

American Vernacular: Popular Culture, Performance, and the Question of National
History, 1871-1915

By

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Abstract

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Scholars tracing America's development into a powerful modern nation between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War One have traditionally considered popular culture, and especially popular culture's depictions of national history, as a vehicle for conveying ascendant socioeconomic ideals of "incorporation" or "Americanization." In this view, vernacular histories—histories rooted in local conceptions of self, community, and experience—provided a nostalgic reminder of a lost golden age, a diversion from the tasks of everyday life, or a quality to be appropriated and remade to fit prevailing narratives of economic and territorial consolidation and white racial superiority. This dissertation, by contrast, considers how popular representations of national history and citizenship were frequently framed by local conceptions of past and present. Specifically, I examine four performances where groups that were (or imagined themselves to be) regionally, ethnically, or racially marginalized by the nation's shift to modernity enacted their pasts for national audiences, and the ways in which these performances circulated vernacular versions of U.S. history and culture for a consuming public.

Chapter one examines the Fisk Jubilee Singers in their first decade (1871-1881). The chapter discusses their performances of slave spirituals as cultural expression and as political practice in a decade spanning the end of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow. Spirituals embodied ideals of self-making, piety, communal solidarity, and liberation. The singers, like their slave forebears, used the spiritual to achieve a level of autonomy, cohesion, and pride as they negotiated the contours of citizenship. The performances examined in chapters two and three struggled with the question of the ideal of "progress" in late nineteenth century historical narration. Chapter two describes the emergence of a particular brand of rugged self-making, seen as central to American identity and threatened by the "settlement" of the West, which was enacted and perpetuated at Buffalo Bill's *The Drama of Civilization* (1886-1887). Buffalo Bill Cody astonished audiences with a spectacular pageant reenacting the "settlement" of the West, but his presentations also mourned the potential loss of "rugged individualism" with the closing of the frontier. Chapter three considers the ways in which the Hull-House Labor Museum (1900-1910) dramatized a history of immigrant craftspeople as integral to seeing America as a workingman's republic, the benefactor of a transnational, transhistorical process of self-, community-, and nation-making through indigenous

craftsmanship. Chapter four reads *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) as a highly divisive neo-Confederate history that dramatized a discourse of northern conspiracy and southern patriotism. Ending with this popular film, the dissertation also highlights the dangers of vernacular history becoming normative.

Reading these accented dramatizations of national history within and against key social and economic developments, the dissertation argues that popular culture provided a language for registering disillusionment with the shift to modernity, including links between whiteness and patriotism, territorial expansion and “settlement,” and technological and social progress. For the performers and the impresarios of these performances, enacting a familiar past as foundationally “American” provided a framework for self-making, “authenticity,” and ambition that shaped their conception of the meaning of modern citizenship and of their own place in the nation at large.

To my parents, Patsy and Sheldon Milner

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Acknowledgments

Three women planted the seeds of this project during my childhood. Dorothy Bulmash, Shirley Milner, and Betty Johnson were great self-mythologizers. As they told me stories of their pasts, my imagination toggled between a Baltimore that was unrecognizable to me in the 1980s and 1990s, a larger-than-life New York and New Orleans, or a tough and rural North Carolina. From these three women I was early schooled in the ways in which people make sense of their identity within the context of both the local and the national community.

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Introduction

“But suppose I am the national genius?”¹

Ludwig Lewisohn asked this question in *Up Stream*, a text that was part memoir, part meditation on the past, present, and future of ethnic identity in the United States. By the time *Up Stream* was published in 1922, three decades of experience with anti-Semitism in America had pushed its author, German-Jewish by birth, to recognize the failed promises of his adopted country. Graduate education at Columbia had fitted him for participation in middle-class life. Equality, though, remained elusive:

What Anglo-American has lived with the poets who are the sources of his great tradition more closely than I? What Anglo-American has a deeper sense for the order and eloquence and beauty of his own town than I? But when, in the old days, I desired to translate my Americanism in that high and fine sense into action, I was told that I was not wanted. Yet I was to be Americanized. I am even now to be assimilated. Suppose I intend rather to assimilate America, to mitigate Puritan barbarism by the influence of my spirit and the example of my life? Then a writer named, let us say, Stuart Sherman, declares that I pervert the national genius. But suppose I am the national genius—Dreiser and Mencken and Francis Hackett and I—rather than Stuart Sherman or the late Hamilton Wright Mabie or the smoothly assimilated Edward Bok?²

Lewisohn’s jibe against Sherman, Mabie, and Bok, each famous proponents of America’s Anglo Saxon heritage, was a protest against the chauvinism that exploded during the First World War and continued into the 1920s. But it also imagined an alternative, as the author wondered, albeit rhetorically, what a national culture would look like when shaped by values considered to be marginal.

Lewisohn made no apologies for this intervention into national identity. Instead, he transformed it into a kind of patriotism, capable of dealing with the ambitions created by life in the modern United States. He described Anglo Saxon culture as a cold, materialistic, and unmoored inheritance: America’s modern consumerist temptations had eroded the self-defined traditions that had long sustained communities. In a series of anecdotes, Lewisohn demonstrated how common it had become for Americanized sons to turn away from the Old World cultures of their fathers. Lacking the valorization of these traditions, sons also lacked an important bulwark against the “encroachments of neo-Puritan barbarism.” Sons saw only their fathers’ “impossible religiosity and Prohibition on the one hand, and the naked vulgarity of the streets and the baseball diamond on the other.”³ Invariably, they chose the latter. For Lewisohn, then, the story of “Americanization” was thus doubly pernicious. The cultural declension it necessitated would only produce personal decline. Time and again, he found that the son of an

¹ Ludwig Lewisohn, *Up Stream: An American Chronicle* (New York: Boni and Livewright, 1922), 237.

² Ibid. Ellipses in original.

³ Ibid., 240, 239. For a discussion of Lewisohn in the context of cultural studies, see Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 142.

immigrant “uses the mechanics of civilization to become a sharper or a wastrel.”⁴ Lewisohn was not alone in his rejection of a “Puritan” inheritance. But I evoke it here to underscore the particular ways in which old-stock American traditions could, perhaps paradoxically, be seen as anathema to core American values. Lewisohn’s sense of how his marginalized identity could offer an important alternative to the perils of modern normativity foregrounds the variety of foundations that were available for conceiving of a national history and culture.

Although reacting to the pressures of life during and after the First World War, Ludwig Lewisohn was, I believe, speaking to a concern with the relationship between vernacular experience and national identity that emerged with force during the tectonic social developments of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This dissertation explores this relationship through the lens of popular culture performance, examining how ethnically, racially, and regionally marginal groups of Americans reenacted their pasts for national audiences and how these reenactments became sites for rethinking the foundations of national history and culture at large. Vernacular narratives of history and culture, I argue, could embody a larger impulse than the attempt to simply maintain local autonomy: They could offer alternatives for understanding history and citizenship, proposing vital links between national greatness and autochthonous experience that frequently seemed to be lost in modernizing America. At the most immediate level, I use “vernacular” to denote particularities of cultural expression in music (chapter one), labor and crafts practices (chapters two and three, respectively), and language (chapter four). Yet I am also interested in how these particularities form the substrata for engaging a sense of history, community, and self—how they create what Olga Viso has called “narratives centered on sense of place, social ritual, and home life.”⁵ In distinguishing between the broadly national and the vernacular, I have drawn from the dichotomy John Bodnar proposes in *Remaking America: Vernacular culture* (as opposed to the “official” culture championed by “cultural authorities or leaders”) promotes the definition of the nation through an immediately known local society. The vernacular represents the “views of reality derived from firsthand experience in small-scale communities rather than that ‘imagined’ communities of a large nation”; it is “what social reality feels like.”⁶

Forced from the margins to the center, held up for inspection, vernacular cultures were presented and perceived in ways that confound the traditional story of their superannuation in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. For not only did they function as critiques of the era’s basic assumptions about the links between race and nation (chapters one and four, although from very different perspectives), territorial consolidation and economic development (chapter two), and urban growth and progress (chapter three), these cultural forms also asserted their continued relevance and centrality for navigating the dilemmas of a modernizing nation. In this way, the dissertation exposes fissures in the traditional story of consolidation, “incorporation,” and “Americanization”—fissures that lay bear alternative modes of historical narration that registered the persistence of folkways in forming the core values and experiences of national myth.

⁴ Lewisohn, *Up Stream*, 239.

⁵ Olga Viso, “Foreword,” *The Spectacle of the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2011), 7.

⁶ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13-14.

