation does not fully resolve that paradox but accepts the coexistence of slavery and freedom as intrinsic to the development of the modern liberal state. In fact the transition from the “ordinary and not improper practice” of beatings to the expression of “moral” outrage at such flogging scenes defines the birth of civilization. He concludes: “To the existence of Negro Slavery then, it is, that we must ascribe the continuance of this barbarous mode of chastisement. . .”<sup>12</sup> Anticipating post-Emancipation logic, he asserts that

<sup>11</sup> Davis further elaborates: “In the case of slavery, labor was the only thing that mattered: the individual slaves were constructed essentially as labor units. Thus punishment was designed to maximize labor. And in a larger sense, labor was punishment attached not to crime, but to race” (99).

<sup>12</sup> Beaumont, Gustave de. *Origin and outline of the penitentiary system in the United States of North America* / translated and abridged from the French official report of G. de Beaumont & A. de Toqueville by William B. Sarsfield Taylor. London, 1833. The Making of the Modern World. Gale 2008. Gale, Cengage Learning. Access paid by The UCSD Libraries. 27 May 2008.

when slavery inevitably ends, the violent excesses of state punishment will follow suit.

De Tocqueville concedes that the prison whip is a culturally accepted mode of punishment actualized in concert with racialized enslavement. While he decries this method and argues that France should eschew such practices, his synopsis provides a genealogy of the torture tactics implemented in the plantation prison systems of the post-“Emancipation” era. De Tocqueville accepts the evident contradictions of the U.S. as the precursors of just methods of imprisonment. Foucault's study provides an understanding of how those “reformatory” discourses did not replace, but rather served to eclipse, the ongoing violence inflicted on prisoners' bodies. The Southern neoplantation prison provides evidence that there was not a linear progression from torture tactics to discipline networks. Rather, the U.S. penitentiary system as a whole has continually deployed seemingly divergent methods of punishment. The Southern penitentiary of the 1930s (and subsequent decades) has served as the aberrant foil to the nation's construction of its otherwise “humane” system of imprisonment. Practices of bodily torture, then, have continued to adapt alongside and in relation to methods of more “benign” or “sanitized” punishment. Discourses of race and sexuality have mediated the supposed divide between these models of incarceration. The extracted labor of the unfree, racialized, and sexualized laborer has been the by-product of the state's supposed “reforms,” or rather reformations. A balance is continually struck between the “excessive” and “rehabilitative” goals of the penitentiary.

The 1930s was a flashpoint in this ongoing struggle to maintain and adapt the U.S. criminal justice system in the face of its differently positioned critics. The Southern chain

gang in particular came under attack for its brutality and its sentences that failed to “fit the crime,” or to consider the criminal as an individual. In effect, the chain gang was depicted as a “medieval” system of punishment, a relic of the pre-modern penal era sketched out by Foucault. As at other moments, calls for reform of punitive tactics simply risked naturalizing the role of the prison in society, and in particular, the unfree status of black labor (as prisoner). For example, Robert Burns's autobiographical account as a white convict, *I Am a Fugitive From a Georgia Chain Gang*, is in many ways a critical discourse that counters the prison system while reaffirming the tenets of racial and criminal segregation. “On the limb” for the last time, he tells a fellow escaped convict: “It's now my life's ambition to destroy the chain-gang system in Georgia, and see substituted in its place a more humane and enlightened system of correction.”<sup>13</sup> He decries the chain gang as slavery but simultaneously naturalizes black unfreedom. When two black convicts attempt escape but are treed by prison hounds, he muses: “Since man invented prisons and slavery, the prisoners and the slaves have always attempted to escape, regardless of the price of failure. The battle has gone on for thousands of years. It will go on for thousands of years to come.”<sup>14</sup> When Burns finds himself back in the chain gang after attempted escape, he aligns himself with black chain gang laborers (and their enslaved ancestors) in their common desire for, and attempts at, escape. But in characterizing this “battle” between the prisoner-slave and the guard-overseer, he continually asserts the injustice of his imprisonment at the expense of the subjugated black laborer.<sup>15</sup> The *desire* to escape, as he sees it, is inevitable, while the *actualization* of substantive black liberation is foreclosed.

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13 *I Am a Fugitive From a Georgia Chain Gang!* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1932) 251.

14 Burns 162.

15 As I will later consider, his first escape from the chain gang depends entirely upon a black laborer whose sacrifice for Burns is predicated upon a kind of acceptance of his own permanent enslavement.

Though Burns's narrative purported to render prisoner subjectivity visible, to represent “the forgotten men” of the chain gang, and to demonize the chain gang model, his narrative, if inadvertently, also worked to render “prisonization” as normal in particular ways.<sup>16</sup> Endesha Ida Mae Holland reminds us that the prison is a cultural mainstay, and actual prisons like Parchman in Mississippi where prisoners “wore stripes. . .and overseers rode horseback through the cotton fields, wielding bullwhips and cattle prods” reference a culturally constructed prison “just like in the movies.” Gina Dent asserts: “The history of visibility linked to the prison is also a main reinforcement of the institution of the prison as a naturalized part of our social landscape. . .Thus, the prison is wedded to our experience of visibility, creating also a sense of its permanence as an institution. We also have a constant flow of Hollywood prison films, in fact a genre.”<sup>17</sup> Visual representations such as the 1932 cinematic adaptation of Burns's *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* were formative in the genealogy of prison films, and were likewise informed by and in dialogue with the other forms of prison representation. The knowledge produced about prisons in the Jim Crow-era South brought a rural neoplantation landscape into sharp relief. And the black prisoner's body often served as a metonym for that expansive cultural landscape, thereby potentially normalizing black suffering. The ongoing violent excesses of the neoplantation converged

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16 I borrow this term from penological studies to suggest the process of transforming nominally free subjects into “prisoners.” The construction of the prison system as a whole entails a process by which subject formations and institutional and social controls are continuously adapted and reinforced. In his 1940 study of a “Coalville” penitentiary, Donald Clemmer likens prisonization to Americanization, and says that the process of prisoners adjusting to the prison social world is not unlike the new immigrant's process of assimilation. In applying sociological methods to penology, he considers how certain “universal factors of prisonization”—acceptance of inferiority, development of new daily habits, learning prison-speak, desire for a good job—are mediated by “age, criminality, nationality, race, regional conditioning.” Furthermore, “every determinant is more or less interrelated with every other one” *The Prison Community* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966) 301.

17 Qtd Davis's *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Toronto: Open Media, 2003) 17-18. Dent goes on to specify that: “the history of film has always been wedded to the representation of incarceration. Thomas Edison's first films (dating back to the 1901 reenactment presented as newsreel, Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison) included footage of the darkest recesses of the prison.”

with those of the prison to create a depiction of the South as an ongoing site of legalized slavery. So while the chain gang and the plantation farm came under attack, structures of incarceration elsewhere were viewed as “more humane and enlightened system[s] of correction.” What was not specific to the depiction of the Southern penal model, however, was the attention to the prison “social world” as a site of deviance and non-normativity. Therefore, I frame this as a cultural moment when the prison was in a kind of existential crisis. But in that moment, notions of Southern “difference” fostered explanations and sometimes resolutions to that crisis. Distinctly “Southern” formations of race and labor were called upon to reform the excesses of the prisoner (sexual and otherwise), as well as to explain and or contest the excesses of the prison itself.

### **The Indebted Laborer and the Chain-Gang State: Private Gain Meets Public Good**

For a half a century following the Civil War, the South had no prisons per se. Instead, as Matthew Mancini has written: “persons convicted of criminal offenses were sent to sugar and cotton plantations, as well as to coal mines, turpentine farms, phosphate beds, brickyards, sawmills, and other outposts of entrepreneurial daring in the impoverished region. They were leased—literally, contracted out—to businessmen, planters, and corporations in one of the harshest and most exploitative labor systems known in American history.”<sup>18</sup> While the prisoner, who had no legal rights to his labor, became the property and tool of the state, the South industrialized. The convict leasing system insured that the structures of slavery would be adapted to the needs of the region and to the reconsolidation of white power. The convicts were overwhelmingly black men readily imprisoned under

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<sup>18</sup> *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996) 1-2.



the codes and regulations legalized in the wake of Black Reconstruction. In 1904, the convict leasing system was still legal in states such as Georgia. Designations of criminality were used to justify this system of labor, but, as one unnamed Georgia worker testified in 1904, that labor system was pervasive. Convicts labored alongside “free” men with almost imperceptible differences separating the free from the unfree. In a piece written for the *Independent* in 1904 entitled “The New Slavery in the South—An Autobiography,” a “Georgia Peon” described the culture of enslavement: “there are hundreds and hundreds of farms all over the State where negroes, and in some cases poor white folks, are held in bondage on the ground that they are working out debts, or where the contracts which they have made hold them in a kind of perpetual bondage.”<sup>19</sup> The thin veneer of “rights” in the post-Emancipation-era worked to perpetuate cycles of indebtedness and involuntary “contractual” slavery. As Saidiya Hartman asserts: “Debt ensured submission; it insinuated that servitude was not yet over and that the travails of freedom were the price to be paid for emancipation.”<sup>20</sup> The contract and the conviction worked hand in hand to adapt the plantation to the “New South” era.

The economy depended upon a coerced labor supply that moved from the jail to the farm in a seamless transition from freedom to incarceration to debt. Planters sent out agents to small-town courts and convinced friendless and penniless men who were charged with “some petty offense” to plead guilty. The planter then pays the fine in exchange for a debt agreement and “in that way save[s] him from the disgrace of being sent to jail or the chain-gang! For this high favor the man must sign beforehand a paper signifying his willingness to go to the farm and work out the amount of the fine imposed.” What he describes is a

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19 All quotes that follow taken from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/negpeon/negpeon.html>.

20 *Scenes of Subjection* 134.

synergistic relationship between planters or bosses and the legal system. This relationship depends upon conditions of abject poverty, entrenched racial hierarchy, and social death. A system of paternalism, like that under slavery, guaranteed only that laborers would be “fed and clothed” (though never adequately, according to this and other accounts) but that paternalism was espoused by the state as agent of the planter. In effect, the guilty plea facilitated unfree labor, and as in the case of this laborer, it made little difference whether he paid his debt to the state chain gang or the private planter. The debt contract, in and of itself, was invested with the power to “signify willingness,” while also guaranteeing the unfreedom of the laborer.<sup>21</sup> In both the case of the convict laborer and the “free laborer,” the state worked to ensure their immobility and their powerlessness. In this system we see an example of the privatization of the state as a means to ensure the accumulation of capital and the production of surplus labor. The peon registers this “plantation state” as outside of time, “a sort of endless chain, for an indefinite period, as in every case the indebtedness is arbitrarily arranged by the employer.”

The Georgia Peon's narrative does not represent “debt” as simply a system of unfree agricultural labor. Rather the debt economy also involved the sexual submission of the wives of black laborers as well as separation of children from their parents, or what slavery and neoslavery scholars such as Orlando Patterson deem “natal alienation.”<sup>22</sup> The concept

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21 Amy Dru Stanley argues: “In postbellum America contract was above all a metaphor of freedom. In principle, contract reconciled human autonomy and obligation, imposing social order through personal volition rather than external force.” In actuality, however, as this Georgia laborer argues, the neoplantation social order coupled with the unequal distribution of resources and institutional supports emptied the contract of substantive freedom. *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 2.

22 Patterson's theorization of natal alienation as a constituent of slavery is introduced as follows: “Alienated from all “rights” or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order. . . Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations to his more remote ancestors and on his descendants.” *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982) 5.

of a stable family unit was impossible as plantation slavery's practice of race-based concubinage was adapted for the neplantation. As in the antebellum era, this system was said to confer “privileges” to the subjugated women. According to the Georgia laborer, this is the fate of his wife:

My wife fared better than I did, as did the wives of some of the other negroes, because the white men about the camp used these unfortunate creatures as their mistresses. When I was first put in the stockade my wife was still kept for a while in the "Big House," but my little boy, who was only nine years old, was given away to a negro family across the river in South Carolina, and I never saw or heard of him after that. When I left the camp my wife had had two children for some one of the white bosses, and she was living in fairly good shape in a little house off to herself. . . . Of the first six women brought to the camp, two of them gave birth to children after they had been there more than twelve months--and the babies had white men for their fathers!

The social architecture of “the Big House” maintains power through the dissolution of black familial structures and the reproduction of an unrecognizable mixed-race family. The speaker here still claims some possession over his wife but clearly sees that the material resources afforded her as the white boss's mistress are made possible through the negation of their bond. This is the mutation of paternalism under neplantation debt systems—black women subjected to sexual violence are granted basic needs, while black men and women labor as a disposable, perpetually replaceable “contractual” workforce. From this laborer's perspective: “we had sold ourselves into slavery--and what could we do about it? The white folks had all the courts, all the guns, all the hounds, all the railroads, all the telegraph wires, all the newspapers, all the money, and nearly all the land--and we had only our ignorance, our poverty and our empty hands.” The neplantation era made possible the paradox of selling yourself into slavery. Saidiya Hartman states that: “The discrepant bestowal of

emancipation conferred sovereignty as it engendered subjection.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, under the neoplantation system, the emancipated subject was so independent that he/she had no access to resources at all, and was left with only the ability to surrender his or her laboring body to the fields or the “Big House.”

The surrender of the laboring body was the surrender of the normative body. As the Georgia laborer describes it, penal labor resulted in gender *undifferentiation*: women “who were peons or convicts were compelled to wear men's clothes. . . I have seen them dressed like men, and plowing or hoeing or hauling logs or working at the blacksmith's trade, just the same as men. My heart would bleed and my blood would boil, but I was powerless to raise a hand.” He articulates his own emasculation as a consequence of not being able to protect women from being masculinized by the penal-peonage system. He therefore relies on a liberal bourgeois construction of gender to justify his critique of the *disorder* of the neoplantation. His frustration (at the breakdown of gender norms and of mis-gendered labor in relation to his wife's sexual subjugation or the loss of his son) is articulated as an inability to serve as a paternal figure within a heteropatriarchal order that depends upon the unfreedom of black men and women. His narrative exposes the conditions under which power was maintained as he insists: “Somewhere, somehow, a beginning of the end should be made.”

In the reform of the penal systems of Georgia and other Southern states, however, the “beginning of the end” ultimately served to create a perpetual stasis for neoplantation convict. The outlawing of convict leasing which gave way to “prison reform,” or paradoxically, the instantiation of the state-run Southern prison, did not result simply from

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<sup>23</sup> *Scenes of Subjection*, 134.

humanitarian politics, but rather because “disfranchisement was on the way. . .the chain gang was on the rise, and convicts were becoming a burdensome expense to those who leased them.”<sup>24</sup> So the transition from the privatized convict leasing system to the state-run plantation prison might be seen as a strategic shift in economic control, but not perhaps as a dramatic sea-change, or indicative of ideological rupture. As Alex Lichtenstein asserts: “While humanitarian motives should not be dismissed altogether, the class interests that backed this new use of convicts had their own notions about the relationship between penal systems and economic development.”<sup>25</sup> Lichtenstein's history of the Georgia chain gang powerfully argues that the shifting penal systems developed in the wake of the Civil War represented the strategic balance of power between the white planter class and the recovering Southern state (with often the two categories overlapping, as indicated by the narrative of the Georgia peon cited earlier). He argues that in plantation societies throughout the nineteenth century, the abolition of slavery, and the subsequent possibility that ex-slaves might become self-sufficient land owners, instigated new ways for plantation societies to control labor. Among these, sharecropping, debt-peonage, and criminalization became most common, and “the necessary political corollary of this labor system was the preservation of white supremacy.”<sup>26</sup> What the planters and the burgeoning Southern industrialists faced was a labor force that, like the freed slaves of Haiti, associated the plantation with slavery. The plantation did not simply represent a landscape that carried the memory of slavery, it represented an economic structure that continued to consolidate

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24 Mancini 225. Mancini here deploys Foucault's theory about the “intimate interconnectedness of reform and oppression” (qtd 215). Also here he cites the Atlanta riot of 1906 as significant in terms of convict leasing “reform” and racial oppression.

25 *Twice the Work of Free Labor*, 16.

26 Lichtenstein 4.

ownership of the means of production and to preclude laborers from attaining any substantive political or economic power. Their problem was that both black and white laborers were “willing and able to exercise mobility.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore planters and industrialists turned to various means of coercion. One of the many links between these two groups, then, was their investment in producing and managing an unfree laboring criminal class, concomitantly maintaining racial hierarchy.

In the development of the neplantation prison, I posit that a relationship between capital and the state advances to benefit the development of a “modern” or “New” South. However, I assume that this is built on an earlier “Old South” pre-Emancipation synergy between the slave plantation and the industrial factory. As David Brion Davis has argued in the case of the West Indian plantation and the English factory, it is a mistake to see the plantation as a pre-capitalist model:

While English society increasingly condemned the institution of slavery, it approved experiments in labor discipline which appeared to gravitate toward the plantation model. Paradoxically, planters, especially those in the United States, increasingly followed the industrialists' lead in using incentives to manipulate slave behavior, without fearing, it should be added, that such 'amelioration' would be a step toward eventual emancipation. Slaveholders and industrialists shared a growing interest not only in surveillance and control but in modifying the character and habits of their workers.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the abolitionist industrial reformer was not antithetical to the slave planter, but instead worked to reproduce plantation techniques and systems of discipline. Nor, in the case of the United States, was the planter simply invested in maintaining previous structures of and means to power. Rather capitalism's development depended upon the adaptation of differing modes of production to their respective contexts, in order to

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<sup>27</sup> Lichtenstein 11.