In order to situate my own understanding of how local identity can provide the springboard for how the nation as a whole understands itself, it is necessary to delve into the historiography of culture, and of vernacular culture in particular, during this period. “History in general,” Michael Kammen asserts, “became the core of civil religion during the spiritual crisis of the Gilded Age. And national history in particular became the means used to transform un-American identities into those of compliant citizens with shared values.”⁷ This was an era, historians are fond of noting, when the United States became modern: consolidating its economy and territory; propagating an Anglo American, middle-class standard of culture; witnessing a rapid and profound industrial urbanism. Historians have told and retold the story of how society reacted to a series of territorial, demographic, and political shifts. The four-and-a-half decades under consideration in this dissertation bracketed a number of challenges to traditional notions of American history and citizenship. With the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, four million ex-slaves were set on a course of striving for self-sufficiency and respect in a nation increasingly marked by the “romance” of white racial reunion. Between 1880 and 1924, 27 million immigrants, most from Southern and Eastern Europe, settled in the U.S. Fueling an urban industrial economy, they helped triple the country’s urban population, from 14 to 42 million. The frontier West was “settled” and its mineral wealth and farming incorporated in Eastern markets. Disgruntled white southerners had to make sense of the end of their way of life. The solution, according to many historians, emerged with the rise of technocratic, managerial culture; the establishment of centralized business structures; and the ascendancy of white Protestant systems of value.⁸

In this context, the failure, or at least the marginalization, of the vernacular has long interested cultural historians of this era.⁹ Popular culture was central to this process. Coney Island, which “help[ed] to knit a heterogeneous audience into a cohesive whole,”¹⁰ is among the most conspicuous examples of how popular culture eased its patrons into a modern socioeconomy. The *popular culture of history*—the ways in which the past, and especially the American past, were consumed in literature, the plastic arts, music, drama, and eventually cinema—suggested a long, at times mythical, precedent for these values. The American West as a site of nation- and self-making is a case in point. In his study of the cultural uses of the frontier in industrial America, Richard Slotkin declares that the region’s archetypal “hunter-heroes... [were] solitary plebeian adventurers who [were] the advance guard of civilization—which is to say of bourgeois democracy in the American

⁷ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 3.

⁸ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American History and Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982).

⁹ For a synthetic history of this trend, see George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 6. For a more focused appraisal, see Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

¹⁰ John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 4.

mode.”¹¹ Museum spaces, community pageants, and world’s fairs presented Anglo American culture as the culmination and apex of human history.¹² Those remnants of vernacular history that refused to be flattened also fell under the totalizing force of modernity. For instance, the strange folk dances and artistic traditions transplanted from Southern and Eastern Europe to urban America were accepted as “immigrant gifts.” Quaint, apolitical, and colorful, they were easily compartmentalized as exotic diversions rather than meaningful practices for constructing community and identity.¹³ In *Sister Carrie* [1900], a novel predicated on the many deceptions—personal, interpersonal, consumerist—created by the advent of mass society, Theodore Dreiser described Manhattan as a place where “The great create an atmosphere which reacts badly upon the small.”¹⁴

Recognizing this, intellectuals, writers, and armchair anthropologists put the vernacular on a kind of pedestal. The period witnessed the emergence of projects seeking to recuperate the vernacular as a counterweight to modern existence, a garrison of stable social life and identity rooted in ancient structures of meaning and experience. The vernacular-as-counterweight pervaded literature and the plastic arts, offering ballast against the discombobulating changes of the present.¹⁵ The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries witnessed the emergence of projects seeking to recuperate and/or codify the vernacular as a sentimentalized, nostalgic counterweight to modern existence; a garrison of stable social life and identity rooted in ancient structures of meaning and experience upon which the incursions of industrial capitalism and the rise of middle-class standards of propriety threatened to encroach.¹⁶ The vernacular-as-counterweight pervaded literature and the plastic arts, in what Miles Orvell has called “acts of archival repossession” that “savor[ed] the ‘authenticity’ of ballads and stories that were rooted in

¹¹ Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 64. See also, Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 18, and Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 25.

¹² Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 166; Robert W. Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

¹³ There is an extensive literature on “immigrant gifts.” I explore these issues at length in chapter three of this dissertation.

¹⁴ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998 [1900]), 620.

¹⁵ Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 70.

¹⁶ Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984 [1973]), xxiii-xxiv; Stuart M. Blumin, “The Hypothesis of Middle-Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals,” *The American Historical Review* 90:2 (April, 1985), 299-338; David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). For an example of how popular cultural performance can reaffirm and codify already entrenched ideals, see Jeffrey D. Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993),

the preindustrial past.” Doing so, he argued, stabilized an otherwise discombobulating national terrain.¹⁷ This was the beginning of the “history preservation movement,” which emerged “in opposition to a freewheeling, free market era, when profit-seeking Americans... routinely demolished what prior generations had constructed.”¹⁸ We find this attempt at preservation to be especially the case when it comes to music: African American spirituals, Appalachian folksongs, and cowboy ballads each became something of a vogue during these decades.¹⁹ Frequently, such efforts were invested with the same moral imperatives that guided salvage ethnographers in their attempts to catalogue traditional ways of life being destroyed by the modern world.²⁰ When Henry Cleveland Wood visited the South in 1892 under the auspices of *The New England Magazine*, he was dismayed. “The old-time melodies are fast disappearing and a new order of things is beginning to supplant them,” he noted; “therefore, I have striven to preserve a few fragments, at least, of song, in an effort toward perpetuating some of the quaint melodies before the drilled choir and accomplished organist have fully established their innovations on this distinctive feature of the negro camp-meeting.”²¹ In *Ramona* (1884), one of the most popular novels of the late-nineteenth century, Helen Hunt Jackson lamented the loss of the noble world of *Californios* and Native Americans of California in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War. Her southern California in the years before 1846 was populated by exotic farmers, ranchers, patricians, and matrons who led “a picturesque life, with more of sentiment and gayety in it, more also that was truly dramatic, more romantic, than will ever been seen on these sunny shores.” But what Jackson introduces as declining amidst the incursions of a rapacious Anglo American expansion persisted in those realms of sentiment and imagination that had not yet been

¹⁷ Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 70.

¹⁸ Michael Wallace, “Reflections on the History of Historic Preservation,” *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, eds. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 165.

¹⁹ Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), ch. 1; Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 436.

²⁰ Anthropologist Jacob Gruber coined the term “salvage ethnography” in 1970 to describe the ethical imperatives of a certain kind of anthropological activity that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century English empire. Not just collection for antiquarian purposes, nascent salvage ethnography, which officially began with parliamentary investigations such as the British Select Committee of Aborigines (1837), was morally, ethically, and professionally charged: “In the face of the inevitable and necessary changes, in the face of an almost infinite variety of men whose details were essential to a definition of man, the obligation of both scientist and human was clear: he must collect and preserve the information and the products of human activity and genius so rapidly being destroyed.” The threat was “must greater in the more limited area of human affairs where the advance of civilization produced a threat of destruction that was so much more obvious.” Indeed, “Throughout the century and within whatever theoretical framework, the refrain was the same: the savage is disappearing; preserve what you can; posterity will hold you accountable.” Jacob Gruber, “Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology,” *American Anthropologist: New Series* 72:6 (December, 1970), 1290, 1295.

²¹ Henry Cleveland Wood, “Negro Camp-Meeting Melodies,” *The New England Magazine* 12:1 (April, 1892), 61.

colonized. She assured her readers that “the aroma of it lingers still; industry and inventions have not yet slain it; it will last out its century,—in fact, it can never be quite lost.”²²

But looking for the ways in which “un-American identities” lost their uniqueness amidst an American “melting-pot,” liquidating difference in an exceptionalist narrative of Anglo American uplift,²³ or were compartmentalized for antimodern indulgences, presupposes a clear, consistent understanding of national identity that ultimately flattens the ways in which Americans conceived of their own history. By contrast, the four case studies that form this dissertation suggest that the period between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the First World War just as often linked vernacular culture and the national historical imagination. Indeed, my own interest in popular culture’s relationship to vernacular histories is to reject the tendency towards eulogy, hand wringing, or compartmentalization. When taken outside of the local environments where they were formed, they became lenses for situating and comprehending the nation writ large.

An eager consuming public, during a period of flux that Howard Mumford Jones aptly called the “age of energy,”²⁴ can just as easily wrestle with dilemmas over what of the past should remain as social, personal, and mythical ballast in a modernizing nation as it can resolve them. Both John Bodnar and Cecilia O’Leary have noted the protean and frequently contradictory nature of debates over national identity during this period. As O’Leary notes,

Between the Civil War and World War I, the cultural politics of patriotism were by no means fixed, definitive, or saturated with jingoism. There was considerable motion and flux regarding who possessed sufficient authority to speak for the nation and which memories, icons, and rituals could represent the nation’s symbolic meaning.²⁵

Her emphasis upon the emergence, struggle to define, and codification of patriotic practices and organizations shows a self-reflective society open to a plurality of voices, each as compelling as the next in its claims to speak for the American past and present. I am equally interested in exploring how the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries opened up a popular and open-ended quest to discover who and what would appropriately “represent the nation’s symbolic meaning.” I hope to add to O’Leary’s imperative to take confusion seriously by adding another layer of the form those “memories, icons, and rituals” took. My approach is to look beyond the creation and proliferation of “imagined communities” that knitted a nation together through easily reproducible cultural products, from maps of national territories to newspapers.²⁶ The deep historical memories and

²² Helen Hunt Jackson, *Ramona* (New York: Modern Library, 2005 [1884]), 13.

²³ Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot: A Drama in Four Acts* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1908).

²⁴ Howard Mumford Jones, *The Age of Energy: Varieties of American Experience, 1865-1915* (New York: Viking Press, 1970). His subtitle is illustrative.

²⁵ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 21; Cecilia Elizabeth O’Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 220.

²⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983). Recent collections have challenged some of Anderson’s basic assumptions about the social and historical processes of manufacturing patriotism. See

engrained ideals of vernacular cultures, each vying for their importance as foundational to American experience, can also serve as frameworks for creating a sense of national identity that, though not easily replicable, can maintain a powerful allure for performers and audiences alike.

How these ideals were conveyed through the particularities of performance is a key theme in this dissertation. The relatively recent collection, *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater* (1999), has considered the unique interventions of the stage as a site both for introducing and enacting different kinds of national identities, showing the particular rituals of “American-ness” in action.²⁷ To audiences it conveys new ways of imagining the national past: ways that deepen, rather than flatten, the particularities of distinct experiences. But performance also had invigorating effects on performers. Because the vernacular cultural forms under consideration in this dissertation were practices for creating self and community, and for thinking about one’s place in the larger nation, the simple act of performing them perpetuated vital links with the past. *Reenactment* just as often became a form of *enactment*.

In contrast to the *Performing America* collection, I focus here on one moment in national history to show how the exigencies of one particular period can be a prism for understanding a diverse array of cultural productions. I have not tried to trace every kind of “American vernacular” that was celebrated and mythicized during this period. In *Visions of Belonging*, for instance, Julia Rosenbaum explores the ways in which artists privileged New England as the repository of Ur-American traditions that were besieged by new technologies and population influxes.²⁸ But in tracing a series of performances that offered alternatives historical narratives, the dissertation proposes a broad, shifting, and ultimately contingent conversation about the foundations of the United States. The chapters that follow proceed chronologically, addressing a series of transitional moments as points of departure for the emergence of different vernacular histories: the post-Civil War South, the “development” of the frontier West, the mushrooming industrial city, and the advent of neo-Confederate politics. Imagining how these transitional moments called for *particular* kinds of vernaculars to emerge, rather than emphasizing an overarching narrative about the dissemination and development of popular culture, compelled me to employ an episodic format for this dissertation.

Beyond Imagined Communities: Reading and Writing the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America, eds. Sara Castro-Klarén and John Charles Chasteen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), and *Nationalism in the New World*, eds. Don H. Doyle and Marco Antonio Pamplona (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006). Melani McAlister posits some of the challenges to the “legitimacy” of the nation-state in the post-modern era in *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, & U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 5-6.

²⁷ Jeffrey D. Mason, “American Stages (Curtain Riser),” *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater*, eds. Jeffrey D. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 4).

²⁸ Julia Rosenbaum, *Visions of Belonging: New England Art and the Making of American Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

This discourse could be as stultifying as it was empowering.²⁹ Indeed, each of the chapters that follow center on audience's fantasies of contact with archetypal historical characters. And just as often, performers and impresarios relied upon overdetermined characteristics to effectively market themselves as "the real thing." But tracing the varied interactions between audiences, performers, and impresarios, tracking how each could be shaped by an awareness of the others' expectations, puts in play a series of concerns about what is "authentic" vernacular looked like, especially when forced from the margins to the center. For instance, as I show in chapter one, the content and the performance of the slave spiritual continued to provide a self-sustaining vision of identity and self-development even when the terms of its origins—the antebellum southern plantation—no longer existed. The spiritual as both vernacular *form* and *practice* resolved the tension between nostalgic yearnings for an authentic past and progressive ideas of self-making if we think of the latter as a natural development of the former.

This is the fundamental question at the core of chapter one. The Fisk Jubilee Singers were a chorus of African American college students, many of them ex-slaves. Beginning in 1871, the chorus began performing slave spirituals in the North in an effort to raise funds for the fledgling Fisk University (est. 1866), a college devoted to channeling the ambitions of freedmen and –women into educational practices centered on pious self-development. Examining the chorus during its first decade—as it grew in prominence, became a vogue, and straddled the political and social changes of Reconstruction and Jim Crow—I argue that the spiritual serves as a prism for resolving the tension of African American identity construction after the Civil War. Singing spirituals was both a commercial act and a way to fuse the precedents of the past with optimism for the future. But it also became for sympathetic white audiences an artifact of authentic experience that grew from the American soil. The Fisk Jubilee Singers, then, emerged from Reconstruction to make a larger point about the relationship between tradition and ambition in modern America. That point, I argue, was shaped by, and channeled through, the specific content and practice of the slave spiritual, which embodied ideals of self-making, piety, communal solidarity, and liberation. The singers, like their slave forebears, used the spiritual to achieve a level of autonomy, cohesion, and pride. These qualities were not located in the flight North or in the slave community, but in the construction and maintenance of Fisk University and its unique milieu.

Following the national political conversation, chapters two and three shift from the southern plantation to the frontier West and the industrial city, respectively. In both, I show how narratives of historical progress challenged the very idea of progress itself, and indeed became spaces for registering anxiety over the prospects of American modernity. Progress formed the framework for historical narrative as well as larger intellectual currents in the nineteenth-century United States. But progress was, I argue, ultimately a vexed value. Chapter two considers Buffalo Bill's Wild West during four months in the winter of 1886 and 1887. During that period of time, William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody staged *The Drama of Civilization* at Madison Square Garden. Telling the story of

²⁹ I draw these ideas primarily from Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), but also from Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

settlement and capitalist development in the American West, *The Drama of Civilization* seemed—and still seems, to many scholars—to promote a sanguine vision of American history, structured along the disappearance of indigenous peoples and the rise of Victorian social norms. As I show, both in the dramaturgy and the cultural apparatus surrounding this show, this narrative was time and again undercut by visions of devolution, of chaos, and of struggle that Buffalo Bill envisioned as fundamental to forming a healthy American citizenry. The frontier, with its unique calls to action, its experiences of testing the self, and its no-nonsense social relationships provided for a myth of nation-, community-, and self-making that saw the unique world of the frontier as the bedrock for future greatness.

In chapter three, I detail the development and reception of the Hull-House Labor Museum (1900-1935) in its first decade. The Labor Museum centered on a diverse group of neighborhood men and women, immigrants all, dressed in the peasant clothing of their homelands and working at their native crafts traditions for audiences of well-meaning Progressives and neighborhood youth, whom Jane Addams feared were becoming the victims of “Americanization.” Arranging these performers from “least” to “most” advanced, Addams hoped to provide a transnational, transhistorical narrative of technological development, culminating in modern America. The result, she believed, would help psychologically orient immigrants thrown into the chaos of the industrial city; would resurrect a true spirit of community and depth that she feared was threatened by modernity; and would change the terms by which Americans narrated their own history. Evolution provided an important framework for reimagining the American past in a way that could account for the millions of new arrivals flooding into cities and fueling the industrial economy. At the same time, vivifying these performers’ unique contributions provided an alternative vision of social relationships—rejecting ideas of self-madness and upward mobility in favor of the important values of community and tradition embodied in the act of artisanal craftsmanship. In this way, the city was imagined a monstrous anomaly in human history, rather than its culmination.

Finally, in chapter four, I return to the American South to consider *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) in a new historical context. D. W. Griffith’s famous, flagrantly racist film remains, for most scholars, the paradigmatic statement of white racial reunion after the Civil War. Revisiting the post-Reconstruction, neo-Confederate milieu in which Griffith’s own identity was shaped, and exploring his directorial process, allows me to provide a new take on the film’s content, as well as its reception by audiences. While I do not argue against the racism of *The Birth of a Nation*, I situate it, and other elements of its dramaturgical and filmic grammar, within the unique epistemological framework of the Lost Cause. I argue that Griffith’s film is best understood as a statement of a Confederate vernacular that claims dominance over national narrative. Perhaps more than any other performance described in the following pages, *The Birth of a Nation* underscores a key methodological aim in this dissertation; namely, to tease out the logic by which these performances articulated their claims to predominance. If Griffith’s film is now commonly seen as the most popular, most fully realized, and most persuasive instance of the postbellum “romance of [white] reunion,”³⁰ it is nevertheless important to stress that

³⁰ Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

it makes these claims through a highly divisive historical vision, stressing what it sees as the superiority of one vernacular history to speak for the nation at large.