<sup>28</sup> *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1975) 458.

integrate modes of race and class suppression in the face of efforts of revolutionary transformation. That suppression depended upon a structuring network of discipline and punishment. Both had in mind the production of what Foucault calls “docile bodies.”<sup>29</sup> It was necessary, of course, that those bodies reproduce in order to ensure their disposability. In the post-Emancipation-era, the docile body was not reproduced through the violent engineering of slave “families,” as it had been previously, but through the construction of a “free” social world that was plagued by cycles of incarceration. The neoplantation continued to be defined in relation to an outside world, in a false dichotomy.

As I argue in previous chapters, surplus populations produce sexualized racial formations (and vice versa). For a complete analysis of the era of chain gangs and neoplantations, it is necessary to consider, in Roderick Ferguson's terms, that: “[a]s formations that transgress capitalist political economies, surplus populations become the locations for possible critiques of state and capital.”<sup>30</sup> Capital assembles labor based on a

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29 For Foucault, docile bodies are the aim of disciplinary institutions and mechanisms: “Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an 'aptitude', a 'capacity', which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection” (*Discipline* 138). While Foucault differentiates this process from slavery, which he identifies as based on the violent “appropriation” of bodies, I contend that plantation slavery honed techniques of discipline and practices of punishment that would be adapted for the carceral neoplantation. Foucault seems to limit slavery to a system that depends upon the constant appropriation of free people who then have to be violently made powerless. In this, however, he ignores the history of plantation slavery in places such as the U.S. South, which relied on a self-reproducing slave population, rather than a steady supply of newly enslaved Africans. We must consider, then, how structures of plantation slavery in the U.S. had long used models of racialized, sexualized, and gendered discipline meant to ensure “docile bodies” and to consider how those models impact larger disciplinary institutions.

30 Ferguson's citation of Marx's explanation of surplus labor is useful in understanding how a rural black laboring class in the South becomes the target of carceral regimes: “As soon as capitalist production takes possession of agriculture, and in proportion to the extent to which it does so, the demand for rural working populations falls absolutely, while the accumulation of capital employed in agriculture advances, without this repulsion being compensated for by a greater attraction of workers, as is the case in non-agricultural industries. Part of the agricultural population is therefore constantly on the point of passing over into an urban or manufacturing proletariat, and on the lookout for opportunities to complete this transformation. . . . There is thus a constant flow from this source of the relative surplus population.” It was this “constant flow” of agricultural labor that the capitalist state sought to contain. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer*

logic of reproduction that defies heteropatriarchal norms, though it may rely on those norms to establish the value of that labor. In other words, capital creates a disposable workforce rather than a stable family unit, and it uses that destabilization to create a labor hierarchy. Those who conform to the state's "universal" subject—the white, propertied heterosexual male in this case—are privileged laborers against whom others are measured.<sup>31</sup> In the case of the Southern prison, the state adopts capital's logic in the production of a stratified and expendable unfree labor force. In the neplantation legal system, the production of criminal laborers is based not on a family unit that produces children who will become the next laboring generation, but upon a system that forecloses the possibility of heteropatriarchal family units and reproduces labor through the (re)production of criminal non-citizens. The decades of Jim Crow segregation saw the advent of the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to sites of industrialization in the North and the Midwest, as well as to the western parts of the U.S. where land ownership was thought possible. The Southern prison became the solution to the region's problem of a surplus labor force in flux. The Southern neplantation penal system was deployed as a means to control that flow of labor, but also to police the heterogeneity of sexual and racial formations produced from delimited citizenship and capitalist expansion.

The formation of black labor as non-normative was both a condition and a consequence of the development of the neplantation prison. In William Ferris's 1975 documentary on the origins of the Mississippi Delta Blues, "Give My Poor Heart Ease," he interviews a man who testifies to the effect of his imprisonment on his wife and family:

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*of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 15.  
31 Ferguson 16.



When I first came here it was 1934, November the 5th, Parchman. It was pretty rough then. . . Whatever they had you doing, you had to run with it. I rowed so hard, tell me to go eat dinner, I couldn't eat with a spoon or nothing, just shake off, being so nervous. but I made it, made it through all right. . . Far's I know they're doing ok all but my wife. Me and her not together now. When I got in trouble, she went on up to the country. Where she at, I don't know. I try to keep her from rolling across my mind. I just get off to myself and try to forget it.<sup>32</sup>

During the 1975 interview, this man is still incarcerated. As he speaks, the camera pans to his nervous, fidgeting hands, to his institutional work boots. He is tightly framed by the camera and by the space of imprisonment. All we see of his environment is a claustrophobic space that seems to allow him little movement. These shots are bookended by shots of vast fields, peopled by lines of gang laborers who are as restricted in the open landscape as they are in their walled quarters. His testimony is edited so that the shattering effects of hard labor on his body and his psyche are directly related to his painful separation from his wife. As with this man, the carceral network ensured that the heteronormative ideals of the state would work to exclude many in the black working class from citizenship and from the rights to their labor.<sup>33</sup>

### **A White Fugitive Slave and the Politics of Prison Reform**

The carceral network does not cast the unassimilable into a confused hell; there is no outside.

--Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

During the 1930s, the effects in incarceration were first, and most prominently, shown to bear on the white chain gang laborer. Despite the fact that then, as now, black

32 (Ferris, Yale University, 1975) <http://www.folkstreams.net/film,80>.

33 Here I'm drawing from important critiques such as Hortense Spillers' send up of the Moynihan Report, which pathologized black families and black mothers in particular. Spillers argues that the history of slavery in the U.S., which violently tore children from their parents, and parents from one another, effected an ongoing history of familial rupture. See "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17.2 (Summer 1987) 85-81.

convicts outnumbered whites ten to one in most Southern penal systems, black communities were relegated to a supporting cast, quite literally, in the dramatic depiction of a white man's unjust imprisonment. In his 1932 autobiographical narrative *I Am a Fugitive From a Georgia Chain Gang!*, Robert Burns set out on a mission of abolition and personal liberation. Eventually, both ends were accomplished, to some degree as a result of the cultural spotlight on Burns's story. The story of the white fugitive convict who advocated for the end to the Georgia chain gang system engendered public outcry on a national level and the successful 1932 film version of his story has long been considered a seminal work in the genre of the prison film. His story falls in line with the tradition of those attempts to move beyond one man's experience to ask: "Who is the real criminal, the prisoner or the society that imprisons people?"<sup>34</sup> Burns's story begins as he is discharged from the military following World War I and finds himself unemployed. Unable to hold a job in his home state of New Jersey, he ends up in Atlanta, Georgia, with two other white men who, unbeknownst to him, decide to commit an armed robbery in a desperate attempt to temporarily escape poverty. Burns and the other men are caught and arrested and he is sentenced to six to ten years of hard labor on the Georgia chain gang. After several attempts at appealing his sentence are denied, he successfully escapes to Illinois and builds a new life under an assumed name and ultimately establishes himself as a respected businessman in Chicago, an expert on real estate, and a magazine publisher. After seven years of "freedom," however, he is betrayed by his wife to the authorities and remanded to the Georgia courts. At this point he returns to prison, this time to an even harsher chain gang, and again, he escapes confinement to live "on the limb" in New Jersey. There his narrative

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<sup>34</sup> Franklin 133.

ends. I read Burns's narrative as a critique that is limited by his self-fashioning--as a white man--who is the victim of circumstance, whose sentence does not fit his crime, who beats the odds to transcend his class status, and who argues that the penal system ought to evaluate him based on his individual history and progress. In his targeted indictment of the chain gang, his polemic effaces the larger carceral network that works to ensure his imprisonment, and he takes for granted the privileges his whiteness and his gender afford him beyond the prison and in ensuring a criminalized laboring class within and outside the prison. Instead, his critique of the "injustice system" depends upon a portrayal of the South as the site of unfair, premodern punishment and upon his righteous indignation that a hardworking white citizen might be made into a fugitive slave. His narrative, however, does suggest a more complex "carceral continuum" and the strategic deployment of race in the larger process of criminalization. In reading this text "against the grain," I address those elements of the narrative in order to construct a relationship between Burns's commercially (and critically) heralded work and other texts that never enjoyed such wide circulation during their time. I also read for the unspoken subtexts of Burns's fugitive drama that point to the era's anxieties surrounding race, gender, and sexuality in the "social world" of the prison.

Burns's tale of injustice is girded throughout by the testimony of non-Southerners, who, in arguing in his defense, implicitly protest the relegation of a middle-class white man to the status of a black convict-slave. This begins first with his brother's introduction to Burns's plight, as he guides the reader into the rural poverty of a pre-industrial penal South. When Robert Burns's brother comes to visit him at the chain gang convict camp in La Grange, Georgia, he depicts a return to the environment of slavery, "to the Troup County

convict camp, isolated among the cotton-clad hills of south Georgia.” His narrative might be described as a descent into an abject netherworld:

The Negroes, lounging around their shacks on this hot Sunday afternoon, sit up to stare at the strangers. The shacks in which they live are one- or two-room buildings on stilts. Buildings that huddle together along the red clay road and house the families of the colored folks. Little absolutely naked babies toddle around the doors. Grandfathers and grandmothers sit silently on steps of houses. Not a single uplifting element surrounds these cottages, except the green of the trees and the blue of the skies.<sup>35</sup>

The scene which frames his visit to his brother is characterized by its rurality and its poverty, which he makes clear are the lot of black Southerners bereft of a “single uplifting element.” This view of the chain gang landscape works to bolster Burns's claims that he does not belong in this scene. Like his brother, he is a “stranger” to this context and his outcry of injustice serves as a foil to the silence of the impoverished legacy of grandfathers and mothers and the naked vulnerability of the next generation of black toddlers. The “free” Negroes, the land, and the nearby chain gang workers alike are covered by “red dust on everything, trees, buildings, men.”<sup>36</sup> The proximity of the free and the unfree class works toward the narrative's overall depiction of Georgia as punishing landscape, while naturalizing the abjection of black Southerners.<sup>37</sup>

Racial segregation is maintained within the confines of the convict camp, but what unites the convicts is the violent surveillance of the guards:

We find ourselves in a grim, gray, dungeon-like room. Through the chicken-wire and iron bars, where a number of convicts are talking to relatives, we see about seventy men. On the right-hand side of the room, huddled in little

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<sup>35</sup> Burns 9.

<sup>36</sup> Burns 10.

<sup>37</sup> This will later be contrasted with Burns's portrait of Chicago, which he associates with the modern life that cleanses his dirty chain gang past. “To-day, after the chain-gang experience, \$3.20 a day was all that any man could want. It meant a clean bed, clean clothes, soap and towels, clean teeth, recreation, movies, books, libraries, lectures, walks through beautiful parks, museums, and the exhilaration of a great, growing, bustling city roaring all around. . .In short, Life!” (83).

groups or pacing up and down in chains, we see about thirty or forty Negroes. On the left-hand side of the room are thirty or forty white men. On a raised platform immediately in front we see several burly guards, with heavy six-shooters on their hips.<sup>38</sup>

The repetition of “we see” in this passage reflects Burns's brother's position as an outsider, a kind of voyeur of the camp horror. In balancing the count of white and black prisoners, he suggests that the equalizing terms of the chain gang are an example of its injustice.

Throughout *I am a Fugitive*, the segregation of the prisoners does not guarantee white privilege; rather, Burns's (and his brother's) central critique of the Georgia penal system is that it fails to individualize the criminal, and what results is in effect, the blanket racialization of the criminal. The racial integration of convict labor is the most problematic. In describing the work done on the chain gang, Burns is quick to point out that “in each group whites and Negroes worked side by side, which was a violation of state regulation.”<sup>39</sup> The racial segregation of prisoners was not specific to the Jim Crow South, however, but was standard across the nation.<sup>40</sup> While Burns does critique the brutality of the chain gang and its effects on all prisoners, both black and white, in his assertion that integrated labor is a violation of state regulation, he implies that on yet another point the chain gang defies, rather than secures, social order. In that sense, then, his narrative implies that the context of a racialized peon laboring class taints the ability of the white worker to transcend his class status, as Burns does after escaping from the chain gang for the first time.

Significantly, it is the integration of chain gang labor that allows for Burns' first escape from the Georgia penal system. In his book, he dramatizes the escape as a cross-

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38 Burns 10.

39 Burns 176.

40 For more on Jim Crow in Northern prisons, see Louis Berg, *Revelations of a Prison Doctor* (New York: Minton, Balch and Co, 1934).

racial, homosocial moment of solidarity, but one rife with embedded power dynamics:

One day I noticed a certain Negro in my group swing a twelve-pound hammer. He had been in the gang so long and had used a sledge so much that he had become an expert. . . Suddenly, like a flash, an idea came to me. I might try to get that Negro to hit my shackles and bend them into an elliptical shape. . . One day in June, when the heat was terrific and the guards were half asleep from the humidity, I spoke to this nigger. "Sam," I said. "Would you do me a favor?"  
 "Boss, if I can, I sho' will," he replies.  
 "Sam, I got six years; that's a long time and I'm going to try to 'hang it on the limb,' and I need a little help. Will you help me?" I asked.  
 "Boss, it sho' is pretty rough, and I ain't much for hunting trouble, but if I's can help you, I sho' will," he answered.<sup>41</sup>

Even as the two men labor together tearing up an old railroad, to make way for a new one, "Sam" is depicted as obsequious to Burns and his needs. As his "boss," Burns represents himself as justified in his request that Sam risk his own life, with no benefit to himself but the possibility of violent punishment for aiding in the escape of the prisoner. Burns neither offers him the chance to escape nor assumes that Sam will have a life beyond the chain gang, since he has already become a dehumanized tool because he had "been in the gang so long." In the film version of Burns's story, Sam (or "Sebastian" as he is called in the film) is even more clear in his desire that Burns should be free at all cost (to him). He responds to Burns's request for help, saying: "I don't want to get in no trouble, but I'd sure like to see you get away from this misery." He agrees to help, though he says they'll give him "the works" if he's caught helping Burns. Though it is their labor that makes this scene of intimate sacrifice possible, their dialogue establishes that the larger social context of a racial hierarchy still holds true. Burns is still the "boss" though they labor side by side on the chain gang, and he is dependent upon Sam's permanent incarceration in order to effect his own liberation. When Burns escapes, thanks to Sam's help, he becomes a fugitive from

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41 Burns 63.

the law, and the narrative takes on the qualities of a fugitive slave narrative, where even in the “free states,” there is no freedom. He remains continually at risk of being discovered, caught, and returned to the chain gang. Unlike the fugitive slave, though, he needs only to change his clothes and shave in order to remove the markings of imprisonment. His whiteness, and later his cultural and material capital, provide all the disguise he needs. Burns becomes obsessed with the feeling of freedom, though it almost always remains elusive.

As he gradually sheds the fear that he will be caught, he settles in Chicago and benefits from the help of a woman, Emilia Del Pino Pacheo, who quickly and dramatically falls in love with him.<sup>42</sup> But he unequivocally states that he has no desire for women following his escape from the chain gang. At his first spot of refuge out of the convict camp, he is offered sex workers by a former convict friend, but says: “I didn't want the girls,” and tells them: “Girls, you got me sized up wrong. I am no goodie-goodie, but I am no professional criminal either, and I don't intend to go on breaking the law. . . All I want is to get out of Atlanta and Dixie, get some job and be on the square.”<sup>43</sup> While he initially rejects the sex workers due to his desire to be “square,” his inability to find heterosexual fulfillment soon becomes a central problem of the narrative. He is incapable of loving Emilia, though he paints himself as a benevolent paternal figure in her life. He refuses to marry her, to legally recognize their relationship, telling her: “I cannot will myself to love you, anymore than I can change the color of my eyes.”<sup>44</sup> Until she discovers his secret, at

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42 Though he never offers much biographical information about Emilia, he depicts her and her mother as new immigrants with “Latin temperament” who need his help negotiating “not so familiar” language, customs, and laws. (He later anglicizes her name and refers to her as Emily.) (85)

43 Burns 73.

44 Burns 85.

which point, she blackmails him into marriage and becomes the “tragedy that neither time nor courage will ever erase.”<sup>45</sup> As long as he remains a fugitive from the law, he remains within the confines of a failed heterosexual marriage. So, ultimately one prison replaces another and the carceral merges with the conjugal.

Burns feels freedom only when he comes close to achieving the racialized heteronormative ideal-- a white (non-immigrant) wife, a house, a successful career—a re-invented life entirely outside of his own past history or experiences of collective trauma. In both the book and the film, Burns ultimately does find love, though outside of his failed marriage. His love of a “respectable” white woman confirms his humanity, his rights to own property, rather than to be the “slave” property of the state of Georgia: “Success, Love, Romance, Happiness, Wealth, and a rosy future, were mine at last! What a long uphill battle I had fought! From a chain-gang slave to the pinnacle of real achievement. . . Had I not acquired all of this by honesty, adherence to ideals; by courage and real worth of character? Surely organized society could not overlook this hard-won and deserved victory over so many obstacles and not see that the man behind it all was now a man. . .”<sup>46</sup> His masculinity is solidified when he finally “loves” a woman and after he has built up a successful business as a magazine editor and real estate expert in modern Chicago.<sup>47</sup> He

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45 Burns 84.