The performances under consideration in this dissertation differ in considerable ways. Most simply, they offer divergent accounts of the vernacular roots of national identity and they privilege different types of performative practices as embodying a kind of Ur-American experience. But all are situated around two key themes. First is the idea of returning to original principles. Those principles were frequently contradictory, ranging from the village commonwealth (chapter three) to frontier self-making (chapter two). But in all cases, what was enacted for public consumption, and what audiences celebrated, was a call to return to a *something* that lay at the core of American identity. Thinking about history in this case becomes a matter of challenging assumptions about the superiority of a forward-looking, positivist white middle-class. A second, related theme is the importance of adhering to inherited frameworks of behavior, rather than seeking citizenship in the abnegation of tradition. Indeed, each of the performances explored in this dissertation underscores a fundamental tension over the relationships of ambition to authenticity. Central to my argument is the attempt to resolve what I understand to be one of the major preoccupations of the period: How to realize one's full potential in America while also—and sometimes *only by*—staying true to the past.

Chapter One

The Tenor of Belonging: The Fisk Jubilee Singers, in Public and Private

A Celebration of What?

Asked to write on behalf of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Mark Twain took to his task “cheerfully.” “I would walk seven miles to hear them sing again,” he declared in an 1873 letter to Tom Hood, of the London publishing house of George Routledge and Sons. “You will recognize that this is strong language for me to use, when you remember that I never was fond of pedestrianism.” Twain’s wry commendation quickly yielded to a sincerer, more intensely personal, engagement with what he had seen onstage the previous winter at Hartford’s Allyn Hall. He continued:

I think these gentlemen & ladies make eloquent music—& what is as much to the point, they reproduce the true melody of the plantations, & are the only persons I ever heard accomplish this on the public platform. The so-called “negro minstrels” simply misrepresent the thing; I do not think they ever saw a plantation or ever heard a slave sing.

I was reared in the South, & my father owned slaves, & I do not know when anything has so moved me as did the plaintive melodies of the Jubilee Singers. It was the first time for twenty-five or thirty years that I had heard such songs, or heard them sung in the genuine old way—& it is a way, I think, that white people cannot imitate—& never can, for that matter, for one must have been a slave himself in order to feel what that life was & so convey the pathos of it in music.³¹

Twain implicitly recognized the “inauthentic” qualities underpinning a concert by the Fisk Jubilee Singers. They were celebrities operating “on the public platform.” He was, after all, writing to the London publishing house in anticipation of the singers’ European debut. Yet Twain’s letter of recommendation focused on the ways in which the singers continued to be marked by, and fettered to, a unique past. Homing in on “the *true* melody of the plantations,” emphasizing “the *genuine* old way,” and placing it in counterpoint to the artificiality of “the ‘negro minstrels,’” the thirty-seven year old author and journalist at once salvaged an autochthonous American history and rendered it ontologically other, “something white people cannot imitate.” For “one must have been a slave himself in order to feel what that life was & so convey the pathos of it in music.” The concert called forth an experience that Twain, despite what would eventually become his nuanced depictions of the bonds of interracial friendship and his own novelistic attempts to imagine being a slave,³² could never know except from the vantage of spectatorship on his father’s Missouri plantation.

Mark Twain’s antislavery politics are by now well known. In his memoirs, the Peculiar Institution was “a bald, grotesque and unwarrantable usurpation” of human

³¹ Samuel Langhorne Clemens to Tom Hood and George Routledge and Sons, 10 March 1873, Hartford, Conn. (UCCL 00886). In Mark Twain Project Online. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2007. <<http://www.marktwainproject.org/xtf/view?docId=letters/UCCL00886.xml;style=letter;brand=mtp>>, accessed 2011-02-10.

³² Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Random House: 1996 [1885]). In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (New York: Bantam Classic, 2005 [1889]), ch. 21, Twain has his eponymous hero, Hank Morgan, describe being a slave in Arthurian England.

life.³³ Remembering the Jubilee Singers, though, he hardly registered the social or political commitments that would eventually mark his work. Nowhere in his letter did Twain mention the remunerative project at the heart of a Jubilee Singers concert; namely, fundraising for an institution of higher education that would usher former slaves or their children into liberal citizenship in the postbellum United States. In his avidity to recuperate a “genuine” and “true” history, he transformed the singers into artifacts to be celebrated in the flush of his own nostalgia, paradoxical for being so clearly interwoven with the brutal slave regime that produced the music’s “pathos.” Ultimately, then, Mark Twain’s enthusiasm was not for the singers as agents in history, but for the singers as artifacts of a past that, though not cheery, was invested with significant experience in, and powerful reactions to, the American landscape.

Twain’s interest in the Fisk Jubilee Singers was uniquely intense in both its nostalgia and its persistence. In fact, they remained a preoccupation throughout his life.³⁴ But Twain’s interest in seeking their “authenticity” over their agency places him firmly among his fellow audience members. Over the course of an eighteen-month tour of the mid-western and northeastern United States (1871-1872), the rigorously trained chorus of African American students from Nashville’s Fisk University was described, debated, and celebrated in the white press in ways that bound them up in a past they could never transcend. Indeed, for Twain and many others, a retrospective vision undergirded these conversations: To watch the Fisk Jubilee Singers perform was to be transported through time and space to the brutal antebellum plantation, a flashpoint for historical fantasia centered on life in the Deep South, but ultimately forming the core of a distinctly

³³ Mark Twain, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2000), 76; Sandra Sagala, “Mark Twain and Buffalo Bill: Mirrored through a Glass Darkly,” 6-7, Buffalo Bill Museum Office Files, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming. For his continued interest in the singers, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 143; Mark Twain, *Mark Twain’s Notebook*, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1935), 336.

³⁴ Mark Twain saw the Fisk Jubilee Singers five times within three years. While in England, lecturing on his travels through the Sandwich Islands, and severely homesick, he sat down at hotel pianos to play “jubilee songs” for friends and acquaintances. Charles Warren Stoddard, *Exits and Entrances: A Book of Essays and Sketches* (Boston: Lothrop Publishing Company, 1903), 65. In anticipation of a return performance to Hartford (1875), he wrote to then-Musical Director Theodore Seward, recalling “an afternoon in London, when their ‘John Brown’s Body’ took a decorous, aristocratic English audience by surprise & sent them into a volcanic eruption of applause before they knew what they were about.” Observing, “John brown [*sic*] is not in this evening’s programme,” he asked, “cannot it be added?” The reason had more to do with Twain’s own predilections than with any political orientation or critical stance *vis-à-vis* performance. Indeed, “[i]t would set me down in London again for a minute or two, & at the same time save me the tedious sea voyage & the expense.” Twain’s demands, and Seward’s acquiescence to them, point up the importance attached to the audience—a fact underscored when Seward introduced the song by reading this self-same letter—even as viewers appropriated and refracted the history on which the music rested. Samuel Langhorne Clemens to Theodore F. Seward, 8 March 1875, Hartford, Conn. (UCCL 01205). In *Mark Twain’s Letters, 1874–1875*, eds. Michael B. Frank and Harriet Elinor Smith. Mark Twain Project Online. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2007. <<http://www.marktwainproject.org/xtf/view?docId=letters/UCCL01205.xml;style=letter;brand=mtp>>, accessed 2011-02-10.

American sound and experience. In such instances, denunciations of the Peculiar Institution existed in tension with the joy of an unmediated encounter with it.

When W. E. B. Du Bois sought to describe the emergence of the “Sorrow Songs” into national consciousness, he turned to the example of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he conjured, in a play on narratological tropes of runaway slaves, a mythic “pilgrimage” of “four half-clothed black boys and five girl-women,” venturing “ever northward” towards public acclaim. Ever since, from the self-empowerment of the New Negro movement to contemporary historical scholarship, a triumphalist narrative emerges in relation to the Fisk Jubilee Singers.³⁵ This chapter does not seek to diminish the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ remarkable work, ambitions, and rewards. But in exploring their creation, reception, and codification during their first decade of national prominence—a decade marked by the shift from official Reconstruction era optimism to the advent of Jim Crow—it emphasizes the ways in which a white middle- and upper-middle-class audience appropriated and reshaped the singers in order to articulate what they found valuable in the nation’s past and to crystallize it around fantasies of a black vernacular tradition.

That vernacular tradition, the slave spiritual,³⁶ was itself a multivalent art form, its layered meanings speaking to the exigencies of lived experience under slavery. The

³⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994 [1903]), 156. For instances from the New Negro movement, see also Arna Bontemps, *Chariot in the Sky: A Novel of the Jubilee Singers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1951]); Pauline Hopkins, *Of One Blood; or, the Hidden Self* (1902), *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 450-454; *The Book of American Negro Spirituals: Including The Book of American Negro Spirituals and the Second Book of American Negro Spirituals*, eds. James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamund Johnson (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1981 [1925 and 1926]), 18-19; and John Wesley Work, *Folk Song of the American Negro* (Nashville: Press of Fisk University, 1915). For more contemporary scholarship, see Toni P. Anderson, “Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus”: *The Original Fisk Jubilee Singers and Christian Reconstruction, 1871-1878* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2010); Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 7; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 89-90, and “Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a ‘Changing’ Same,” *Black Music Research Journal*, 11:2 (Autumn, 1991), 111-136; Sandra Jean Graham, “The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Concert Spiritual: The Beginning of an American Tradition” (Ph.D. dissertation, NYU, 2001); Eric Bernard Grant, “‘Message In Our Music’: Spirituals and the Cultural Politics of Race and Nation, 1871 to 1945” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2005), ch. 1; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 166; Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 227-231; Andrew Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers Who Introduced the World to the Music of Black America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

³⁶ I am working from John Lovell, Jr.’s, definition of the spiritual: “It is now emphatically clear that for a century or more before 1867 there was an Afro-American spiritual. It was and is an independent folk song, born of the union of African tradition and American socioreligious elements. It was affected to a limited extent by the American Christian evangelical tradition and the Anglo-American hymn, but not at all by the so-called white spiritual. Its creators were religious folk in the broad sense of the African, not in the narrow sense of the white spiritual

spiritual was used to communicate a shared ideology and to hide meaning from slaveholders. Robert Darden explains this as “a ‘rhetorical practice’ designed to protect sensitive information from outsiders.” Harriet Tubman, for instance, is said “to have promoted the spiritual ‘Wade in the Water’ to demonstrate how to throw bloodhounds off the scent.” Fisk Jubilee Singer Ella Sheppard provided a more mundane example when she wrote in a brief pamphlet that the slave master “only heard the song, but the slave received a message. When they sang ‘Steal Away to Jesus,’ it meant that there would be a sacred meeting that night to worship the Lord, to pray for a better day.”³⁷ Nor was the concept unknown to sympathetic white audiences. Frederick Douglass’s popular *Narrative* (1845) had explicated the coded meanings of the spiritual. When slaves sang “I am going away to the Great House Farm!,” their words sounded “to many [like] unmeaning jargon,” but “were full of meaning to themselves.” He also described how, when slaves sang “O Canaan, sweet Canaan, / I am bound for the land of Canaan,” they were singing of escape. “[T]he North was our Canaan,” he explained. Hearing the call to worship, “Run to Jesus—shun the danger / I don’t expect to stay / Much longer,” provided the inspiration for Douglass’s own flight to freedom and a long process of self-making through struggle.³⁸

Yet audiences of the Fisk Jubilee Singers failed to recognize that the music continued to underpin private experience. Even sympathetic white audiences failed to understand the songs in the terms that the singers did. Both theoretically and practically, singing slave spirituals provided for the Fisk Jubilee Singers the realization of personal ambition and inclusion in American narratives of self-development, even if this meant they needed to allow for their commodification as celebrities invested with the caché of “experience.” It became a vehicle for self-expression in ways that frequently contradicted the narrative foisted upon them. While singing spirituals was both a remunerative act for the chorus and a way to fuse the precedents of the past with optimism in the future, it also became for audiences an artifact of authentic experience in the American soil. In what follows, I structure my analysis along the bifurcated meaning of the spiritual as private expression of ambition (both epistemologically and practically) and public performance of “authenticity.” For sympathetic white audiences, it evoked celebrations of a

creator. They settled upon Christianity as a source for ideas and models only because Christianity was the nearest available, least suspect, and most stimulative system for expressing their concepts of freedom, justice, right, and aspiration. The one God of Christianity was not new to their centuries-old tradition; in their creative hands, however, he became a close associate.” John Lovell, Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame: The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual was Hammered Out* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 111.

³⁷ Darden, *People Get Ready!*, 80-81; Ella Sheppard Moore, *Before Emancipation* (New York: American Missionary Association, n.d.), 4, Jubilee Singers Vault, Archival and Manuscript Collections, the John Hope and Aurelia Elizabeth Franklin Library, Fisk University (hereafter, JSV), box 3, folder 6. Darden is borrowing from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), ch. 2.

³⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2000 [1845]), 27; Frederick Douglass, quoted in Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 51. Jon Cruz provides an extended discussion of Frederick Douglass and the slave spiritual throughout *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

quintessentially American tradition of life rooted in the soil, of simple piety, and of redemption through suffering. For the singers, I argue, it became a tool for articulating personal ambitions of upward mobility that were also encoded in the music and the very public performance of the spiritual.

History and Ambition at Fisk University

Following the Civil War, Clinton Fisk, an agent in the Freedmen's Bureau, had admonished ex-slaves to remain on their plantations. "Do not think that, in order to be free, you must fall out with your old master, gather up your bundles, and trudge off to a strange city," he wrote in *Plain Councils for Freedmen* (1866), reflecting the official policy of President Andrew Johnson. "This is a great mistake. As a general rule, you can be as free and as happy in your old home, for the present, as any where [*sic*] else in the world."³⁹ While adhering to themes of devotion and diligence, his namesake university implicitly rejected the advice to remain on the plantation and be content. Fisk University, which opened in January 1866, emerged as a consequence of the American Missionary Association's (AMA) shift from foreign missionary efforts to the more immediately meaningful task of working to ensure an improved quality of life for southern African Americans navigating their way in a reconfigured South. Through private donations, the AMA set about establishing "training schools" for African American teachers and ministers.⁴⁰

Methodist in its Christian leanings, Fisk University embodied what one historian has called the denomination's "remorseless emphasis on... the need for human beings to take control of their spiritual destinies, not as passive respondents to the iron will of God, but as active agents 'working out [their] own salvation.'" Methodism had long framed slaves' experiences with Christianity. This was most likely because of the "association with song, music, rhythm, and emotional release from anxiety and from traditional social expressions of bodily comportment and restraint" that it offered easily merged with West African patterns of worship. But Methodism's emphasis on second birth, "community support," and "fear of backsliding into the world left behind"⁴¹ provided spiritual bedrock for Fisk University's aspirational objectives. Indeed, boosters spoke of a millennial

³⁹ Clinton Fisk, quoted in Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 381; for Johnson's policy, see Lester C. Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee, 1791-1970* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 35. See also, Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 157.

⁴⁰ The other universities established by the AMA during this time and similarly dedicated to the cause of educating freedmen, were Berea College (Kentucky), Hampton Institute (Virginia), Atlanta University (Georgia), Tougaloo University (Mississippi), Talladega College (Alabama), and Straight University (Louisiana).

⁴¹ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 58, 131, 135, 62. John McCardell explores the complicated history of Methodism among white southerners in *The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 193-200. Slave religion has been extensively documented. See, for instance, Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Role: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 159-184; Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, ch. 9; and Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

venture in the project. Fisk's purpose was nothing less than "that of elevating and Christianizing the Black race among us, by a system of free popular education" that "must ultimately succeed or the race is lost." University Professor John Ogden imagined a merger of "science and religion..." that were "joined... in Heaven-appointed means of lighting humanity to its proper standings and true dignity." Adam Spence, the school's first principal, imagined the racial redemption in an allusion to Moses' fate in *Exodus*: "And it was a study to see those earnest, dark faces, with their great, dreamy eyes, as they peered in at the portals of the temple of knowledge so long closed against them, and just got a glimpse of the glory beyond, and knew, if they themselves could not enter, their children might."⁴²

Founded on the site of a former Union hospital on the northern border of Nashville, the campus' location was fortuitous. Of the city's total population of 16,000 in 1866, roughly a quarter (3,945) was African American. Sandwiched between the Deep South states of Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi, and the border state of Kentucky, Tennessee, and its north-central city of Nashville in particular, had long been considered a magnet for northerners and southerners alike. It was "a nostril," in the words of one mid-century visitor, which had long inhaled "the Northern air of free institutions." Indeed, Tennessee had been the only slaveholding state to permit the educational instruction of slaves.⁴³

The site itself, purchased for \$16,000, was nevertheless inauspicious. A "two-story frame building" made up the girls' dormitory, while the rest of the campus consisted, in the words of former student and Fisk Jubilee Singer Ella Sheppard, of "low, one-story frame structures, totally unfit for the permanent housing of the school. The officers' quarters became the home of an earnest band of teachers; the sick-wards were fitted up as schoolrooms...; the dead-houses were turned into a state-room of supplies for the naked and hungry." When Professor Helen Morgan assumed an appointment in 1869, she found the furnishings "Spartan-like in their plainness." Nevertheless, and as a testament to the institution's pride and forbearance, she recalled how "visitors and friends were attracted by the appearance of the school. The buildings and grounds were scrupulously neat." Recalling such humble beginnings fifteen years after its founding, J. B. T. Marsh, an early university historian, couched the story of the school's origins in a narrative of redemption and renewal, turning the transition from slavery to a spiritually-

⁴² Port, T.M, to Adam Spence, 2 May, 1864, MS American Missionary Association Archives, 1839-1883 73502. Amistad Research Center at Tulane University. *Slavery and Anti-Slavery*. Gale. University of California, Berkeley. 10 April, 2011 (hereafter, AMAA); Prof. John Ogden, quoted in G. D. Pike, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1873), 33; A. K. Spence, "The Freedmen: Tennessee: State Teacher's Institute," *American Missionary* 32:1 (January, 1878), 15. Spence's allusion to the "glory beyond" no doubt references *Deuteronomy* 34:4: "Then the LORD said to him, 'This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, "I will give it to your descendants." I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over.'" The figure of Moses had long had purchase in American self-mythologization, although frequently only as a liberator and ignoring the prophet's sad fate. For comparisons between Moses and George Washington, see Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 150.