46 Burns 103.

47 I highlight here how “love” functions to reaffirm Burns's construction of his humanity, as opposed to the reduced state of the chain gang beast. In his study of prison sexuality, Joseph Fishman indicates how the fulfillment of love, rather than sexual urge, was a cultural standard for humanity: “. . .this physical behavior, involving all the actions of a normal man in love with a woman, is what every normal man attempts to consummate in loving. It is this spiritual force of love, so powerful yet so intangible, that makes a man superior to his own environment, and to his own physiology. This [sic] all the more remarkable when we stop to ponder the overt circumstances of a man confined in prison, who cannot realize his most insignificant sexual whim. If a man on the outside of prison wants a woman he knows where to find her. . . But not so the unfortunate man hidden away from the eyes of society, confined behind grim walls, incarcerated in a concrete tomb. It is not only the architecture enclosure which bears down on him, not only the shame—if he is a sensitive man and not a neurotic criminal—not only the loneliness of his isolation, but the terrific weight of his emotions, the onus of his desires, the emptiness of not having anything for which



sets this in direct opposition to the degraded, and even insignificant, sexual and financial relationship that he had with his first wife, whom he paints as a desperate “Latin” immigrant. In his relationship with her, heterosexual marriage functioned as arm of punishment, as a legality that has bound him to a woman who would and does betray him to a fate of chain-gang labor and torture.

Though there are no explicit references to homosexuality in Burns's story, it is necessary to read the subtext of his failure to realize heterosexual norms in light of his criminal subjectivity.<sup>48</sup> As Alex Lichtenstein states, convict life on the chain gang was, despite its unending labor and punishing technologies, a community of what Carson McCullers will call “mortal men”: “Convicts, of course, were also human beings with familial ties to free kin and social ties to their fellow prisoners. Convict life—the work songs, crap games, knife fights, religious worship, practical jokes, comradeship, and sexual or romantic encounters with convict ‘gal-boys’--went on.”<sup>49</sup> It might be argued that Burns elides these kinds of homosocial or sexual encounters in his account because of his polemical intent. After all, he takes every occasion to remind the reader of his right to full citizenship within the liberal capital state-- he is honest, he is scrupulous, and he is “normal,” with only the desire to have a happy home with his wife as a successful businessman.<sup>50</sup> But he is obsessed with his own failure, in particular, to participate in the

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he longs gratified” *Sex in Prison: Revealing Sex Conditions in American Prisons* (New York: National Library Press, 1934) 252-3.

48 When he describes his second stint on the chain gang, he does take care to note the bullpen sleeping quarters of the convicts as filled with “stark naked” men or others in various states of dress and undress. He states that this is indicative of how tired each man is after a day of excruciating toil, however. In other words, he is careful to de-eroticize these scenes and therefore to follow the general penological line of thought that labor prevented sexual aberration in prison. For other examples of labor as a prescriptive for homosexuality in prison, see Louis Berg, *Revelations of a Prison Doctor*.

49 Lichtenstein xvii.

50 Burns insists throughout that he be judged as an individual and that his criminality be viewed in relation to that. In his pleas for parole, his supports repeatedly stress the singularity of his accomplishments and the

project of the nuclear family, first because of his own inability to be seduced or to love, and then because his status as a fugitive renders him unable to realize that norm. I suggest that Burns's self-fashioning betrays an anxiety that his inculcation in the blackened, homosocial/sexual prison world of the chain gang has rendered him irrevocably outside of the heterosexual bourgeois norm.

This anxiety might have been the product of his own confrontations with race and sexuality while in prison, or the cultural norms to which he ascribed; though what we must also consider is how the problem of prison sexuality had entered into public discourse during this era through a variety of disciplinary angles. During the era in which Burns's plight gained notoriety, sexologists and penal authorities alike were publishing studies centered on the “problem” of homosexuality within all U.S. prisons. Segregation of prisoners by race and by sex necessarily entailed that white men were held together in cages that produced intimacies previously only known within military environments. Burns himself had been a soldier in World War I and had come out irrevocably changed. His brother describes his post-war mindset as: “mentally wounded—a casualty upon whose injury one could not place a finger, but a more deeply wounded casualty for that very reason. He was nervously unstrung and mentally erratic—a typical shell-shock case.”<sup>51</sup> The result of which was his inability to re-enter society as a functional worker: “We tried to get him into a government rest camp but without his co-operation we were unable to establish the nature of his malady. Again we tried to get him to work. But it was always the same story—he was too nervous to stay put long enough to fill a position of the simplest kind. He grew more and more despondent and bitter with his fate. Finally he disappeared—

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relative insignificance of his crime.

<sup>51</sup> Burns 11.

wandered off in a fog of mental discouragement.”<sup>52</sup> The next thing his family knew, he was on trial for robbery in Atlanta and headed to the chain gang. What I want to suggest is that Burns's experiences within disciplining institutions, which enforced segregation based on race and gender, used sexuality and labor as a means to create “docile bodies.”<sup>53</sup> Burns's postwar breakdown led him to a life of wandering without laboring, which was, in so many cases, the basis for designations of criminality (and for psychiatric care, as his brother argues). His condition as an escaped convict is much the same—he is only able to work sporadically, he cannot pursue the goal of heteronormative domesticity, and he is left with a life of criminality. The film makes his impotence and his marginality that much clearer in the closing scenes. When his would-be wife asks him how he survives as a fugitive, he desperately and emphatically hisses: “I steal!” Burns's narrative portrays a subject who has not simply been made victim to the neoplatation brutality of the chain gang, but who has been continually disciplined by a much larger “carceral continuum.”<sup>54</sup> He makes clear that he knows what the norms are, and he desires them, but yet those remain perpetually out of

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52 Burns 12.

53 Fishman notes a correlation between the military and the prison, and asserts that homosexual military officers often find themselves in prison and/or morally damaged: “In the United States Navy, for instance, men who have deviated from the normal sex instinct, have been punished severely, some of them being sent to prison for long terms. Every possible effort has been made in the Navy to prevent such practices, the most usual being to keep the men occupied mentally and physically almost to the point of exhaustion in order to divert their thoughts from sex. . . This has left its scars on their personalities for the remainder of their lives. Notwithstanding all these efforts, men deprived of the society of women continue to give expression to what is a biological necessity, no matter how it may be regarded by those who adhere or pretend to adhere to a more rigid moral code” (19-20).

54 Foucault argues that: “. . .the lyricism of marginality may find inspiration in the image of the 'outlaw', the great social nomad, who prowls on the confines of docile, frightened order. But it is not on the fringes of society and through successive exiles that criminality is born, but by means of ever more closely placed insertions, under ever more insistent surveillance, by an accumulation of disciplinary coercion. In short, the carceral archipelago assures, in the depths of the social body, the formation of delinquency on the basis of subtle illegalities, the overlapping of the latter by the former and the establishment of a specified criminality” (*Discipline* 301). Burns's final declaration “I Steal!” is devoid of any such lyricism of marginality, defying conventions of the picaresque narrative that H. Bruce Franklin says are rejected by much of the literature produced by U.S. prisoners. Rather Burns's narrative reveals the “insistent surveillance” that marks him, and those condemned to prison, as perpetual criminals. The criminal is ever bound by the prison, even beyond the supposed boundaries of institutional control.

reach, and not just due to circumstance but due to the effects of punishment that have accompanied his interpellation within at least two key interrelated networks of discipline—the military and the prison. He continually faces his life as a bound man, despite the privileges affording to white bourgeois masculinity.

Burns's depiction of white male impotence dramatizes the sentiments of many penologists, sexologists, and prison administrators in the 1920s and 1930s who determined prison sexuality to be *the* problem of the modern prison. These studies came to an overwhelming, if contradictory, consensus that the prison produces excesses that it claims to contain. Subsumed within and integral to these studies were ideas about race, gender, and labor. In his 1934 publication *Sex in Prison: Revealing Sex Conditions in American Prisons*, Inspector of Prisons Joseph Fishman echoes Havelock Ellis's claim that: “Homosexual practices everywhere flourish and abound in prison. . .”<sup>55</sup> For Fishman and others, the problem of sexual deviance in prisons was the result of a biological urge that was denied to otherwise heterosexual men in the absence of women. “Sexual starvation” took its psychological and physical toll on men, rendering them weak to immorality and practices that they would otherwise never engage in.<sup>56</sup> Studies such as Fishman's and those

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55 The key word here is homosexual “practices.” Those who interrogated homosexuality, for the most part, considered prison sexuality as a situational set of practices, which they strategically distanced from those gender-deviant prisoners who were labeled as having a homosexual *identity*. Fishman then includes Ellis's quotation from a doctor who claims: ‘Sexuality is one of the most troublesome elements with which we have to contend. I have no data as to the number of prisoners here who are sexually perverse. In my pessimistic moments I should feel like saying that all were; but probably eighty per cent would be a fair estimate’ (79). Fishman classifies prisoners into several categories: Homosexuals Who Come to Prison, Homosexuals Formed in Prisons, juvenile delinquents, and (the marginally discussed) interracial lesbian prisoners. With each of these he both reaffirms essentialist constructions of sexuality and attests to their indistinguishability. Resulting from these studies would be the segregation of those prisoners deemed homosexual threats. These were normally criminals who displayed non-normative gendering practices and those who were chronic convicts. “On the other hand, there are homosexuals who are simply male prostitutes” (58). In Fishman's construction male sex workers were always deemed “homosexuals.”

56 Regina Kunzel argues that “situational homosexuality,” such as that practiced by prisoners in gender-segregated institutions, was a twentieth-century invention: “Situational homosexuality must be understood, then, not as a description of sexual acts produced by the presumably ahistorical forces of circumstance and

of prison doctors such as Louis Berg make it clear what the stakes are: the prisons produce a population of men who could very well be forever “morally damaged.”<sup>57</sup>

The social world of the prison, which claimed to protect society from criminals and to reform the criminals themselves, was instead producing men who would pose a bigger threat upon release. The prison was itself a pathogen. Fishman goes on to cite sexologist William J. Robinson in his consideration of the problem of sexual “starvation” of prisoners: “What is the result of this attempt at chaining or imprisoning of the sex instinct? What is the result of the numerous obstacles which have been put in the way of the normal satisfaction of the sex urge? The result is that we are becoming a nation of impotents. The most widespread of all disorders to men in any Anglo-Saxon community is sexual impotence. . . .”<sup>58</sup> Robinson and Fishman make clear the threat that sexually “normal” white men might be made into non-reproductive sexual deviants.<sup>59</sup> Robinson extends this claim to the conclusion that the nation's well-being is at stake. Implicit in his fears about “Anglo Saxon” male virility is a fear of the hypersexual non-white threat. People of color were being incarcerated at increasing and disproportionate rates across the country, as they had

environment but as a rhetorical maneuver by which midcentury social scientists sought to contain the disruptive meanings of sexual acts apparently unlinked to, and therefore unsettling to, sexual identity.” “Situating Sex: Prison Sexual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8.3 (2002) 265.

57 See *Revelations of a Prison Doctor*.

58 Qtd. Fishman 15.

59 In her historical reading of the prison lesbian, Estelle Freedman argues that there was a focus on male homosexuality in early decades of twentieth century but not on the problem of the prison lesbian until the 1950s. The focus on white women previous to that was on their heterosexual promiscuity and/or their involvement in sex work. Black women, on the other hand, were considered to be “naturally” hypersexual, and therefore were not pathologized as deviant homosexuals, per se. Importantly, she notes that there was concern in the early decades of the century about homosexual relationships between black and white women in prison. Joseph Fishman notes the trend of white women to be attracted to butch black women in prison, because presumably, they were drawn by racial taboo and the performance of masculinity: “white women who play the passive part in homosexuality are more likely to have affairs with colored women than are white men with colored men. . . .Some administrators of women's prisons think it is because white women associate masculine strength and virility with dark color” (29). For more on this, see Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000) 33-38.

been in the South since the “abolition” of slavery. The subtext for the prison sex panic, then, was that white men were being contaminated by “prisonization,” a process that had historically been racialized. This underlined the instability surrounding the criteria for citizenship that equated whiteness with the heteronormative and the patriarchal. If white men could be transformed permanently into aberrant non-citizens, then perhaps the prison was working against its own ends. This, too, is the underlying concern of Burns's narrative. Fishman states that sexology tells us that all individuals are bi-sexual and might become homosexual given the right/wrong circumstances.<sup>60</sup> His anxiety remains that it might be difficult to distinguish (and therefore to contain) the homosexual in prison. The layered citations here point to the palimpsest that was (and is) the interdisciplinary construction of the criminal/homosexual. As Foucault argues, these discourses center on the disciplined body even as they claim to transcend the body through the reformation of the criminal as a moral subject who, depending upon his position, may or may not be credited with having a “soul” or “conscience.”<sup>61</sup>

### **Contesting the Chain Gang Neoplantation, Asserting Black Sexual Normativity**

Narratives that critiqued the neoplantation prison, unlike the penological studies of

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60 Fishman argues that homosexuality does not entirely define a person's identity and is in fact quite commonplace in society, saying, it is not “generally known that homosexuals possess as many differences in personality, character, and mentality as do normal people. The mere fact that they are homosexuals no more makes them all similar than the fact that men who smoke or play the piano are similar. Homosexuality is but one phase of their personalities just as heterosexuality is but one phase of the personality of a normal person. Many homosexuals are well educated, cultured persons who are perfectly at ease in any society, and are capable of holding responsible, high salaried positions in all walks of life. They are prevalent in almost all industries and professions. They can be found occupying positions of importance in the theatre, film, music, literature, decorative arts, business and industry. . .” (*Sex in Prison* 58).

61 Angela Davis's critique of Foucault is that he fails to consider how black men and women were dehumanized to the extent that they were not considered to have “souls,” both during and following slavery.

prisoner sexuality, indicted the region's aberrant culture of violence and poverty as responsible for the penitentiary's excesses. Southern practices of enslavement colored the chain gang, spectacles of punishment, and corruption of justice. At points, the invocation of slavery worked in concert with a more pointed critique of how prisons created an unfree, largely African-American laboring criminal class. The fugitive convict Robert Burns and his fellow critics of the chain gang assailed its practices as “ancient barbaric and mediaeval.”<sup>62</sup> He catalogs the various techniques and instruments of torture used on convicts to punish them for escape or for resisting discipline. Burns's perspective occludes, however, how segregation worked to ensure that black convicts were subject to generalized (rather than individualized) tactics of discipline and punishment that were continually being tailored to the needs of a modernizing state. As Lichtenstein argues: “The chain gangs which built the roads of the twentieth-century South became an enduring symbol of southern backwardness, brutality, and racism; in fact, they were the embodiment of the Progressive ideals of southern modernization, penal reform, and racial moderation. In this duality the southern chain gang replicated the most significant feature of the convict lease system it had superseded.” More radical critiques of the chain gang pointed to its relationship to the ongoing development of the neoplatation prison and formations of the capitalist state.

John Spivak's 1932 novel *Georgia Nigger* in many ways picks up where the Georgia Peon's 1904 narrative of the debt and servitude on the Georgia plantation ends. Spivak's novel is a thinly veiled fictional account of the vast system of legalized slavery in Georgia that, as the title indicates, emphasizes the racialized degradation of black Southern

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62 Burns 170.

laborers to a salacious degree. In this narrative, he depicts David, a young man whose story begins on the eve of his release from the chain gang. That liberation is a false promise, though, and he finds himself fated to a life of chain gang labor, at times working for the state and otherwise imprisoned by a private landowner who preys on criminalized black workers. The novel was the result of his journalistic investigation into the practices of labor and punishment on the Georgia chain gang. In its aim, it shared much in common with Burns' written and cinematic accounts of his time on the chain gang: it represented a prison system that was fueled by corruption and harsh sentences that worked toward the aim of ensuring an unfree laboring class. It differs from *I am a Fugitive*, however, in that it focuses on how the penal system used race as a means to criminalize the black agricultural working class of neoplantation Georgia. The novel focuses on the cyclical incarceration of David, a character Spivak identifies as a composite of the many actual black chain gang and plantation workers whom he met during his investigations in the region. The novel begins as David is about to be released from the chain gang to return to work on his family's farm as sharecroppers for a ruthless planter. David soon finds himself back in court on fabricated charges of gambling, fighting, and resisting arrest. Against his will, he is taken into the care of a local planter who pays his fines to the court in exchange for his labor on his farm. The debt, as David well knows, will be perpetual, and he is sentenced by extralegal violence to a life of backbreaking work that is neither distinct from the chain gang in terms of the conditions and terms under which he labors nor is it divorced from the network of carceral power that ensures the continuance of the state-run chain gang. In every case, his labor is not his own and the "contract" under which he labors is one he enters into unwillingly. The polemic of the novel centers around the peonage of the black



worker as another form of slavery, which dehumanizes workers and reduces them to a devalued state lower than animals. As one chain gang worker puts it: “Niggers got no rights. Mules got rights. Mules cost money. . .”<sup>63</sup> When an indentured laborer angers the planter, he is murdered and thrown into the swamp to teach the others a lesson. David remarks that the black laborer is now worth less than a slave: “Dee's father had brought eighteen hundred dollars in the open market and no man throws eighteen hundred dollars into a swamp in a fit of anger, but Limpy had cost Deering only five dollars. . . And there were lots of five dollar niggers. . . to be taken from jails and chain gangs or hired for an advance. . . the south was full of them.”<sup>64</sup> In Spivak's representation, the penal system produces labor that is worth less than the individual bodies of slaves were. The commodification of human life has been replaced by devalued, indebted labor. In this equation, the body is worth next to nothing.