⁴³ Joe M. Richardson, *A History of Fisk University, 1865-1946* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1980), 3; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 96.

enlightened freedom into the metaphor at the core of the school's ambitions. "When a pile of rusty handcuffs and fetters from the abandoned slave-pen of the city came into the possession of the school, and were sold as old iron," he wrote, "... the money [was] invested in the purchase of Testaments and spellings books."⁴⁴ As Eric Foner has described it, this goal was a "typical nineteenth century amalgam of benevolent uplift and social control... aimed simultaneously to equip the freedmen to take full advantage of citizenship, and to remake the culture blacks had inherited from slavery, by inculcating qualities of self-reliance and self-discipline."⁴⁵ "Objects and Aims," as expressed in an early Fisk promotional pamphlet, included "A Practical Business Education" and "The Training of Ministers." But it also endeavored to shape young men and women, emphasizing "The Physical, Intellectual, Moral, Social and Religious Training of Students without sectarian or denominational biases." Fisk strove to create, as early boosters declared, a total social-educational environment, "adapted to *Home, School, & Church* purposes." This included Victorian standards of "neatness and order, both in person and arrangement of books." The school prohibited "ardent spirits, tobacco in any form, and all games of chance."⁴⁶

In 1874, *Scribner's* journalist Edward King noted, for a national audience, the student body's educational cultivation by reprinting "a report from a recent commencement [to] show what progress the ex-slaves have already made." What followed was a laundry list of Freshmen and Sophomore subjects, including courses in Geometry and Botany. Students were taught Cicero, Livy, and Virgil, all in Latin.⁴⁷ Traditional in its academic focus, Fisk would thus stand in stark opposition to the industrial education offered at other famous African American universities founded during the postbellum period, such as the Tuskegee Institute (est. 1881), with its emphasis on vocational training.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ella Sheppard Moore, "Historical Sketch of the Jubilee Singers," *Fisk University News: The Jubilee Singers* 2:5 (Oct., 1911), 93; Helen C. Morgan, "Fisk University Before the Singers Went Forth," *Fisk University News: The Jubilee Singers* 2:5 (Oct., 1911), 14-15; J. B. T. Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers; with Their Songs* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1880), 12.

⁴⁵ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 146.

⁴⁶ Ogden, John "Fisk University," n.d., AMAA H9672; Smith, E. P. to M. E. Strieby, 11 October, 1865, AMAA, H8973; Spence, Adam to E. M. Cravath, 4 October, 1870, AMAA, H9529; Ogden, John, "Rules and Regulations of the Fisk University" (pamphlet), n.d., AMAA.

⁴⁷ Edward King, "The Great South," *Scribner's Monthly: An Illustrated Magazine for the People* 9:2 (December, 1874), 153-154. See also, "Fisk University: Statement" (Nashville: Banner Print, 1873), Jubilee Singers Scrapbook 1873-1874, Archival and Manuscript Collections, the John Hope and Aurelia Elizabeth Franklin Library, Fisk University (hereafter, JSS 1873-1874).

⁴⁸ Booker T. Washington, in *Up From Slavery* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1989 [1901]), 155, argued for what he considered a more pragmatic educational apparatus: "The individual who can do something that the world wants done will, in the end, make his way regardless of his race. One man may go into a community prepared to supply the people there with an analysis of Greek sentences. The community may not at that time e prepared for, or feel the need of, Greek analysis, but it may feel its need of bricks and houses and wagons. If the man can supply the need for those, then, it will lead eventually to a demand for the first product, and with the demand will come the ability to appreciate it and to profit by it."

Among its “Specialties,” Fisk advertised, “Vocal and Instrumental Music... taught and practiced in the most thorough and systematic manner by able and experienced teachers.”⁴⁹ University treasurer George White was appointed to lead regular choral instruction of Fisk’s most talented singers. The tall, gaunt, and severe son of a blacksmith, White had grown up amidst humble surroundings in upstate New York, where he never completed high school. He saw action for the Union Army at Gettysburg and Chancellorsville, and was later in the ranks of the Freedmen’s Bureau as Assistant Commissioner for the Tennessee and Kentucky division. As an impresario, George White was frequently remembered as embodying a series of noble characteristics: “a true artist,” “very generous,” self-abnegating, “very modest and retiring before the public,” and “a man of great courage.” To his chorus, he was “fatherly.”⁵⁰

Though not rooted in it, musical instruction included the singing of slave spirituals.⁵¹ Chorus members frequently contributed these; from their own memories of having sung them as children or of having listened to their parents sing them. It was a taxing process. “To recall and learn of each other the slave songs demanded much mental labor,” Sheppard remembered.⁵² But the singers did not simply replicate the sounds of their parents. Singer Georgia Gordon Taylor remembered that George White “was wonderful in the interpretation of those old Negro melodies. He would keep us singing all day until he was satisfied that we had every soft or loud passage to suit his fastidious taste,” which demanded “perfect enunciation.”⁵³ White’s “interpretation” was to render these songs into delicate four-part harmonies. This was not without precedent in the realm of folksong collecting more generally. Similar interventions had been made among folksong collectors in eighteenth-century Europe.⁵⁴ As Sandra Graham notes, “[i]n arranging the spirituals, White probably was concerned with making them exotic enough to sound interesting, but familiar enough that audiences could recognize them as relatives of music they were accustomed to,” thus creating “a polished concert performance with spirituals resembling hymns.” Indeed, based on her survey of white reactions to black spirituals in the mid nineteenth century, musicologist Dena Epstein has shown that “The irregular rhythms, rhapsodic singing, rasping voices, and bodily movements would have seemed at that time an irreligious blending of the minstrel show and a church service, too offensive to be tolerated.”⁵⁵

What emerged instead from these practices was a professional grammar that emphasized “naturalness of expression,” an amalgam of force and tenderness. Locking himself and his choir in a room, White instructed them to sing the spiritual in *pianissimo* tones. Mary Spence remembered listening to these earliest practices as a little girl: “He used to tell the singers to put into the tone the intensity that he would give to the most

⁴⁹ Ogden, John, “Fisk University,” n.d., AMAA, H9672.

⁵⁰ Mary E. Spence, “A Character Sketch of George L. White,” *Fisk University News: The Jubilee Singers* 2:5 (Oct., 1911), 5; Georgia Gordon Taylor, “Reminiscences of Jubilee Singers,” *Fisk University News: The Jubilee Singers* 2:5 (Oct., 1911), 29.

⁵¹ Anderson, “*Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus*,” 39.

⁵² Moore, “Historical Sketch,” *Fisk University News*, 47.

⁵³ Taylor, “Reminiscences,” *Fisk University News*, 29.

⁵⁴ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 19.

⁵⁵ Graham, “The Fisk Jubilee Singers,” 186; Dena J. Epstein, “Black Spirituals: Their Emergence Into Public Knowledge,” *Black Music Research Newsletter* 10:1 (Spring, 1990), 63.

forcible one that they could sing, and yet to make it as soft as they possibly could.” White employed a vivid metaphor in his instruction: “If a tiger should step behind you, you would not hear the fall of his foot, yet all the strength of the tiger would be in that tread.” Sheppard remembered, “to prepare them for public singing required much rehearsing.”⁵⁶

Deviation and improvisation were discouraged. Jennie Jackson could “remember how anxious I used to be to do well” in such practices. When once, in her “zeal,” she “forgot where [she] was,” White chided her, announcing to the group, “That little girl who sings so loud is making discord.”⁵⁷ Was the free-born Jackson⁵⁸ giving herself over to the music’s power, imagining herself in a backwoods camp meeting or on the plantations where her parents worked? She was ambiguous on the source of her “zeal.” But her initial self-consciousness, and White’s belittling response to her lack of control, points up an early recognition of the chorus as anxiety-provoking in its rigor.