In this system of disposable labor, Spivak's characters experience racialization as the primary technology of the neoplantation. However, sexuality is at several key points the means by which power is exercised. The hypersexualization of black men justifies both their policing and the sexual “license” they are afforded.<sup>65</sup> Like the prison inspectors and reform advocates, Spivak depicts homosexuality on the chain gang as yet another foul product of a flawed system. His critique, however, insists that the dehumanization of the black convict in particular, produces a compromised sexual environment. The vulnerability of their bodies to chain gang torture techniques such as the stocks, the “sweat box,” or

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63 217. All quotes that follow are taken from *Georgia Nigger* (Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1969).

64 Spivak 100-1.

65 Racialized sexual norms determine the means by which he attempts escape from Mr. Deering's farm. When he implies to the guard that he's going to rendezvous with the Cook's wife, the guard replies: “Well, if you gits yo'se'f a woman hit ain fo' me to stop you!” (112).

weighted ankle spikes, is bound to their “nakedness.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, the homosocial world of the prison prevents black Southerners from living the “normal” life to which they are entitled and which they desire. Through the character of David, Spivak constructs homosexuality as immoral and as antithetical to black cultural ideals. This becomes clear when David, who is punished for escaping by being forced to wear twenty pound spikes around his ankles as he labors, finds sympathy in an older convict, Smallpox, who is a veteran of the chain gang. As a “lick leader” Smallpox determines the pace of the gang's labor through work songs. He notices that, in his pain, David cannot keep rhythm, and in the following scene, he offers to help:

The twenty pound spikes pulled David ankle deep in the loose earth. The large brogans the commissary had given him filled with soil. His heart pounded. Muscles ached. . . In a momentary breathing space while wagons were being changed Smallpox whispered to David: 'Lick too fas'? I'll make it, he said doggedly. . . .  
 “Reck'n we'll hit up a slow tune,” Smallpox said with a wink.  
 David nodded gratefully. The huge nigger's deep voice started a rhythmic chant, like the cry of his savage ancestors praying to their gods in the jungle.<sup>67</sup>

H. Bruce Franklin, Alex Lichtenstein, and other labor historians document the significance of work songs as a means to control the conditions of the labor as well as the extent to which their labor was unfreely extracted. Here Spivak shows the use of a song as a means to alleviate the sufferings of tortured laborers, given no respite from the day, as well. The

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66 Spivak's first depiction of the chain gang begins with prisoners in bed at night, in a racially segregated cage, seen from the perspective of David as he awaits release: “There were thirteen men in the cage with him—nine negroes and five whites—sprawled on thin mattresses covering the iron bunks ranging the length of the cage on either side in three three-decker tiers. The six nearest the solid steel door were reserved for whites. The fourteen men were naked to the waist. Their exposed bodies shone with sweat even in the semi-darkness” (2). He represents the chain gang and its attendant organizations of unfree labor as disproportionately targeting black men (and their families). Their bodies, in particular, are unjustly treated as whipping posts in one way or another, and “nakedness” is central to Spivak's depiction of dehumanization. Dehumanization is to be without protection for the body.  
 67 Spivak 182.

narrative voice, however, relies on tropes of the primitive savage as a means to ground these songs in an African “tradition.” The workers' solidarity with one another places value in collective resistance, while problematically relying on essentialist racial constructions.

What prevents an appreciation of this gesture of solidarity for David, however, is Smallpox's “wink” and what he reads as his overly thoughtful attention to him. David concludes this can only mean one thing: “If you are young and have been in a chain gang before you know what it means when a strong convict offers you friendship. There was a Snake Fork cook who had been on chain gangs for fifteen years in different counties who was comforted by a fifteen year old boy doing three months, whom the warden gave him as a helper.”<sup>68</sup> While he does not overtly state that theirs was a sexual relationship, he implies that the longtime chain gang cook entered into a coerced intimacy with the young boy, under the direction of the warden. The queerness of their relationship is rendered, not through a reference to homosexual acts or to a preexistent homosexual identity, but rather through the proximity and unequal power relations produced by chain gang authority.

David then considers Smallpox's favor and remembers that his father had warned him “that to sleep with a man was as evil in the eyes of the Lord as sleeping with a beast in the field.” Prison intimacies counter patriarchal Christianity's moral mandate. He confronts a surprised Smallpox asking what his expectations are of him:

“Lissen,” David said quietly, “I bin on a chain gang befo'.”

“Tough, eh?”

“Lissen, Mistuh, doan start nothin' wid me---”

The other convicts sat up at the prospect of a fight. The shotgun guard turned in their direction, sensing trouble. . . .Smallpox spat contemptuously and walked away.<sup>69</sup>

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68 Spivak 182.

69 Spivak 182.

David's association of homosexuality with bestiality is grounded in the biblical codes that were invoked to condemn nonheterosexual intimacy. But in the context of the novel, David's memory of his father and his sexual moralizing works to construct black culture as heteronormative and patriarchal. It also suggests that the black worker, at every turn, resists being made into a beast. His memory of other chain gangs and relationships between older convicts and young boys, however, implies that the penal system not only allows for, but in fact structures, sexualities that would otherwise be seen as aberrant and immoral within the community. David's conversation with Smallpox indicates that those relationships were not uncommon and that sex was used to establish unequal power dynamics between prisoners. This scene also reminds readers that the "shotgun guard" and the warden violently regulate intimacies between prisoners—they create the conditions for intimacy (as between the cook and the boy) and then look for "trouble" between men as reason to make a spectacle of their power.

In the novel, alliances between convicts are continually severed by the carceral labor technologies that promote suspicion, mistrust, and hopelessness. Spivak represents the neoplantation as a hierarchical structure made flexible as chain gang laborers are made to believe that they might be treated as individuals (and so made to believe they will or will not be punished accordingly) and yet are continually disciplined as a whole without distinction. For this reason, David does not believe that Smallpox would be willing to risk punishment for his sake unless he was expecting a return. The tone of this passage suggests that David is wrong in his suspicions but suggests that his homophobic panic is justified. In other words, the novel seems to long for the possibility of resistant intimacies, but does not

allow that those might be fostered in relation to a queer sexual alliance among prisoners.<sup>70</sup>

The scenario of the younger prisoner as victim of older prisoners' sexual advances was recurrent in the penologists' studies of prison sexuality as well.

Fishman writes:

Every year large numbers of boys, adolescent youths, and young men are made homosexuals, either temporarily or permanently, in the prisons of America. This unfortunate condition is achieved not only through the negation of normal sex habits, but because of the constant talk concerning sex, enforced idleness, the loneliness of one's cell; and finally the relentless pressure of the "wolves" or "top men" housed among the normal inmates in the prison, who "spot" those among the younger prisoners whom they wish to make their "girls," and who "court" them with a persistence, a cunning, and a singleness of purpose which is almost incredible in its viciousness.<sup>71</sup>

Fishman's argument hinges upon a distinction between "normal sex habits" and those aberrant practices resulting from the conditions of modern imprisonment. As in other prison sexuality studies, he attempts to explain how perversion is both produced by prisons and by the pre-existing predilections of inmates disposed to gender variance (especially the recurrent figure of the "gal-boy" who transforms normal men into "wolves"). In his formulation, queerness, then, is not only rendered visible on the individual bodies of prisoners but in the relationships that form between them. He suggests that the relationship between "wolves" and younger "girls" is inherently violent. His study, along with many others, displaces the violence of imprisonment itself onto the relationships between prisoners. While he asserts that sex talk, idleness, and loneliness lead to homosexuality in prison, and calls for alleviation of those conditions, he disallows for a critique of what

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<sup>70</sup> In the novel, men attempt often attempt escape in pairs, despite the fact that this might render them more vulnerable to capture. The possibility that men might rely on one another, despite being subject to a system that pits them against one another, is more often than not reaffirmed. This makes David's moral aversion to homosexuality all the more likely to be Spivak's way of combating depictions of black culture as licentious or "bestial" as well as his way of suggesting that the prison's "queering" of relationships between men was an obstacle in the path of resistance.

<sup>71</sup> Fishman 84.

Foucault calls “the body of the prison.” In other words, he maps out ways in which the prison ought to further regulate and discipline the relationships between prisoners in order to combat the threat that they pose to the state and to the society that becomes vulnerable upon their release.

In Spivak's novel, David fears that a favor from Smallpox will come with a price, the price of sexual acts or an ongoing relationship in which David might always be in debt to Smallpox for his help on the work line. When David escapes and is caught again, he attempts to protest by silence. He refuses to be complicit in the system that lands him in an endless cycle of debt, a cycle that continually deprives him of the right to protect his body from abuse and torture and to reap the fruits of his labor. Therefore, the sexual relationship that he fears Smallpox might require becomes yet another way in which his body and his labor might become part of a system of debt. Though there would be no commodification of his body, sex represents both the labor he would render and the worth(lessness) of his body. The novel concludes with David punished for escape, reduced to the status of “a living mummy in an upright coffin” in the solitary confinement of “the sweat box,” which was “too narrow to turn around in,” with only a “small spot of light entering a two by four inch air hole in the top.”<sup>72</sup> Just released from this confinement, he regains consciousness “lying naked on a lower bunk in the cage. The handcuffs and stinking clothes had been taken off and a blanket thrown over him.”<sup>73</sup> In Spivak's novel, the naked body is the confined body, to which no protection, dignity, or rights are afforded. Therefore, this final scene of subjection, in which he is covered up with a blanket, marks him as powerless in ways no less insidious than the violent spectacle of the sweat box torture.

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72 Spivak 238.

73 Spivak 240.

### **The Walled Neoplantation: The Problem of Sexuality in the Prison Narrative of a Revolutionary**

In these male-authored neoplantation prison narratives, moments of sexual crisis and confrontation highlight the prisoner's position of unfreedom and of dehumanization. But, more than that, they represent modes of segregation as facilitating unequal power relations within and beyond the neoplantation prison's jurisdiction. In the case of Robert Burns, the racially integrated, yet gender-segregated world of the chain gang produces anxiety about the value of whiteness within the abject world of the prison, and consequently he continually seeks to fulfill the promise his white heterosexual bourgeois status would otherwise guarantee. For Spivak's character David, the indistinguishable positions of the chain gang laborer and the indentured peon are always racialized and sexualized as nonnormative. His perpetual enslavement is predicated upon total bodily subjugation and one of his ways to resist this is to assert his moral opposition to homosexuality. In these texts, the possibility of intimate alliance between prisoners is offered but then foreclosed and heteronormative masculinity is reaffirmed as the ideal.

Prisoner narratives, such as Angelo Herndon's 1937 *Let Me Live*, sought to complicate the idea of the "morally damaged" convict by explicitly pathologizing the prison, rather than the queer relationships between prisoners, and the neoplantation social structure that it maintained. Herndon, a young black communist activist in the South, imprisoned for organizing workers, approaches the Southern prison from a radical ideological position that sees the prison as a means to physically and psychologically debilitate the body of the revolutionary. As he had been sentenced based on early

nineteenth-century laws meant to criminalize slave insurrection, he indicts the prison system as a continuation of slavery.<sup>74</sup> The law that attempted to shut down Herndon's (until then) successful organizing efforts of black and white workers in Atlanta was one that had been revised in 1871 to indict all insurrections, regardless of the race of the offender who made “any attempt, by persuasion or otherwise, to induce others to join in any combined resistance to the lawful authority of the State.” Conviction resulted in possible death or not less than five years confinement in the penitentiary.<sup>75</sup> This allowed for courts and/or judges to apply widely varying sentences to those convicted. Because he was both “Negro” and “Red,” Herndon faced the harshest sentencing. Before he is ever granted a trial, Herndon finds himself in the Death House of the Atlanta penitentiary.

From Herndon's perspective, both the law, its application, and the modern Southern prison, historically guaranteed race and class hierarchy. His experience in prison, however, teaches him that the prison's technologies of torture, discipline and murder are made strategically individual and yet developed to target all: “Our jailers were very inventive. They had imagination. They were never at a loss to discover new ways to torment us. Their cruelty was raw. It hurt like an open wound.” While his supporters protested the singling out of Herndon for torture, Herndon, more often than not, speaks of the damage done to a collective. As he puts it, “there could have been no more ideal stage setting for a melodrama.” Herndon sees the torturous conditions in the prison Death House—leaking pipes, open sewage drains, rotten food—as not the product of neglect but of a strategically staged violence. Under these circumstances, in an eight by twelve foot cage with no lights,

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74 He identifies slavery as the ongoing oppression of the working class, both black and white.

75 Herndon 204.



he realizes: “I had never understood before what it meant to be buried alive. Now I knew.”<sup>76</sup> As a prison slave, he lives the social death Orlando Patterson ascribes to slaves as powerlessness in exchange for a “conditional commutation,” in which the prospect of death is not erased, but deferred.<sup>77</sup> Rather the living death, like that described by David in *Georgia Nigger* and Herndon here, is the surrogate for actual death. Forced to surrender his own claim on his life to the state in exchange for the status of a social nonperson, Herndon, by his own account, refuses to be broken by maintaining hope for liberation. He credits his survival to the relationships he builds with other inmates and with the support of his comrades on the outside. He consistently places the suffering and triumph of the individual in relation to the power of the communities to which he belongs.

The exception to this is Herndon's treatment of those he identifies as homosexuals within the prison. The relationships formed under the influence of sexual deviance become for Herndon a powerful site of disidentification. Like Fishman, he critiques homosexual practices as the diseased product of prison conditions rampant within the Atlanta jail where he is incarcerated:

What were men to do with themselves in their state of perpetual idleness? They were not given any work. . . It was but natural that under such unhealthy circumstances the prisoners' sexual instincts and practices should have become diseased. . . It is noteworthy at this point to remark that these relatively harmless pastimes were indulged in mostly by the better elements among the prisoners. The others, hardened in crime and degenerated in their tastes and habits, looked for a more concrete outlet for their sexual appetites. They preyed upon all the young boys, some of whom were mere children!<sup>78</sup>

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76 Herndon 251.

77 Under slavery, “the execution was suspended only as long as the slave acquiesced in his powerlessness. The master was essentially a ransomer. What he bought or acquired was the slave's life, and restraints on the master's capacity wantonly to destroy his slave did not undermine his claim on that life.” (*Slavery and Social Death*, 5).

78 Herndon 209.

Like Spivak, Herndon bases his critique in a discourse of “bestiality.” Prisons, like slavery, made men into beasts. His argument, following Spivak, is that the prison power structure not only sanctioned sexual violence between prisoners, it also depended upon it. Unlike Fishman, he implicates the guards, saying: “. . .they were old hands at it. They behaved in a callous manner. These incidents afforded them endless amusement.”<sup>79</sup> I think Herndon might be strategically vague about exactly what the guards were “old hands” at doing here. Though he never specifically portrays the guards as sexual aggressors, he suggests their spectatorship is both complicity and a mode of participation. Their “amusement” is yet another means to signal their power. In this case, watching inmates subordinate one another through sexual violence is revealed as a disciplinary technique.<sup>80</sup>

Herndon depicts sex between prisoners as a public spectacle in which the panopticon provides for collective voyeurism. In the following passage, he describes a daily routine that fosters sexual intimacy, thereby undercutting Fishman's argument that the isolation of the cell is to blame for homosexuality in prison. A scene of temporary liberation becomes the means for state-orchestrated sexual violence: “Every day at nine o'clock the cells were opened by the turnkeys, and the men circulated freely in the entire prison block for the rest of the day. They had access to all the cells and thus could come in

<sup>79</sup> Herndon 211.

<sup>80</sup> Saidiya Hartman's analysis of the relationship between the slave's “good times” and white enjoyment under slavery might be applied to this scene of carceral sexuality: “Like the imputation of lasciviousness that dissimulated and condoned the sexual violation of the enslaved, and the punitive recognition of will and responsibility that justified punishment while denying the slave the ability to forge contracts, testify, or sustain natal and conjugal relations, enjoyment registered and effaced the violence of property relations. . . Thus. . . the fixation on the slave's 'good times' conceals the affiliations of white enjoyment and black subjection and the affective dimensions of mastery and servitude” (*Scenes of Subjection*, 25). What I would argue, then, is that Herndon reveals the enjoyment of white officials of the state in scenes of sexual subjection that were naturalized by assumptions of black male lasciviousness. The master/slave relationship Hartman delineates is transformed into a state guard/convict relationship, encoded with norms of race, gender, and sexuality that justified unfreedom under slavery, and now unfreedom within the neoplantation prison.

close contact with one another. This made it possible for the prisoners with homosexual inclinations to go prowling around for their private pleasures. “Love making” was carried on in full sight of everybody. (Frequently I had to turn my eyes away in disgust and pity.)”<sup>81</sup> Though Herndon claims to have had to “turn away” in “disgust” and “pity,” he consciously serves as a witness to the orgiastic social world lived in the prison. Like Fishman and other penologists of the era, he does not label the inmates as aligned with a homosexual identity, but instead suggests that these inclinations or behaviors are situational. The foremost targets of his disgust are those inmates who are young boys gendered as “Old Ladies,” who are “hunted” like big game by older prisoners.<sup>82</sup> Those relationships he sets apart based on the violence involved, the practice of gender “inversions,” and the evolution of sex into sex work. “Gal-boys” or “Old Ladies” learned to wear girl's underwear and to “behave like the lowest streetwalker.”<sup>83</sup> In his indictment of the prison, his judgments reveal a conjunction of gender and sexual norms reinforced in Marxist ideology and in dominant culture. This is complicated, however, by his critique of the prison as an inherently racist institution. In other words, he depicts homosexual, gender variant black sex workers in prison as the most defiled product of a capitalist society dependent upon the dehumanization of black men. Earlier in the autobiography, he likewise suggests that the lynch mob is racist and sexually degenerate, turning the stereotypes of black deviance back onto white violence.<sup>84</sup> In his critique of Marx and historical materialism, Roderick Ferguson argues that Marx took the prostitute to be the “obvious and

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81 Herndon 211.

82 Herndon 210.

83 Herndon 211.

84 Herndon 167—“One thing all lynch mobs have in common: their unmentionable sexual degeneracy. It is indeed significant to note that every flogging, every beating and every lynching has as its point of emphasis the defilement or mutilation of the sex organs of the victim! . . .”

transparent site of capital,” as here Herndon takes the prison “gal-boy” sexworker to be the transparent site of the capitalist state's penitentiary. Like Marx, Herndon equates “the hegemonic discourse about the prostitute, a discourse that cast [“her”] as the site of immorality, vice, and corruption, with [the?] reality of a burgeoning capitalist economy.”<sup>85</sup> The result, according to Ferguson, is that both liberal and revolutionary projects were invested in the heteronormative and the heteropatriarchal as the goal.<sup>86</sup>

In a move that seems to contradict his political investment in the wholesale critique of the neoplatation prison, Herndon offers a sympathetic portrayal of an older convict who attempts to bring charges against homosexual convicts. An old man who “angrily disapproved of the bestiality among some of the men” tries to indict a number of homosexual prisoners, but is instead beaten up by those prisoners. When he tries to press charges against them for homosexuality, his case is denied: “As an indictment would have meant laying the sores open of the entire prison system, the corrupt politicians saw to it that the charge never reached the Grand Jury.”<sup>87</sup> Herndon never fails to align homosexuality in prison with convict-against-convict violence. In keeping with Spivak's assessment, prisoner resistance is precluded by the divisiveness of sexual relationships predicated upon power differentials. In his representation of homosexual prisoners, there is no possibility for “gal boys” to become agents of resistance themselves. They are repeatedly only assigned victim status or spotlighted as the symbols of prison corruption. In his support of the old man's case here, he argues that the bodies and practices of individual prisoners cannot be subject to standards to which the entire institution is not subject. He does, nonetheless, support the

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85 Ferguson 10.

86 Ferguson 10.

87 Herndon 212.

(re)criminalization of those prisoners who practice homosexuality, even though this is a practice that almost always means rape in Herndon's view.<sup>88</sup>

Like Robert Burns, Herndon longs for intimacy that can be abstracted as “fine feelings”: “Unless one has had the doubtful benefit of a stay in prison, it is hardly possible to grasp fully the viciousness of life there. Men who even once had a spark of humanity have it soon extinguished in the degrading atmosphere. An indefinable air of something slimy, monstrous and unnatural hangs over the entire prison. There is no room in it for any fine feelings, for love of men or of nature.”<sup>89</sup> Though he describes his own close friendships (non-sexual, of course) with other inmates, his discursive project of protest against capital and the state relies upon bourgeois ideals such as “fine feelings,” “love of men” (interestingly enough), and love of nature. His critique, like Marx's, is therefore limited by its reliance on bourgeois heteronormative ideals about bodies, intimacy, and racialized, sexualized labor. Echoing many penologists and criminologists of the era, he suggests that “the criminal is the state’s biggest crime.”<sup>90</sup> Its crime, according to Herndon, is that it reduces the black working class to a subhuman state of ignorant, sexual bestiality.

The humanist discourse he relies on compromises his larger project of cross-racial, class-

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88 Fishman cites a case, also brought about by inmates at the Atlanta State Penitentiary: “. . . a group of prisoners, some of them homosexuals, some with long criminal records, or both, preferred charges of homosexuality against six or seven of the officers of the prison, civilians as well as members of the uniformed police. They produced numerous affidavits signed by prisoners, some of them reciting in great detail, alleging that the officials had indulged in homosexual union with inmates, and demanding that an investigation be made. . . The District Attorney went ahead with the case with the result that the unfortunate officials were thoroughly humiliated by unnecessary publicity which the case received, although the accused were acquitted without the jury even leaving the box” (74-5). This is perhaps the same case that Herndon refers to. In Fishman's account, though, the guards were the targets of the inmates' charges, not the homosexual inmates. Fishman presumes the guards' innocence though he does admit that some prison guards wrongly turn a blind eye to prisoners' sexual behavior. He is unwilling to admit that the institution itself directly participates in violence, but instead suggests its complicity in the formation of homosexual practices.

89 Herndon 209.

90 From Benjamin Karpman's 1948 prison sex study: “Sex Life in Prison” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 38.5 (Jan.- Feb. 1948).

based resistance to the criminal capitalist state. He begins to critique the body of the prison itself as “slimy, monstrous, and unnatural,” but then displaces that critique onto the bodies of the queered prisoner. In doing so, “the indefinable air” becomes defined by the production of gender and sexual deviance from a liberal norm that always disembodies and renders them as “things” that might be categorized as “finer” or as “monstrous” and unnatural. The prison allows “no room” for the possibility of a critique from the inside, from those bodies themselves, and Herndon's voice of protest relies on a self-construction that he, like Burns, somehow remains outside of that non-normativity. He is unable to identify with the gal-boy sex worker and so inevitably conforms in some ways to the very discourses of normalcy that he seeks to rebel against. In taking up Fishman's argument that “idleness” produces destructive sexualities, he fails to articulate how the surplus labor force that has been caged remains so in part because of intersecting discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and criminality.

### **The Neoplantation Penitentiary: The Carceral and the Conjugal**

In turning back to Mississippi's State Penitentiary at Parchman Farm, I want to consider how a neoplantation model more closely resembling the cultural landscape and social model of plantation slavery adapted technologies of race, gender, sexuality, and labor to the project of penal reform. Unlike the prisoners of Herndon's jail, Parchman convicts always labored in service of private capital and/or the state. The chain gang model that was made mobile in order to build Georgia's rural and urban infrastructure was maintained as a stationary, if expansive, plantation structure. For decades, however, it had no walls. Its boundaries were maintained by surveillance, by trustees (trusted inmates who had “earned”

the privilege of policing their fellow inmates), prison guards (and their guns), and dogs. And, of course, the plantation prison relied on an extensive rural network that could be relied upon to pass on information about escaped convicts or to apprehend the convicts themselves. Parchman, like the chain gangs of Georgia and other Southern states, constructed itself as an imagined boundaryless terrain of discipline and punishment. Its jurisdiction and its regulations were dictated by the state, but there was little accountability, and so techniques of torture were carried out in the isolation of its endless fields. Even the prisoners often had little idea what might be happening on other parts of the plantation. Unlike Herndon's jail where prisoners all watched one another when the turnkeys opened the cells daily, Parchman's separate camp units ensured a decentralized penal structure. Numerous small camp units operated on different parts of the prison farm, differentiated based on their labor (and their product), their gender, their race, and the severity of their sentences and crimes.

In 1900, the state purchased the over fourteen thousand acres of Mississippi Delta land to be the new site of the state penitentiary, and in so doing, vowed to usher in a new era of prison politics in the state. The convict leasing system had been denounced as a corrupt and bloody solution to crime that had benefited only a select few, while the plantation prison they sought to institute would be a profitable venture for the state as a whole. According to William Banks Taylor's history *Down on Parchman Farm*, the penitentiary did not become fully developed until "reformer" governor James Vardaman vowed to turn Parchman into a "moral hospital."<sup>91</sup> While on the plantation, "the work ethic could be instilled in convicts only through a comprehensive and systematically pursued

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<sup>91</sup> *Down on Parchman Farm: The Great Prison in the Mississippi Delta* (Columbus: Ohio State U P, 1999) 28.

program of incentives, he thought, and other social instincts might be inculcated by the influence of Christian doctrine.”<sup>92</sup> His reform policies crafted a neoplatation vision that would shape the politics of race and criminality in the decades to follow. With black men comprising over eighty percent of the state prison population year after year in the decades that followed the Civil War, “the governor's quest to protect white rule narrowed the scope of his penal philosophy.”<sup>93</sup> From its foundation, Parchman was structured by the discourses of “criminal negroes” who were migrating to cities seeking “a way to live without honest toil” by “violating the safety of the white man's home.”<sup>94</sup> These discourses were coupled with paternalist rhetoric and practices that claimed to be to the benefit of the childlike black worker.<sup>95</sup> In the years that followed, black convicts cleared the land, built the camp structure, which would remain intact until the 1980s, and ensured that the fertile land would produce cash crops in abundance. In 1908, female prisoners joined the ranks of Parchman, adding to the labor supply by producing garments, canned food, and butchered livestock. By 1913, Parchman had cleared nearly a million dollars in profit over the span of two years.<sup>96</sup> “Fearing the private exploitation of convict labor, and ever pointing to the hefty revenues generated by penal farming, Vardaman and his allies frowned on any labor that carried convicts off state lands. Mississippi thus rejected the “good roads movement” so common among other Southern states in the early twentieth century, and few of the state's convicts were links in a 'chain gang.’”<sup>97</sup> This points to the major structural difference between the penal systems in Georgia and Mississippi (as well as perhaps to the disparity in

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92 Taylor 28.

93 Taylor 33.

94 Qtd in Taylor 32.

95 “The preservation of white rule necessitate politics of moral suasion and social indoctrination in all branches of public administration, but especially in the administration of legal punishment” (Taylor 33).

96 Taylor 40-1.

97 Taylor 45.



these states' development of infrastructure and industry in these decades): Georgia's chain gang was mobile and Mississippi's was "contained" by a decentralized landscape.

The penitentiary furthered disciplined convicts through the racially segregated conjugal visit. In 1969, penologist Columbus Hopper declared: "Parchman has the most liberal visitation and leave programs of any state penitentiary in the nation. . .As late as 1958, Parchman was the only American penal institution which permitted inmates to make home visits for reasons other than emergency."<sup>98</sup> The conjugal visit was just one of the reforms advocated by earlier penologists such as Fishman as a means to combat the problem of homosexuality in modern prisons. Hopper similarly advocates for the benefits of this practice, looks to Parchman as a test case for its efficacy, and traces the evolution of sexual policy at the prison in relation to its plantation architecture and the role that race, culture, and economics played. According to Hopper: "The conjugal visit has developed informally, and it is still best described as an informal, unofficial program. That is to say, when the practice began cannot be determined from the existing penitentiary records. . .One man, who had been employed there intermittently for over thirty-five years and who lived near the penitentiary and had knowledge of it even before his employment, said that conjugal visits were allowed as long ago as 1918."<sup>99</sup> In light of Taylor's description of the neoplantation as an adaptation of racist paternalism, then we must see the conjugal visit as a policy that was designed as yet another "positive incentive" in the project of creating a disciplined, racialized and sexualized labor force. The "privilege" of the conjugal visit was meted out along racial and gender lines (at least until the 1930s). The prison authorities experimented with the practice of allowing white men to have conjugal

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<sup>98</sup> Taylor 50.

<sup>99</sup> Taylor 52.

visits, but then abandoned this experiment because it supposedly incited conflict between inmates.<sup>100</sup> From its inception, however, black men, who were viewed as “naturally” more sexual, were allowed visits from wives, both common law and legal, and sex workers. A former employee of the prison in 1935 describes the situation as follows:

'An interesting but unique feature of the penitentiary system is in dealing with the races. As for example, no visitors of any type are allowed in the living quarters for white men unless they are chaperoned. Yet truck loads of women are permitted to enter the various camps for Negro men. Commercial prostitutes make their weekly visits to these camps and are permitted without any type of examination. Another interesting feature with regard to such actions, is that quarters are provided for these Negro women during their visits to the camps. During the day they occupy rooms on the basement floor of the central building. It was impossible for the writer, during the time of his employment, to obtain a definite reason for this unusual racial difference.'<sup>101</sup>

In effect, paternalist policies instituted an elaborate economy of sex work based on the construction of the insatiate black laborer as a threat to neoplatation order. While it is unclear who paid the bill for the sex workers, or whether these women even arrived of their own volition, it is clear that the prison administration did not institute this system out of generosity. The practice worked to shore up racial boundaries within the prison and beyond, to further the stereotype of black men as hypersexual and black women as a sexually available workforce. The conditions provided for the sex workers—being brought in by the “truckload” and then housed in the basement—suggest not just poor treatment, but a certain level of incarceration for them as well. This system interpellated “free” black women as subject to the conditions and terms of the neoplatation prison system. This earlier version of the “conjugal” visit would produce black prisoners' sexuality as non-

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100 Taylor 60.

101 Hutson “Mississippi's State Penal System,” qtd. in Columbus Hopper's *Sex in Prison: The Mississippi Experiment with Conjugal Visiting* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1969) 48.

normative (practiced outside the boundaries of marriage and family) and facilitate the total surveillance of prisoners' bodies. The realm of physical intimacy and pleasure was a disciplinary fantasy of the carceral state.<sup>102</sup> The “conjugal visit” functions as an adaptation of what Saidiya Hartman calls “the instrumental amusements of the plantation.” The neoplantation prison practices emphasize the “good times” had by the convicts, which, as under nineteenth-century slavery, displace the “excess of enjoyment” onto the slave, thereby obscuring the pleasures that the master violently extracts from black subjection. In this case, the master/“body” of the plantation prison might be said to obscure the violence it enacts in the spectacle of black convict pleasure.<sup>103</sup>

When the opportunity came for the prisoners of Parchman Farm to articulate their own views of the conjugal, they depicted it as violent, as a parallel to incarceration, and, at least in one instance, as queer. When the newspaper's first editor addresses the penitentiary's policy of conjugal visitation directly, he says that although the visits are “greatly desired,” they are “so mingled with galling circumstances as to turn them into bittersweets.” All visitors must submit to “the embarrassment of a personal 'search' prior to their admission to the visiting room and, while the visit lasts, are under the close

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102 Historical accounts of this system reaffirm it as an economy of pleasure, though they acknowledge it as a means to “discipline” black laborers. For example William Banks Taylor states: “Many of the convicts could think of nothing else but these visits. They sang of their women while working in the fields, often gazing toward faraway Front Camp and the blessed [railroad] depot. . . .” (59) Taylor equates the convict's conjugal visit with freedom, assuming that their gaze toward the railroad tracks that lead to and from the prison is a longing for their “women.” Essentially, he reaffirms the discourse that the prisoner finds freedom in sexual pleasure, if only temporary. This, he assumes, is why “the sergeants could reasonably anticipate a manageable labor force” following the bimonthly conjugal visits (60).

103 Parchman was first put on the cultural map when John and Alan Lomax, a father and son folkloric team, recorded the work songs of prison laborers in the fields to be archived at the Library of Congress. Many of the songs they recorded in the 1930s and later in the 1940s popularized the ballads sung to “Rosie” and the “Midnight Special,” presumably celebrating the conjugal visits of their wives and lovers. Following H. Bruce Franklin and others, however, I would argue that these songs code freedom from the prison in terms of romance and intimacy. See *Prison Songs: Historical Recordings from Parchman Farm 1947-48, Volume Two: Don'tcha Hear Poor Mother Calling?* (1997); <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lohtml/lohome.html>

surveillance of the guard.” Therefore the memory of the visit “lingers on in intermingled joy and sadness, fear and anxiety.”<sup>104</sup> When the editor goes on to describe the effects of confinement, he significantly compares prison life to that of a housewife. Significantly, then, the newspaper's early editions, published when the practice of conjugal visitation was still segregated, depicted the carceral and the conjugal as interrelated. When a sociology class visits Parchman and one of the students sees the convicts as jovial and at ease, he reports that maybe “the treatment was too good for prisoners.” Walter Kembro responds to this assessment by contesting that the appearance of contentment eclipses the damage done to the prisoner. He describes these psychological effects as “stir bugs”:

Man can grow accustomed to almost any hardship, yet unconsciously it works its ravages on the human condition. Confinement, uncertainty, suspense, and constant supervision begin to toll on the convict, and gradually he manifests that he is among the number of those afflicted with the penitentiary mental disorder known in prison parlance as 'stir-bugs'. The symptoms are peevishness, irritability, resentfulness, hatred and notions of persecution. . . These same symptoms are frequently found in housewives or professors who are obliged to live too confinedly.<sup>105</sup>

While the lash, or the “Black Annie” strap, was off and on still legally administered as physical punishment for convicts who (literally) stepped out of line in the cotton fields, Kembro chooses to focus on the perhaps unseen violences inflicted on the prisoner, and significantly associates this with the gendered position of the spatially and socially constricted “housewife” and the professor, a historically masculine, if sometimes effete, subject position.<sup>106</sup> In his explication of how prison makes (or unmakes) men, he creates a

104 All quotes from “Editorial,” May 1950, p. 34.

105 *Inside World* (Kembro 34).