The tension between musical control and emotional release was nevertheless crucial. Emotional release no doubt sutured generational fissures, acting as an empowering connection with the past that might be equally attuned to a sense of authentic vernacular experience in the American South and a sense of how the spiritual could convey personal ambition and transcendence. Musical control, on the other hand, carved out a professional grammar that made the music palatable and, therefore, marketable, to respectable audiences. As we shall see, these two elements existed in mutually reinforcing relationships.

During this era, music served as a repository of national identity. The postbellum decades saw a popular cultural upsurge of folk musical styles (polkas, Irish jigs, Scottish ballads), of which the slave spiritual was just another example. Music was a powerful metaphor. Expressing his fears of Radical Republican power, Samuel Tilden, chairman of the Democratic Party in New York, turned to song. At the 1868 Democratic State Convention in Albany he warned, “The grim Puritan of New England—whose only child, whose solitary daughter is already listening to the soft music of a Celtic wooer—stretches his hand down along the Atlantic coast to the receding and decaying African and says:

⁵⁶ Spence, “Character Sketch,” *Fisk University News*, 4; Samuel Floyd, quoted in Anderson, “*Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus*,” 103; Moore, “Historical Sketch,” *Fisk University News*, 48. See also Work, *Folk Song of the American Negro*, 104.

⁵⁷ Jennie Jackson, quoted in Pike, *Jubilee Singers*, 62. Fisk University was not alone in recognizing the distinction between public and private music making as it pertained to the slave spiritual. Hampton University (est. 1868), also a flagship school of the AMA, would, in the next decade, pioneer the task of collecting and studying the slave spiritual among African American musicologists, musicians, and folklorists. Thomas Fenner, the musical arranger for Hampton’s own chorus (of which more below), wrote about the distinctions between public and private in *Religious Songs of the Negro as Sung on the Plantation* (Hampton: The Institute Press, 1874), iii: “There are, evidently, I think, two legitimate methods of treating this music: either to render it in its absolute, rude simplicity, or to develop it without destroying its original characteristics.... Half its effectiveness in its home depends upon accompaniments which can be carried away only in memory. The inspiration of numbers; the overpowering chorus, covering defects; the swaying of the body; the rhythmical stamping of the feet; and all the wild enthusiasm of the Negro camp-meeting—these evidently cannot be transported to the boards of a public performance.”

⁵⁸ See Pike, *Jubilee Singers*, 61.

‘Come, let us rule this continent together!’⁵⁹ Tilden’s political histrionics spoke to a complicated postbellum milieu that often pitted African Americans against Irish and German immigrants. But his metaphor of “the soft music of the Celtic wooer” seems to transcend political rhetoric and speak to a larger national preoccupation with emergent folk culture. Tilden’s was a potent formulation in an era of mass immigration, as well as evincing a Herderian impulse towards preserving and cataloguing national culture.

Music, then, was a flashpoint for meditations on American character. *The Atlantic Monthly* sought, from its first issue in 1857, to “invent” a national music that was not derivative of European folk musical models, which could speak to experience in America, and that, presumably, rejected the grotesquerie of blackface minstrelsy. A similar ambition had been expressed the previous year in Boston’s highbrow *Dwight’s Journal of Music*.⁶⁰ The search for pure, natural, national song was, Jon Cruz has shown, part of a larger effort by elites to tease out an American artistic tradition rooted in Protestant ideology and separation from “machines, the marketplace, and the worst of the now undesired European pretensions.”⁶¹ For many, the slave spiritual was the ideal mode of patriotic expression, predicated on a particularly Christianized vision of the United States. Simple piety, true belief, and tropes of redemption through struggle were, in the words of the era’s most popular novel, most fully manifested in African American slaves. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe asserted, “Certainly they will, in their gentleness, their lowly docility of heart, their aptitude to repose on a superior mind and rest on a higher power, their childlike simplicity of affection, and facility of forgiveness... exhibit the highest form of the peculiarly *Christian life*.” And as she wrote in *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853), God had given the Bible “to them in the fervent language and with the flowing imagery of the more susceptible and passionate Oriental.”⁶² In such discussions, the American slave embodied a pure Christian piety that had been lost to cold and calculating Anglo Americans. The experience of slavery, with its various tests of the body and spirit, was the crucible upon which an organic American Christianity emerged.

In contrast, White’s efforts, and their reception by his chorus, spoke to the ambitions of personal development—of transforming the past into an empowering and marketable skill—that structured the educational rigors and social relationships of Fisk University. The spirited self-development of such an institution, not to mention a memory of slavery’s brutality, precluded a glorification of the spiritual as the highest expression

⁵⁹ Samuel Tilden, quoted in Robert Kelley, *The Transatlantic Persuasion: The Liberal-Democratic Mind in the Age of Gladstone* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 272. See also, John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), ch. 2.

⁶⁰ “Music,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 1 (November, 1857), 125; Paul Fritz Laubenstein, “Race Values in Aframerican Music,” *The Musical Quarterly* 1:3 (July, 1930), 378.

⁶¹ Cruz, *Culture on the Margins*, 116, 130. John Cox finds this sentiment emerging as early as the wartime years: “Confronted with the breakup of their nation, Union soldiers used their narratives to see the reincorporation of the South into the national community and to identify and celebrate those aspects of the region that they found most ‘American.’” Cox, *Traveling South*, 67.

⁶² Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009 [1852]), 235; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853), quoted in Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29-30. Emphasis in original.

of African American life and culture. Even as White collected songs from local freedmen and asked his chorus to contribute whatever they knew of the music, he encountered resistance. One of his earliest pupils spoke for her colleagues in noting “the tendencies of the freedmen... to leave them [slave spirituals] behind in the grace of slavery.” Others seemed “to regard them as songs of their former disgrace and to shun them as one would the prison clothes of the day of his incarceration.” Ella Sheppard recalled, “They were associated with slavery and the dark past, and represented the things to be forgotten. Then, too, they were sacred to our parents, who used them in their religious worship and shouted over them. We finally grew willing to sing them privately.”⁶³ The various strains of the group’s trepidation—shame, trauma, and sentimental protectiveness—strike an important note of self-recognition, both collective and individual. The chorus members conceived of themselves as something other than slaves. They did not reject their pasts; yet they were unwilling to let the past dominate their sense of self, a sense that was being shaped by their status as students of a nationally regarded institution of higher education. In any event, the spiritual remained the province of the private realm of experience, a sentimental or shameful genre that had no place in the university’s official curriculum. Even as White’s as-yet-unnamed student chorus became so skillful that it performed throughout Tennessee and Georgia, the repertoire abjured the “slave songs” in public.

Such protectiveness was apt in light of the middle nineteenth century’s avidity for slave music. Even the most empathetic and scholarly exploration of African American music typically held it up as an expression of racial distinctiveness. Thomas Jefferson was not the first to give tribute to what he considered the innate musical capacity of African Americans, but he was perhaps the most famous early proponent of this sentiment. In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1788), he described the state’s slave population as “more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time.”⁶⁴ Black musicality became a common theme throughout both the antebellum and wartime years as a range of white observers (southerner Mary Boykin Chestnut, northern tourist Frederick Law Olmsted, novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, a host of the two million wartime soldiers, Freedmen’s Bureau agents, and missionaries writing home from a war-torn Confederacy) reckoned with the unique music they heard, first on plantations, and later in contraband camps and the barracks of all-black army regiments.⁶⁵

⁶³ Moore, “Historical Sketch,” *Fisk University News*, 43. See also, Taylor, “Reminiscences,” *Fisk University News*, 28; and the unsigned speech, given 26 March, 1873, reprinted in Anderson, “*Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus*,” 39.

⁶⁴ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1788) in *Black Americans in the Revolutionary Era: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Woody Holton (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009), 106. Lawrence Levine provides an earlier instance of such praise by the Rev. Samuel Davies, who preached to cross-racial Virginians between 1747-1774. Levine quotes Davies’s letter to London friend: “The Negro, above all the human species that ever I knew, have an ear for music and a kind of extatic [*sic*] delight in psalmody.” Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 21. For an extended discussion of European, and later white American, visions of slave music and dance, see Thompson, “Choreographic Race.”

⁶⁵ See John D. Cox, *Traveling South: Travel Narratives and the Construction of American Identity* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), ch. 5. For a brief description of white reactions to African American music in the South, see Ronald Radano, “Denoting Difference: The Writing of the Slave Spirituals,” *Critical Inquiry*, 22:3 (Spring, 1996), 506-544.