106 The idea of the invisible punishment takes on new meaning in a subsequent piece from the Women's Camp by Rosa L. Washington: “Last week you were told to expect an answer as to just who that guy “Mr. Frisco Ghost” is. The answer, I am sure, is not as bright and interesting as many of our readers were probably expecting. Mr. Frisco Ghost is, in reality, no joking manner. He is something we all fear, Mr. Frisco Ghost is the name given the form of punishment administered here at the Women's Camp.” (*Inside World* 25) She never clarifies what this punishment entails or who exactly administers it, but ironically

rather unlikely set of differently gendered identifications that implies emasculation but also advances a more nuanced idea that social control as well as spatial and temporal regulation, in both abject (the prison) and seemingly free (the home) contexts, produce *disordered* subjects. The “ravages on the human condition” are the product of the prison, not necessarily a “reformed” prisoner. Instead of “moral damage,” the *Inside World* at every opportunity implied that the conditions of incarceration denied them community, education, rights to parole, early release, furlough, and most importantly, a status worthy of respect and rights as prisoners and upon release.<sup>107</sup>

Despite their best aims to have sole control over their publication, what they could print and distribute was always subject to the administration's approval. From the start, one of their stated goals was to facilitate communication between prisoners housed in different camps. They mapped the prison farm in printed drawings and in their descriptions of their segregated camp life. Despite the fact that they understood themselves as part of an institution characterized by dispersed camps and an oppressive “outside,” the name *Inside World* easily won the contest to title the paper. The newspaper became a tool of communication, resistance, and community previously unknown to them. As reflected in one of the earliest editorials, the press intended to produce resistant knowledge, to contest conditions of confinement and to resist the “criminal natures” summoned to bolster public policy: “. . .the aim of your editor is that this magazine be BY AND FOR us, the inmates of

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states that as long as Mr. Frisco is around, they have “peace.” Significantly, the women's camp was not segregated by race. However, in the early decades of the farm, only a handful of white women were ever incarcerated at Parchman. In effect, the women's camp was a unit for black females.

107 For example, an editorial that critiqued society for seeing the criminal as perpetually abnormal, insists: “The absence of such knowledge and understanding [about the convict's ability to reform] on the part of the society to which we return is dangerous, because when an ex-convict is rejected from the normal function of a community the chances are that he will revert back to an indifferent attitude concerning any rights.” “Society and the Prisoner” by William Payne, Parchman inmate (*Inside World* Aug 49, p 11).

Parchman. Limited in scope, and confined within its [sic] own boundaries it may be, as is the custom of the penal press, we will not be simply going nowhere and accomplishing nothing as it might seem to some. . . The man in prison, contrary to public opinion, is more often than not, a diligent student of the forces and conditions which put him here.”<sup>108</sup> While penologists (dating back to De Tocqueville's day) worried that prisoners only become better students of crime, the editors of the *Inside World* dedicated themselves to studying the policies toward veterans, the acts passed by the legislature, and the allocation of resources for educational programs. As H. Bruce Franklin has noted, the prisoner's narrative was more often than not a story about the material forces that structured prison life.

While the stories often reinforce ideas about criminality—that criminals are lazy, greedy, or ignorant—they more often than not include pieces that question distinctions of good and evil and, significantly, normal and abnormal. Stories about freak show acts like the “ugliest woman,” the phenomena of midgets, obesity, and others most often end by asserting how these are normal people who should be treated as such. In short the bodies deemed visibly non-normative become the means through which the newspaper contests the marking of bodies as marginal. In turn, they address the “sexual panic” that has led the press to declare an epidemic. While decrying pederasty, an article reprinted from a Connecticut prison newspaper entitled “Snatchgrabs by Hysteria” questions discourses surrounding pathologized sexuality as a means to criminalization and as a means to pass federal laws that would trump state laws. In another reprinted article, “Letter to a Lost Love,” a presumably comic but nonetheless subtle portrayal of gender-queer lovemaking between two convicts becomes yet another example of the paper's persistent inclusion of

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108 *Inside World* Aug 49.

pieces that embrace the “abnormal.” “You looked so lovely, dear, in your swept-up hair, and army shoes. We were the first couple on the floor that night-----you wanted to wrestle. Silly, impulsive darling. . .I recall the day you hocked your burglary tools to pay for the [marriage] liscense [sic]. It was then that I knew you really loved me.”<sup>109</sup> This scene parodies a heterosexual romance as two criminals courting each other, while it also references the gender-bending that penologists and prisoners alike described as commonplace within the homosocial world of the prison. Their lovemaking is violent, however, and inextricable from their criminality—sex is a wrestling match, and the marriage is paid for by surrendering the tools of the criminal trade. In keeping with much of the literature on prison sexuality of the 1930s and 1940s, sexual intimacy between male-bodied prisoners is characterized by one partner performing femininity. However, the lover does not completely “succeed” in this gendered performance and the parody plays on that failure. Through comic forms, political editorials, and “freak show” sidebars, the newspaper created a platform from which to challenge how subjects were deemed fit or unfit to be part of the social body. At stake for them was the extent to which criminality would mark them in both visible and invisible ways, and the extent to which differently marginalized subjects might be able to create a tool for survival.

### **The Chain Gang and the Queered Mill Town**

So far I have considered prisoner narratives that were mediated by different sets of constraints. In each of these texts, I have considered how subjects under penal control and surveillance have negotiated the terms of their incarceration. In the meantime, those

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<sup>109</sup> May 50.

“outside” the prison who betrayed the characteristics or behaviors associated with the neoplantation prisoner were criminalized by the carceral continuum and so experienced varying degrees of unfreedom. The threat of incarceration, or absolute abject unfreedom, always loomed as the “bogey man.” Therefore to *identify* with the neoplantation prisoner, as Endesha Mae Holland eventually does, becomes a way to resist the terms of abjection applied to both the “free” and “unfree.” However, because those terms had been so intricately wrought by the institution itself, the nuances are certainly not always intelligible not even to the prisoners themselves, as we see in the case of Burns and Herndon. This signifies the extent to which the Jim Crow state regulated the construction of subjectivity through the adaptation of plantation slavery for the development of the modern capitalist state. In the final text I will consider, the identification with the neoplantation prisoner becomes a means to interrogate Jim Crow norms, and in particular, to explore how Jim Crow subjects are strategically positioned within a carceral continuum. Carson McCullers's 1940 novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, departs from the texts I have considered thus far in genre, form, style, and authorial position. McCullers herself was never a prisoner and she does not attempt to speak from that position as Spivak does. Rather she constructs a third person narrative voice that speaks for a diverse group of people who each have a place in the order of a segregated Georgia mill town. Through this narrative technique, what Bakhtin might deem “heteroglossia,” she represents the various ways in which racial segregation, class difference, and heteronormativity work to produce intimacy but preclude solidarity between characters who experience unfreedom in different ways.<sup>110</sup> However,

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110 Richard Wright admired McCullers for her ability to represent complex black subjectivity: “To me the most impressive aspect of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, for the first time in Southern fiction, to handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race.” “Inner Landscape.” *New Republic* 103 (Aug. 1940): 195.



through the character of a wounded chain gang prisoner, she explores the potential for resistance and solidarity among a group of characters despite their different levels of access to power. By the novel's end, moments of solidarity don't amount to much, but I examine this text for the possibilities it suggests as much for the resolution it elides. While important work has been done recently on how McCullers's characters intersect as a queer community, little attention has been paid to the role that the neoplantation carceral regime plays in their solidarities and the dissolution of potential community-led resistance.<sup>111</sup>

*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is set in a mill town in Georgia in the 1930s where the sex workers know your name (so do the fascists), the carnival threatens to erupt in a race riot between a “hunchback” and a thief, and corner preachers defame drunken marxists as “children of Sodom.” Richard Wright noted that the novel had about it a “sheen of weird tenderness,” and determined it might best be thought of as a “projected mood.” Indeed, there are many “queer things” in this novel and the pervasive mood might be summed up in a song that Mick begins to write but does not finish: “This Thing I want, I Know Not What.”<sup>112</sup> This longing, I argue, is produced by the elusiveness of freedom and the difficulty of sustaining a resistant antiracist, anticapitalist “queer” community in the face of neoplantation restraints. First Dr. Copeland, a black marxist doctor, Jake, a white marxist carnival worker, Biff, a recently widowed cafe proprietor, and Mick, an adolescent tomboy, each separately befriend Singer, a “deaf-mute” whom they each come to rely on as a confidante and sounding board for their ideas.<sup>113</sup> Later, when Willie, Dr. Copeland's son

111 See Sarah Gleeson-White, *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003); Gary Richards, *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961* (Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

112 380. All quotes that follow are taken from Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1991).

113 Though I do not intend to analyze Singer's hearing impairment as simply a figurative device in the novel, I do want to consider how his inability to speak is problematically taken by these characters as an

returns from the chain gang disabled by prison torture techniques, this group of characters has reason to come together, rather than to simply be connected through their mutual friendship with Singer. I consider how a collective identification with Willie provokes McCullers' queered community to confront and to attempt to resist the carceral continuum of race, class, and sexuality-based violence. His body and the extreme conditions by which Willie is rendered powerless become a focal point for addressing a point of juncture for collective injury. His body in pain, like Singer's speech and hearing impairment, is depicted as a burden produced by violent social constraints.<sup>114</sup> I will briefly consider how McCullers represents the revelation of solidarity for these central characters, as well as their subsequent inability to transform revelation into action.

We first learn of Willie's injury through Portia, his sister and Dr. Copeland's daughter, who tells him the details of how white chain guards orchestrated the punishment and torture of her brother and two of his friends. As a result of torment from one of the guards, Buster “sassed back” one day while they were doing roadwork. Buster's friends, who are chained together, all fear punishment for his offense, and in trying to to escape, the chains necessitate that they flee together. Their attempt fails, however, and they are placed in a torture camp where the temperatures are below freezing and are made to lie on their backs with their feet strung up. As Portia dwells on the agonizing details, she repeats the

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opportunity to rely on Singer as the perennial listener. Through different narrative techniques, McCullers constructs a complex conscious voice for his character that often admonishes the other characters for assuming his silence is complicity, sympathy, or unqualified solidarity with their plights, ideas, and dreams. <sup>114</sup>Though I do not mean to suggest that both Singer's hearing impairment and Willie's crippling have the same effects or causes, I do want to argue that McCullers works against the view that the disabled body is pathological. Instead, she depicts all bodies as discursive and marginalized based on socially prescriptive norms that are themselves disabling. When Singer's companion Antonopoulos, who is also deaf, becomes infirm and is institutionalized in a town far away, Singer is left with no ASL community. His frustration with this is represented in his painful relationship with his hands (345). The effects of Singer's physical and communicative marginalization, however, are never made visible to those who care about him, or to the community at large.

refrain that: “They hollered there for three days and three nights and nobody come. . .” When at last the prison authorities come for them, gangrene has set in. “They sawed off both of Willie's feet. Buster Johnson lost one foot and the other boy got well. But our Willie—he crippled for life now.<sup>115</sup> In her telling, the prison administers discipline and torture not through this single spectacle but through every step which leads to Willie's crippling, from the taunting of the prison guard to the refusal to treat their wounds until it is too late to save their limbs. In her identification with Willie's suffering, Portia initiates the start of what becomes a collective identification with his plight.

Dr. Copeland's first response to her story is to go into a state of shock: “She spoke and he could not understand. The sounds were distinct in his ear but they had no shape or meaning. It was as though his head were the prow of a boat and the sounds were water that broke on him and then flowed past. He felt he had to look behind to find the words already said. . . . 'I am deaf, said Doctor Copeland. 'I cannot understand.'<sup>116</sup> As a character who has actively used theoretical discourse as a means to understand his subject position, this moment represents a kind of cognitive rupture. He cannot process the torture and disabling of his son through the ideological frame upon which he has come to rely. McCullers articulates this as a traumatic deafening, thereby identifying in some way with his good friend Singer. Both Copeland's temporary feeling of deafness and Singer's interminable position as a “deaf-mute” speak to the ways in which discourse, and language itself, functions as a source of pain. He then enters into a kind of psychologically incarcerated state, as he walks home conscious of fences and the walls of buildings, and finally experiences: “Descent into the depths until at last there was no further chasm below. He

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115 McCullers 394.

116 McCullers 394.

touched the solid bottom of despair and there took ease.”<sup>117</sup>Through Copeland, McCullers creates a character whose recognition of loss renders him dangerous.

His complex identification with Singer and then Willie compels him to vocalize resistance against the state “body of the prison.” After realizing that the thought of “every lawyer, every judge, every public official with whose name he was familiar. . .the thought of each one of these white men was bitter in his heart,”<sup>118</sup> he decides to confront the carceral legal system head on. In defiance of segregation codes, he goes to the judge of the Superior Court, where he meets a wall of sheriffs who call him “Reverend,” pronounce him drunk, and then take him to a jail cell where he is brutally beaten. The jail cell as the most explicit carceral space, as the body of the prison itself, provokes Copeland's rage, reminding him of what he is there to resist: “A glorious strength was in him and he heard himself laughing aloud as he fought. He sobbed and laughed at the same time. . .The door to a cell was opened. Someone kicked him in the groin and he fell to his knees on the floor.”<sup>119</sup> Their final kick to his groin symbolizes the sexual violence that is part and parcel of the state's means to power. In this moment, he is physically subjugated but his laughter serves as an expression of his contempt for his aggressors, as a signal that their power is not natural but absurd. While they desire a spectacle of pain, he performs amusement, and so resists the paradigms of orchestrated amusement and torture outlined by Saidiya Hartman as so integral to cultures of enslavement.

McCullers represents neoplantation discipline as dependent upon not only white complicity in racial norms but in gender and sexual norms as well. She reveals that the

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117 McCullers 395.

118 McCullers 399.

119 McCullers 401.

construction of whiteness as normative relies on the abjection of those who transgress male/female boundaries or heterosexual desires. Mick, who is an androgynous teenager, struggles to create spaces in which she feels comfortable. At every turn, she fails to successfully perform as a girl, as an object of heterosexual desire. Her anxiety about this builds to a crisis point in the novel and coincides with the torture of Willie on the chain gang. The memory of his punishment collides with her own feelings of confinement. She is unable to sleep and has nightmares: “Nearly a month had gone by since Portia had told about what they had done to him—but still she couldn't forget it. Twice in the night she had these bad dreams and woke up on the floor. A bump came out on her forehead. . . . She felt queer waking up in the living room. She didnt like it.”<sup>120</sup> Her identification with Willie is signified by the “queer” sensation of waking up in a room that is not her own. Like Doctor Copeland, Mick only learns of Willie's fate through Portia's narrative and it continues to live on in her nightmares and in her memory, and the vision of his pain is made manifest in a lump on her head. His trauma, then, lives on, not only in his body, but in hers as a violent spectacle performed by the neoplantation state. Like a lynching narrative, the crippling of Willie works to police the community through a discursive network.

Through Mick, McCullers constructs a social world in which the chain gang is but one incarnation of sanctioned and prescribed violence. Queer feelings precede scenes of sexual vulnerability, and in particular, Mick's haunted vision of Willie prefigures her first experience with heterosexual sex. As she and her childhood friend Harry spend a day together, it becomes clear that their relationship is now loaded with the pressure to transform platonic intimacy into sexual intimacy. It culminates when he insists that, instead

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120 McCullers 403.

of returning to town, they lie down together: “They both turned at the same time. They were close against each other. She felt him trembling and her fists were tight enough to crack. ‘Oh, God,’ he kept saying over and over. It was like her head was broke off from her body and thrown away. And her eyes looked straight into the blinding sun while she counted something in her mind. And then this was the way. . . . This was how it was.”<sup>121</sup>

Absent from this scene is any notion of desire, reciprocity, or erotic fulfillment. Her body is reduced to a violent metaphor, a sensation of having her head severed from her body and thrown away. Her clenched fists signify resistance never quite made manifest. In this act, she is stripped of her right to consciousness, to protest, and that is simply “how it was.” The scene reinforces the tensions inherent in her own feeling of compulsion to perform heterosexual and gender normativity.

This normativity is inseparable from whiteness in the logic of neoplantation order. As Harry panics afterward, worrying that his mother will be able to “see” what he has done, to recognize him as an adulterer, Mick can only think: “His face was whiter than any face she could remember. . . . Things would be better if only he would just quit talking.” By performing the role of the male-bodied sexual aggressor, Harry, though he is Jewish, becomes white. His talking about sex, though in crisis, only affirms his power. In response, Mick turns away for a moment to locate herself: “Her eyes looked slowly around her—at the streaked red-and-white clay of the ditch, at a broken whiskey bottle, at a pine tree across from them with a sign advertising for a man for county sheriff. She wanted to sit quietly for a long time and not think and not say a word.”<sup>122</sup> In this moment, Mick's painful recognition of Harry's white male heterosexual power converges with symbols of state

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121 McCullers 414.

122 McCullers 415.

power, signified by the sheriff's campaign sign. Her experience of sexual violence has taken place in the jurisdiction of the ever-present disciplining patriarchal state. She imagines safety as an unmovable silence. Unwilling to succumb to Harry's moral panic and to think of herself as an "adulteress," Mick refuses to think through Harry's logic and so shuts down. Like Harry, however, she imagines that their transgression will be visible in some way on her body. She arrives home and asks Portia: "Look at me. Do you notice anything different?" Portia notices her sunburn. "It was almost worse this way. Maybe she would feel better if they could look at her and tell. If they knew."<sup>123</sup> That visibility would render her subject to opprobrium, but would paradoxically situate her as a heterosexual girl. Instead, left alone with a conflicted sense of what has happened, the implication is that she must discipline herself, mete out the requisite guilt and shame, and contain it within her own body. This scene indicts those norms, however, and the ways in which they are enforced by a punishing surveillance.

While Mick internalizes the fate of the chain gang convict and identifies with his plight through her own experiences with gender and sexuality, the Marxists of the novel see Willie's injury as a call to action. When Jake, the drunken white Marxist, learns of Willie's injury through Singer, he proposes to Willie's father, Doctor Copeland that he be allowed to push Willie and the two other former convicts around in a wagon. They would tell their story and follow with a lecture on the "dialectics of capitalism:" "I would explain so that everyone would understand *why* those boys' legs were cut off. And make everyone who saw them *know*."<sup>124</sup> Like John Spivak, Jake wants to use the prisoners' bodies to illuminate the injustices of capitalism, but Copeland dismisses this idea, Jake's grandstanding and

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123 McCullers 418.

124 McCullers 443-4.

racial privilege, and his propensity to “forget the Negro.” When he proposes that they stage a “march on Washington” instead, Jake dismisses Washington and the implication that citizenship might provide the means to revolution. Though they disagree about the path to revolution, their conversation extends long into the night because it is propelled by moments of shared revelation. They agree that the mill town is a “paternal system of American industry” that maintains a workforce permanently indebted to the mill owners for food, clothes, and housing and parallels them with the indebted sharecropper. Each is “held down the same as if they had on chains.”<sup>125</sup> The tension in this scene builds to the final explosive moment, with Jake calling Copeland a “short-sighted bigot” and Copeland declaring him a “White fiend.” What makes this lengthy exchange so fraught with tension and frustration is that the two men seem ostensibly to be in agreement—on the exploitation of the working class, the deployment of race to ensure inequality and division, the consolidation of corporate wealth at the regional and national levels, the need for dramatic and immediate change. However, not only do they fail to come to a consensus about how to proceed, but their dialogue devolves into racialized insults. What McCullers represents are two potential allies who are so bound by a culture of racial segregation that their antagonism is overdetermined. Jake inevitably comes across as a self-righteous crusader, dismissive of the power of black workers' revolutionary acts, to which Copeland admonishes: “Do not attempt to stand alone.”<sup>126</sup> “The strangled South. The wasted South. The slavish South” that both men hold responsible for Willie's injury and exploitation on a much larger scale ultimately intercedes in their discussion and stops it short of revolution or resolution.

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125 McCullers 438.

126 McCullers 442-3.



What is perhaps most significant is that neither Jake nor Copeland are able to engage Willie in their conversation about what is to be done. At some point, their conversation transcends the very situation and personal injury that initiates their ideological debate. Willie sits in the other room, contemplating his lost limbs, feeling pain where his feet once were: “I feel like my feets still hurting. I got this here terrible misery down in my toes. Yet the hurt in my feets is down where my feets should be if they were on my l-l-legs. And not where my feets is now. It is a hard thing to understand. My feets hurt me so bad all the time and I don't know where they is. They never given them back to me. They s-somewhere more than a hundred m-miles from here.”<sup>127</sup> As he tries to explain how he continues to be affected by this, Jake interjects and at every turn tries to structure Willie's story, insisting that he provide what he considers to be more relevant information—the names of the white chain gang guards, the names and addresses of Willie's two “friends.” Willie insists, however, that the other injured convicts are not his friends. He is preoccupied with the dissonance he experiences—he feels parts of his body over which he has lost control. He does not know their whereabouts and cannot locate what has been lost. He articulates a “phantom limb” experience, but does not exactly long for wholeness, but rather for knowledge of what has “happened” to his feet, which he feels, but cannot see or locate.<sup>128</sup> The prison doctor is the figure he dwells on, and so, in this moment, McCullers reveals how bodies continue to be disciplined and limited beyond the strict confines of the chain gang or the prison. The carceral geography is one that violently displaces and separates communities, loved ones, and even the prisoner's body from itself. In Jake's view,

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127 McCullers 429.

128 For more on phantom limbs and disability studies see: Elizabeth Grosz *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994); Michael Davidson “Phantom Limbs: Film Noir and the Disabled Body,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9.1-2 (2003) 57-77.

Willie's disabled body speaks to the injustices committed, but for Willie, it is what cannot be seen that is the most troubling. Willie, like the family friends who speak for him, fears that Jake is just a white man who thinks he knows best, and who has come to cause trouble.<sup>129</sup> His condition of containment as a chain gang laborer has been transformed into a state of immobility, of enduring poverty. Rather than be made an example, he turns to his harp and plays music that is dark, sad, and dolorous. Like Mick, he seems to seek a means to cope with the fact that this was just “how it was.”

McCullers's mill town must be viewed in relation to the neoplatation economic and social structures upon which it was developed. Not only is the milltown dependent upon plantation crops, but its techniques of ordering labor and power are adapted from those of the plantation as well. In this single-industry town, the black working class labors in poverty, is imprisoned, and is made to labor on the chain gangs that build roads from the cotton plantation into the mill. The white working class has little power to exert over the mill owners and exerts what little power it does have through the privileges afforded by racial status. As Alex Lichtenstein argues:

. . . the total control that planters sought over the black agricultural workforce was extended and re-created in other economic sectors with various degrees of success. In the cotton mill villages the paternalism of the company town, company store and company housing severely limited the options of the landless whites who entered the mills. And in the South's coal and iron mines, railroad camps, brickyards, sawmills and turpentine camps, capitalists often relied on the forced labor of convicts as a spur towards industrial development.<sup>130</sup>

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129 Marshall Nichols, a prominent black community member and friend of the Copelands suggests that Jake need not stir up trouble: “Naturally we have discussed this matter *extensively*. And without doubt as members of the colored race here in this free country of America we are anxious to do our part toward extending *amicable* relationships. . . And it behooves us to strive with care and not endanger this amicable relationship already established. Then by gradual means a better *condition* will come about.” (432)  
130 *Twice the Work of Free Labor*, 4-5.

In her novel, McCullers deftly represents the power of segregation to prevent alliances between black and white laborers who are differently positioned along a carceral continuum. Similarly, she represents the racist violence that works to ensure segregation and to produce an unfree laboring body of prison convicts. Through her depiction, the neoplantation's techniques of power are adapted to organize industrialized workforces and their social environs and to ensure that they were regulated by the threat and the reality of the neoplantation carceral regime. She suggests that these subjects might have many ways to relate to one another and that their acknowledgment of this itself poses a threat to neoplantation order. While she does not offer up a utopic vision of revolutionary solidarity, she gestures toward an as yet unrealizable coalition led by those at the margins of power.

### **Conclusion**

All day there is the sound of picks striking into the clay earth, hard sunlight, the smell of sweat. And every day there is music. One dark voice will start a phrase, half-sung, and like a question. And after a moment another voice will join in, soon the whole gang will be singing. The voices are dark in the golden glare, the music intricately blended, both somber and joyful. The music will swell until at last it seems that the sound does not come from the twelve men on the gang, but from the earth itself, or the wide sky. It is music that causes the heart to broaden and the listener to grow cold with ecstasy and fright. Then slowly the music will sink down until at last there remains one lonely voice, then a great hoarse breath, the sun, the sound of the picks in the silence. . . .And what kind of gang is this that can make such music? Just twelve mortal me, seven of them black and five of them white boys from this county. Just twelve mortal men who are together.

--Carson McCullers, "The Ballad of the Sad Café"

Each of the neoplantation texts that I have analyzed represent the effects of a carceral continuum that disciplined and punished subjects through institutional, economic, social, and discursive controls. In this Jim Crow era, dominant carceral representations were predicated upon an economy of silence as well as a proliferation of pathologizing discourses, but resistant prison narratives inevitably betrayed a more complex story of dissent. While the *Inside World's* writers were most directly limited in what they could

convey about prison life by the institutional authorities who controlled the distribution of their paper, the “Georgia Peon,” Burns, and Herndon were subjects who wrote while on the outside of the prison's walls but who nonetheless remained under the direct impending threat of incarceration. Spivak's muckraking novel, on the other hand, conformed to the journalistic conceits of the era in its sensationalism, but the author himself was beyond the pale of the prison. In looking at fictional accounts written by free men such as Spivak who attempt to construct a prison subjectivity they have never experienced, in relation to the autobiographical accounts of subjects who speak from firsthand experience, I have argued that neoplantation prison subject formation was circumscribed by intersecting cultural discourses of unfreedom. Ultimately, the neoplantation prison marks the limits of unfreedom as the most abject space of the Jim Crow cultural era. Though these authors speak from different positions and for different purposes, together they offer a window into how unfreedom was constructed as a social world in which the body was at every moment subject to violence, through conditions of brutal labor, isolating and torturous confinement, and instruments of punishment, as well as through the administration of sexual license, whether in the form of “conjugal visits,” choreographed rape scenes, or the unequal distribution of power among prisoners. These narratives indicate that at every level—from the violent spectacle to the quotidian routine of numbering the convict and assigning him/her tasks—the neoplantation prison compelled submission and social death.

The convergence of these different narratives in their portrayals of prison subjectivity suggest that prison subject formation was integral to a Jim Crow “structure of (carceral) feeling.” The prison worked to interpellate people as subjects of and subject to carceral power within the institution and beyond. As Endesha Ida Mae Holland tells it,

Parchman farm functioned as the “bogy man” of her community. Narratives of the neoplantation prison and the subject formations it produced in some ways supplemented the Jim Crow script of the modern liberal citizen-subject. As the unfree life of the prisoner came to be characterized by racialized labor, by regimes of violence, gendered punishment, sexual aberration, and by the fundamental role of the state as master, the flip side of that was that “freedom” came to be coterminous with white heteropatriarchy. For example, as I discussed earlier, texts such as Spivak's and Herndon's contest the racialization and the sexualization of the prisoner but conform to heteropatriarchal ideals of liberation. I examine these previous texts not to point out their shortcomings but to examine how the formation of prison subjectivity, even that which resists the terms of its subjugation, has intersected with the goals of the neoplantation state they sought to undermine. This suggests the difficulties of fully disidentifying with the carceral regime and the perpetuation of the prisoner as the abject, even if that abjection comes a result of state terror and injustice.

Carson McCullers's short story, “The Ballad of the Sad Cafe,” ends with a scene of a chain gang who labors from daybreak to sunset, under the watchful eye of a guard, measuring their song with picks. McCullers's vision of the chain gang gestures to the anxieties and possibilities that the social world of the neoplantation prison opened up in the 1930s and 1940s. Men, classified by race, but laboring side by side, were part of a cultural landscape that was both Southern “free” society's frightening counterpart and its foundation. The proximity of differently racialized men, who would otherwise be segregated by the racial hierarchy of Jim Crow, was the source of anxiety and contention for those, like Robert Burns, who found themselves part of the neoplantation chain gang.

However, that proximity also worked to produce discourses advocating alliance between black and white laborers, such as the revolutionary praxis of Angelo Herndon. As McCullers suggests, the neoplantation prison disproportionately criminalized black men, and so many narratives of this era, as I have argued, were forced to deal with the reality that race was itself an integral technology of this system. John Spivak's novel, as well as the Georgia Peon narrative that came before, both represent how black communities were conscripted by and perpetually injured by an economy of social incarceration that included but transcended the boundaries of a visible penal institution.

That prisoners' voices and songs were “like a question” suggests not only that prisoners could and did interrogate their conditions, their representation within larger cultural contexts, the violence of prisonization, and the terms of freedom and unfreedom, but that they had also become the objects of interrogation. As I have argued, the critique of neoplantation prison forms intersected with nationwide concerns about prisoners as “mortal men,” whose ability to be disciplined was the subject of debate among penologists, sexologists, and institutional administrators. In particular, the sex life of the prisoner was deemed the biggest concern for a carceral network whose prison population increased exponentially during the years of the Depression. While the leading studies of prison sexuality, such as Joseph Fishman's *Sex in Prison*, claimed that labor was the solution to the problems of perversion, the “hard labor” neoplantation prison produced its own narratives of sexual anxiety. In other words, the neoplantation prison narratives undermined penologists' claims that the prisoner's sexuality was ever his (or hers) to control. Instead, at the expense of the “gal-boys” and “wolves” who transgressed gendered and sexual norms, narratives such as Spivak's and Herndon's represent the body of the prison itself as

perverse, degenerate, and totalizing in its control. Narratives such as theirs, which importantly sought to indict the racialized exploitation and violence inflicted upon prisoners in the carceral state, relied on discourses that pathologized homosexuality and gender variance in order to shore up their critique of capitalist-state barbarism. On the other hand, McCullers's fictional project points to the ways in which norms regarding race, gender and sexuality intersect in the maintenance of structural inequality. She represents the prison as something closer to what Foucault calls a “heterotopia of deviance,” as a site which those who deviate from the norm are compelled to enter.<sup>131</sup> For McCullers, compulsory racial and sexual norms under heteropatriarchal Jim Crow codes render deviance as an inevitability rather than an aberration. As such, her cast of nonnormative characters converges on the injured body of a chain gang laborer. As a visible sign of the neoplatation's violence, Willie's disability necessitates a radical response. However, none of McCullers's characters are able to formulate a response that would include Willie or the adolescent androgynous Mick. The prisoner is left with a dolorous song and Mick is left in silence, longing for a room of music. The “togetherness” McCullers portrays as the sun sets remains bound by systems of confinement.

In her cultural analysis of slavery and the unrecoverability of a slave past, Saidiya Hartman extends the possibility for redress for the ruptures and violences of slavery in the “traces of memory” that suggest experiences of loss and affiliation. Those traces of memory function “in a manner akin to a phantom limb, in that what is felt is no longer there. It is a sentient recollection of connectedness experienced at the site of rupture, where the very consciousness of disconnectedness acts a mode of testimony and memory.”<sup>132</sup> The

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131 See “Of Other Spaces” (1967) <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>  
 132 *Scenes of Subjection*, 74.

recognition of loss “entails a remembering of the pained body, not by way of simulated wholeness but precisely through the recognition of the amputated body in its amputatedness, in the insistent recognition of the violated body as human flesh, in the cognition of its needs, and in the anticipation of its liberty.”<sup>133</sup> Carson McCullers treats this metaphor of loss as both symbolic and material, with the phantom limbs of the chain gang laborer haunting his community, but in some way each of the narratives I’ve addressed returns to the injured captive body to call for redress. Though the history of the early twentieth-century neoplantation prison must be distinguished from the temporal, spatial, and cultural ruptures of the slave trade, the Middle Passage, and centuries of legalized slavery, its millions of “forgotten men” and women, buried without markers in prison graveyards, with the occasional fragmented stories left to linger in songs and pictures, represent the continuation of that history. The difficulty of assembling the stories of those outcast of outcasts—the unruly women, the gal-boys, the prison queers, the rioters, those who attempted to escape and failed—is that much more difficult when dealing with the state’s systematic disposal of human life. When their stories do surface, in the studies and documentation of the Southern prison, they do not control the terms of their narrative. Like several of the texts I have addressed, the prison narrative is as the slave narrative was—highly mediated and inherently dangerous. In constructing an alternative genealogy of the neoplantation prison, I have argued that narratives that called for reform were limited in their calls for redress. The neoplantation prison emerged as an incredibly adaptive and mobile institution around which divergent discourses of criminality and excess were spun. Though the carceral plantation was subject to public outrage and national critique, the

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133 Ibid.



Southern penitentiary became a model for the racialization and sexualization of criminality and for technologies of subjection that would be implemented in U.S.-run prisons worldwide.

## Epilogue

Plantation is manlabor for 5 bucks for hourly intervals. . . We can make the best of it in this post-apocalypse.

--Deltron 3030, "Memory Loss" (2000)

Leslie Stahl:

If someone's in custody and they are brutalized by a law enforcement person, if you listen to the expression cruel and unusual punishment, doesn't that apply?

Antonin Scalia:

On the contrary, has anybody ever referred to torture as punishment? I don't think so.

--*60 Minutes* (2008)

In this dissertation I have examined the neplantation as a cultural institution, as a material structure, and as a kind of temporal and spatial crossroads. In my consideration of how the plantation was animated through Jim Crow era discourses and reformulated in twentieth-century structures, I have looked at three contexts in which a neplantation project emerged. First, in my analysis of Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* and the Atlanta white riot of 1906, I considered the neplantation as a performance of white supremacist fantasy that conscripted racialized subjects into the project of white spectacles of violence as well as the everyday segregated order of intimacy and contact. I then turned to the neplantation's role in extending and expanding imperial reach, especially in terms of the relationship between the U.S. South and Haiti. Specifically, I examined occupation-era cultural texts that articulated the connections between their shared histories of plantation slavery. In queering the relationship between the U.S. and Haiti, I argued that the proliferation of the plantation was represented as the production of racialized sexual formations that troubled the boundaries of the state and the region. Finally, I traced the state's organization of neplantation structures for the project of discipline and punishment. I examined the neplantation prisoner as a source of anxiety and resistance through whom Jim Crow discourses of normativity were filtered.

In each of these contexts, the neoplantation was called upon to sustain the contradictions of modernity. As narratives of progress, development, and democratization always erase what they cannot incorporate, so has the neoplantation repeatedly asserted itself as a radical break from its cultural foundations. As a construct of modernity, the neoplantation has simultaneously evaded and evinced those foundations, and so I have argued that the cultural discourses surrounding neoplantation formations offer a key locus for critique. The neoplantation has continually called up imagined pasts and energized cultural memories that reveal “flashes of disjuncture.” In particular, I have suggested that the neoplantation often failed to contain the resistant subjects it produced. In that failure, counter-memories and lived testimonies have insisted on the reconfiguration of “freedom” as freedom from violence, from the exclusions of liberal citizenship, from exploitation, and from the regulation of bodies and intimacy.

As the neoplantation continues to adapt through both cultural discourses and material structures, so do those dangerously resistant subjects. In perhaps one of the most obvious mobilizations of the neoplantation, the incarcerated populations of the “plantation states” have exponentially increased at rates that far exceed the population growth overall, and people of color are represented in vastly disproportionate numbers.<sup>1</sup> The plantation prison farms of Mississippi and Angola, Louisiana turn out agricultural revenue in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, while inmates labor under torturous conditions.<sup>2</sup> Private

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1 In 1930, the population of Mississippi was around 2 million, now about 2.8 million. Its inmate population, however, was around 2,000 in 1930, and is now over 24,000. In 2007, Mississippi's state prisons provided over 16 million dollars worth of “free labor” for the state. Meanwhile, Georgia's state population was 2.9 million in 1930, and its population is currently 9.5 million. It now boasts the fastest growing prison population, with currently 200,000 inmates involved in carceral system. See MS DOC site: [http://www.mdoc.state.ms.us/Annual%20Report%20PDF/2007\\_Annual\\_report.html](http://www.mdoc.state.ms.us/Annual%20Report%20PDF/2007_Annual_report.html) and GA DOC site: <http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/Reports/Annual/AnnualReport.html>.

2 See, for example: [http://www.mdoc.state.ms.us/Annual%20Report%20PDF/2007\\_Annual\\_report.htm](http://www.mdoc.state.ms.us/Annual%20Report%20PDF/2007_Annual_report.htm). According to this report, Mississippi's Parchman Penitentiary is a multimillion dollar agricultural

prisons run by the CCA (Corrections Corporation of America) operate in rural communities in Mississippi and throughout the South, housing inmates (from sites as faraway as Hawaii) who are devastatingly disconnected from their families and from legal resources. The states that perfected the neoplantation prison and remain sites of devastating poverty have fallen prey to the promises of the private prison. This industry promises to bring revenue and jobs to under-resourced parts of the South, based on a steady increase in incarcerated people. The system that once fueled the development of state infrastructures, and which imprisoned people to serve that purpose, is now wooed by a “recession-proof” industry that also turns prisoners into another source of capitalist production. These prisons claim to make more efficient use of state funds but are beyond the already inadequate state methods of monitoring prison conditions and accessing accountability for inhumane treatment. The neoplantation prison in many ways offered an effective model for the development of the capitalist prison industry. The ills of the private prison are largely overlooked. They are optimistically viewed by many commentators as reformed models of incarceration, while their failures are eclipsed by the failures of the state-run prison.

Cultural interrogations of the prison as a rehabilitative structure continue to circulate and generate debate just as the prison narratives of the 1930s did. The prisoner as a marginalized, racialized, and sexually aberrant figure continues to populate texts concerned with social reform. Sociological inquiries such as Daniel Bergson's *God of the Rodeo* (1998) depict the plantation prison of Angola as a neoplantation run by power-hungry and paternalist white wardens. However, his narrative also reflects the persistent tendency to fixate on prisoner sexuality and gender-queer inmates, or those who don't

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industry, turning a profit of almost a half a million dollars in 2007.

conform to the norms of masculinity, as a symptom of the prison's ills. In other words, cultural formations of neoplantation subjects continue in the genealogy of the Jim Crow era texts I have examined, with those subjects embodying the abject qualities of the institutions by which they are regulated. But as the technologies of the neoplantation adapt, so do different forms of cultural critique. In the last few years, online prison forums have developed that feature discussion “threads” for relatives, partners, loved ones, and former prisoners who seek to address LGBT concerns about prison life. Wives wonder if their husbands' homosexual experiences in prison will render them gay for life. Former female prisoners speak to the propensity for female inmates to form intimate, loving, and sexual relationships in prison. They wonder how they will reconcile their prison sexuality with their straight life on the outside. Beyond the personal struggle of those impacted by the prison system, collective organizing such as Critical Resistance is working for prisoners' rights and fundamentally for the abolition of the prison industrial system as we know it.<sup>3</sup> The Appalshop collective in Kentucky works to form cultural networks and coalitions to fight poverty and criminalization among prisoners of color from urban areas and white residents of Appalachia, as they find themselves to be unlikely neighbors in the rural communities that now house newly built prison complexes.<sup>4</sup> Prison activism has likewise begun to address the policing of queer subjects and to acknowledge that the state perpetuates and orchestrates sexual violence. To meet the specific needs of queer prisoners, for example, transgender rights organizations such as the Sylvia Rivera Law Project fight practices of discrimination and prison-orchestrated rapes against transgender and

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.criticalresistance.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> See their “Holler to the Hood” project: <http://www.appalshop.org/h2h/>.

genderqueer inmates.<sup>5</sup> Avenues of support and protest have been created not only to reform the prison system and its practices but also to foster radical change.<sup>6</sup>

In the expansion of imperial networks of power, the neoplantation's racialized and sexualized technologies of torture and surveillance have been exported to various parts of the world. What Foucault called the “carceral archipelago” has become what we know today as a globalized carceral empire. While the concept of the “prison island” still resonates with current debates surrounding the U.S. military prison as well as the “Devil's Island” of Mississippi's Parchman Farm, the prison-industrial-complex ensures global flows of capital and the consolidation of U.S. imperial power beyond individual prison walls or national borders. The ongoing U.S. “war on terror,” includes not only the war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the development of prison facilities and torture sites in various known institutions, such as Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and various unknown “black sites” across the globe. While Southern queer soldiers such as Sabrina Harman have been scapegoated for the excess violences of the prison scandals at Abu Ghraib, the military leaders of the “war on terror” continue to justify racialized constructions of terrorists and to promote sexual torture techniques among others. As I have discussed earlier, resistant spectatorship to the deployment of this rhetoric of terror continues in texts that, like Willie Dixon's song “Terrorized,” reframe terrorism as a tool of U.S. practices of exclusion and racialized warfare. African-American activist artists like the underground music pioneer DJ Spooky (aka That Subliminal Kid, aka Paul D. Miller) insist that art, performance and representation must engage with and subvert the legacies of these genealogies and their

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.srlp.org/index.php?sec=03N&page=criminaljust>.

<sup>6</sup> Radical scholarship such as that of Ruthie Gilmore and others has also worked to this end. See for example Gilmore's study *Golden Gulag: Prison, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

influence on contemporary U.S. American cultures.

In conclusion, I will briefly discuss the work of Kara Walker, a contemporary African-American visual artist whose plantation scenes, like the earlier cultural texts I have considered, remind us that the (neo)plantation remains with us in ways that have often been “unspeakable.” What DJ Spooky attempts to disrupt in Griffith's and Dixon's narratives through digital interruption, reposition, and dissolution, Kara Walker does with paper cutouts and visual landscape. Walker's artwork spans more than a decade and has garnered her a national and international reputation for genius, provocation, and depth in her recreation of scenes of plantation slavery through the lens of a self-conscious black female artist resistant to “positive images.” She has become famous for, among other things, her use of the nineteenth-century medium of the silhouette-- black paper cutouts of people's profiles, popular in Southern plantation homes and Northern drawing rooms. The images, then, are “negative” in that they cut out or remove from the space of the “painting” the hyper-stereotyped images of slave women, white Southern belles, white aristocratic planters, “Uncle Tom(s),” “mammies,” male slaves or “bucks,” and “pickaninnies.” The tension between the positive/negative image is not only reflected in her materials and art process but in her transhistorical field of representation and its place in African-American cultural history.

Her pairing of racist caricatures with scenes of sexual subjection prompted black feminist artists and critics to protest her politics, her work, and her having been awarded a MacArthur “Genius” Grant. She responded to her critics with extensive drawings and notes, a collection titled “Do You Like Crème in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?” (1997). In these pieces she ultimately insists that to represent race in the U.S., and, in

particular, the relationship between whiteness and blackness in a culture born from slavery, is to inevitably face the ambiguities and ugliness of desire, subjection, and embodiment. The extent to which these two-dimensional cutout bodies remain legible to a twenty-first century viewing public, despite their “antiquated” status, underscores their relevance to contemporary notions of racialized bodies as sexualized bodies. Walker's neplantation functions as a “rememory of slavery,” as a way to “see the unspeakable” of the past and to reconfigure racialized sexual formations in light of the twentieth-century cultural and material investment in the plantation. In this respect, Walker's work both invokes an ongoing representational “reality” of plantation slavery in U.S. culture and takes that critique a step further by unapologetically constructing a neplantation of her own through her art. From the start, there is a basic acknowledgment that she can never be in total control of the terms of her image as an artist, the images she portrays, or the narratives that they might both propel and dispel. The neplantation is both her subject and that to which she is subjected.

Her earlier pieces were inspired by her reading Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* for the first time. While she expected to loathe it, she found herself identifying with Scarlett O'Hara, and this desire to be the heroine fostered an uncomfortable perspective. Her work invokes all too familiar narratives but subverts them by peeking under the skirts, so to speak, of the bourgeois norms that have historically elided violent fantasy and perverse spectacle. She consciously references the historical significance and enduring popularity of *Gone with the Wind* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, most notably in her panoramic (or “cycloramic”) tableaus such as “Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart” (1994) and



“The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven” (1995). Even without these contextualizing references, the plantation as background and as an overdetermining narrative frames these bodies in scenes of desire, violence, and reproduction. Her images are two-dimensional, but she creates distance and depth within the visual field by representing trees, landforms, and the moonlight (sans magnolias) that connote the “Southern landscape.” In “The End of Uncle Tom. . .,” the big house of the plantation, while smaller than the bodies it surveils, ominously watches over scenes of slave women “nursing” on each other's breasts, while another wields a hatchet as a young boy stands before her unsuspecting. Another boy walks along a path, playing the tambourine, leaving a trail of shit behind him. The connections between the scatological and the homophobic are bound together by pathologies of race and sexuality. In this, Walker's work embraces the “dirtiness” of the slave plantation and its place within U.S. culture. On the other side of the tableau, a slave cabin acts as the complement to the plantation house in its scale, its position beyond the foregrounded drama, and its role as a kind of stage. With these images, Walker constructs her spare neplantation geography in the form of strategically-positioned fragments. It doesn't take much to signify the plantation and it's clear that just a few of its narrative tropes are needed to set the stage for race, sex, and violence. Walker sketches out a kind of plantation shorthand so that her neplantation characters can be brought into relief, transforming scenes of full-body penetration between masters and slaves into a landscape of power all their own. Walker's vision of neplantation *disorder*-- where bodies, acts, and relationships upend every scene's purported tranquility—participates in the genealogy of the neplantation I have been tracing throughout this dissertation.

Many critics and scholars have spoken about Walker's insightful and incisive use of the taboo and the explicit and her uncanny ability to render problematic the “obviousness” of race and gender. She achieves this in part through the confusion of scenes of dominance and submission and the uniform blackness of the images that nonetheless signify race, gender, and class.<sup>7</sup> What I want to emphasize is that her representations of “the sexual” recontextualize reproduction in relation to the heteropatriarchal and in relation to axes of power. In “Gone, an Historical Romance” a young slave girl drops babies on the ground with the jaunty lift of her leg. To her left, a white belle reaches to kiss her chivalrous suitor, but an extra pair of legs is visible under her petticoats, and the sharp tip of the “rapier” threatens a kneeling slave child. The scenes are inevitably connected despite the spatial distance within the tableau, and the white heterosexual romance appears as a facade while other relationships, such as those between white belles and female slaves, become more explicit. Although this suggests that the bodies of the belle and the slave are both subject to the master's desire, and that one is defined in relation to the other, it also represents a queered notion of reproduction that denaturalizes heteropatriarchal control. No relationships appear as “natural” and so the saturation of the perverse in this neoplantation scene inevitably renders all that happens within it as “natural” within its context. This is the paradox of slavery in Walker's rendering—the abject and the aberration produce the normative. That paradoxical space produces knowledge and a way to approach a history that can only be known through the scripted lenses of plantation melodrama, mediated slave narratives, and a post-Civil Rights discourse of slavery as an oppressive history that must be (and has been) overcome.

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<sup>7</sup> See *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007); *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, Duke UP, 2004).

Those who cry “pornography” in viewing her work are shocked by the subsuming of *desire* in the forthrightness of penetrative *acts*. In Walker's neoplantation, the sexual act is fundamentally disconnected from other forms of intimacy that might make the scene more or less palatable. Instead the cast of stock characters is caught up in an interconnected network of sexualized power. This is the labor of slavery that she makes evident. In her video project, “. . .Possible Beginnings Or The Creation Of African-America A Moving Picture By The Young, Self-Taught, Genius Of The South K.E. Walker,” a male slave and a white planter figure are represented in various sexual positions together, and from this union a ghostlike cotton boll baby is born and then dies. The doomed baby indicates that the violence, or possible rape scene we have watched, produces not the miscegenated child of Thomas Dixon's fictions or William Faulkner's novel, but instead the dark product is that which fueled plantation wealth, for which slaves were held in a state of social death. If, as Gina Dent and Angela Davis suggest, the fear of miscegenation was a metonym for the larger fear of “the reproduction of a social world that would read along and against the boundaries of nation-states, races, genders, and sexualities,” Walker's queering of gendered bodies, sexuality, and “emancipation” itself constructs the neoplantation as that fear *writ large*. Meanwhile popular plantation storytelling has rendered unintelligible the racialized sexual economies of its narratives. Through Walker's filter, unseen acts between belles and slaves, then, become one of the many subtexts for Margaret Mitchell's, as well as Thomas Dixon's, plantation vision of belles and mammies, pickaninnies and mistresses. In the dominant narratives that represent antebellum plantation slavery, including slave narratives, the relationships of violent intimacy between women have been occluded. Walker's project is to foreground the acts made illegible by epistemologies of slavery, not to further some

kind of moral imperative, but instead to suggest that the inassimilable intimacies have nonetheless “given birth” to formations beyond the control of the neplantation state.

Taken together, Spooky's *Rebirth of a Nation* and Walker's artwork represent a few projects among many that encounter the limits of reconstructing cultural memory in the wake of plantation slavery.<sup>8</sup> Their return to genealogies of plantation literature suggests, however, that the cultural reinvention of the plantation has been intimately connected with the structuring inequalities that ensure its popularity. The plantation is taken up by these artists as a fluid signifier that might be co-opted and retooled as an imagined neplantation that works not to transcend the past but to complicate it. In so doing, they inevitably indict the neplantation present. While these artists are in a radically different position than neplantation prison writers such as Angelo Herndon or Parchman's *Inside World* contributors, or the journalists of Atlanta's *Voice of the Negro*, they each acknowledge in some way that attempting to construct a counter-memory of structural formations of slavery might be a process without an identifiable resolution. For Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps this meant returning to the site of plantation revolution in Haiti. For Zora Neale Hurston it meant tracing the circuits of folklore. In this dissertation, I have focused on authors who invoke the discursive literary plantation tradition in order to construct a neplantation counter-memory. I have put these voices in conversation with others that never name the plantation but which nonetheless speak to and against its proliferation. In this I aim to honor a diverse range of voices that, though they might have been evoked to different ends and with different means, have all worked to contest structures of

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<sup>8</sup> Others certainly worth returning to are works such as Alice Randall's novel *The Wind Done Gone*, Aaron McGruder's graphic novel *The Birth of a Nation*; Natasha Trethewey's volume of poems *Native Guard*; Lil Wayne's rap responses to Hurricane “George Bush” and its effects on New Orleans on *The Dedication* mixtapes 1 and 2.

neoplantation power. In the online prisontalk forum, former prisoners and loved ones pose questions that often go unanswered. Instead they elicit gestures of support and encouragement. Similarly, this dissertation has aimed to open up meaningful interrogation rather than to posit resolution. In doing so, I hope to contribute to the ongoing spirit of neoplantation resistance.

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