The postbellum years witnessed an upsurge of interest in slave spirituals, frequently tinged with efforts to codify a cultural form that seemed, of necessity, to be on the wane. However sympathetically, observers and early chroniclers rendered the spiritual a site for discussion of black difference. William Francis Allen, Lucy McKim Garrison, and Charles Pickard Ware's *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), a massive *catalogue raisonné* of 136 numbers the authors collected and categorized by regional origin, emphasized the failure inherent to their task. The "voices of the colored people have a peculiar quality that nothing can imitate," they announced in their prologue; "and the intonations and delicate variations of even one singer cannot be reproduced on paper."⁶⁶ As Ronald Radano notes, around the Civil War, whites began to study and express a predilection for "authentic" black music:

Typically, these depictions outlined discursive extremes, ranging from saintly freedom to the most debased images of blackface. Hyperbolic references to "wildly excited," "barbaric" songs that were nonetheless "fresh" and... "from the heart" appeared across the literature, balancing precariously between paradoxical moods of praise and reproach, desire and disgust, or what Eric Lott calls "love and theft."⁶⁷

Linda Warfel Slaughter, an Ohio traveler, described her visit to one southern congregation after the war in terms whose sympathy was interwoven with a sense of the uncanny:

It is impossible to describe the wild, weird melody produced from these uncouth jargonic rhymes. To you who merely read them, they will doubtless seem to be destitute of rhythm, and incapable of being rendered into music; but who that has stood by their camp-meeting fires, and listened to the soul-swelling strains, in which the simple hearts of rustic worshippers poured forth their fervent feelings, can ever forget the waves of sound that rose and ebbed and died away among the overhanging foliage of the forest? It is the music of nature, the divine melody of untaught devotion, swelling rich and free from the fountains of untutored hearts.⁶⁸

Rather than seeking the historical threads that produced this unique sound or values of individual sentiment and purpose, writers instead touched on sublime themes of transcendence, pathos, selfhood, and community rooted in an abstraction of the slave experience. The music was mystical and affecting for being so "barbaric." In many of these discussions, white observers positioned the slave spiritual within a larger quest to discover and retrieve a "national" music, one rooted in organic, rather than personalized, experience. Thomas Wentworth Higginson described the process by which he transcribed and studied the spiritual as an act of artifactual collection. Higginson, the Boston Brahmin commander of the First South Carolina Volunteers, the Union Army's first all-black regiment, described listening to his soldiers sing spirituals in camp, quietly writing down their lyrics, secreting them in his officer's tent, and then studying the music as though it were "some captured bird or insect." Higginson painted barracks life as

⁶⁶ William Francis Allen, Lucy McKim Garrison, and Charles Pickard Ware, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: A Simpson & Co., 1867), i, iv-v.

⁶⁷ Radano, "Denoting Difference," 510.

⁶⁸ Linda Warfel Slaughter, *The Freedmen of the South* (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969 [1869]), 137.

exhilarating fieldwork, the opportunity to finally “gather on their own soil these strange plants [spirituals], which I had before seen in museums alone.”⁶⁹

The Fisk University chorus, though, defined itself precisely in terms of its ability to transcend the ontological designations confidently delineated by white writers. Rather than pointing up the cultural fetishization that had long served as the distinguishing marker of black performativity, White and his students maintained a repertoire emphasizing musical virtuosity, from the *Cantata of Esther*, sung “in Costume” or an Emancipation-themed tableau with its multi-ethnic mélange of polka and the “Tam O’Shanter.” Not just form, but also content, situated the chorus within larger national currents. The original composition, “The Tombs of Our Brave,” performed at the National Cemetery in Nashville in 1871, emphasized nothing so much as the chorus’ solemn participation in the postbellum death cult that David Blight has described as the unique province of white reckoning and reunion. “Let cannon boom forth and banners all wave, / While we mingle our tears o’er the tombs of the brave,” sang the chorus, emphasizing not victory but the “wail of a nation in grief o’er its dead.”⁷⁰

For Adam Spence, these performances fulfilled his millennialist prophecies. He was “sure could the colored people hear the students sing it would inspire them with more courage for their race and desire to educate their children and no doubt it would bring us students.”⁷¹ And for some in the national press, such concerts, and their reception, were barometers of race relations in the Reconstruction South. When the *Tennessee Tribune* fawned over the performance of “The Tombs of Our Brave,” celebrating the song’s efforts “to fit the black man to know his right, and knowing, dare maintain,” the Methodist journal, *Zion’s Herald Boston*, reviewed the review. “It is a sign of the great change in the South,” the paper proclaimed, “when audiences patronize and papers commend such exercises from those, born thrall of the Saxon, and but lately in that condition.”⁷² The chorus, then, was a palimpsest, overwritten with ruminations on southern black identity, southern white’s visions of black freedom, and white northerners’ preoccupations with both.

The optimism of *Zion’s Herald Boston* notwithstanding, performing in Tennessee and Georgia was financially and professionally inadequate to the chorus’ social and remunerative ambitions. Sporadic local performances could never raise the \$20,000 needed to build and replenish Fisk University, whose benefactor, the AMA, was \$78,000 in debt and unable to support the twenty-one schools and 110 teachers operating under its aegis. It was also physically dangerous. The Reconstruction South (and even

⁶⁹ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Negro Spirituals,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 19:116 (June, 1867), 686.

⁷⁰ “Fisk University! Concert at Masonic Hall Two Nights, Thursday & Friday March 9th & 10th. The Cantata of Esther, the Beautiful Queen!,” (1871), Jubilee Singers Scrapbook 1867-1872, Archivan and Manuscript Collections, the John Hope and Aurelia Elizabeth Franklin Library, Fisk University (hereafter, JSS 1867-1872); “Fisk School. Grand Entertainment at Masonic Hall on Thursday Evening, May 30,” JSS 1867-1872; “Fisk School Entertainment. Second Night! Friday Evening, May 31,” JSS 1867-1872; “Order of Exercises at the National Cemetery, Nashville, Tenn., On the 30th May, 1871,” JSS 1867-1872.

⁷¹ Spence, Adam to E. M. Cravath. 6 April, 1871, AMAA, H9672.

⁷² *Zion’s Herald Boston*, 20 April, 1871, JSS 1867-1871. The *Tennessee Tribune*’s review was quoted in *Zion’s Herald*.

cosmopolitan Nashville) held danger for African American performers, especially when working for an institution of higher education. Despite the official promise of Reconstruction, African Americans in Tennessee (as elsewhere) became the targets of political and physical violence. In September, 1871, less than four months after Fisk singers performed “The Tombs of Our Brave,” at the National Cemetery in their home city, Nashville witnessed the spectacle of ex-Union Commander, former Lincoln associate, and then-Missouri Senator, Carl Schurz implicitly rejecting the idea of cross-racial reunion. Presenting his vision of the emerging creed of Liberal Republicanism, Schurz outlined “a platform that included civil service reform, tariff reduction, lower taxes, the resumption of specie payments, and an end to land grants for railroads.” He also “advocated political amnesty, an end to federal intervention, and a return to ‘local self-government.’” Schurz’s vision had its analogue in the vigilante violence of the Ku Klux Klan, which engaged in episodes of “spontaneous violence” in Tennessee during this period.⁷³ Despite Fisk’s détente with white Nashvillians,⁷⁴ playing off Confederate sentiments was a potent political tool and was folded into a larger atmosphere that seemed to give tacit approval to anti-black violence. In this milieu, the student chorus, as White wrote a colleague, sometimes “received private notice of such a nature that we wisely took the first train home.” Adam Spence noted “much bitterness showered on the singers and especially toward us ‘white niggers.’”⁷⁵

First National Tour

If the chorus had positioned itself as capably conveying progressive ideas of self-making and of belonging in a larger American milieu, it soon became clear that for many audience members, the singers satisfied nostalgic yearnings for an authentic national past. As the singers under White’s charge grew into a national phenomenon, this distinction between ideas of authenticity rooted in the landscape and ideas of authenticity rooted in ambitions of self-making became more pronounced. At the same time, this distinction collapsed, as the singers effectively fueled their ambitions in the present by turning to the practices of the past.

As funds trickled away, the grounds fell into disrepair, and the “privations and limited food began to tell on the students,” George White imagined a revenue-earning

⁷³ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 500; Lamon *Blacks in Tennessee*, 39.

⁷⁴ White Nashville politicians and merchants maintained a professional, if symbiotic, relationship with Fisk University. As A.A. Taylor showed in 1954, between the university’s founding and the new century, while the “strictly sociable relations between the officers and members of the Fisk faculty and the Southerners were negligible,... the institutional officers maintained good business relations with their neighbors in Nashville, especially with the leaders in business and education. The university and its students spent thousands of dollars with Nashville business houses. Merchants and their proprietors supported projects of Fisk students... and they gave employment of the traditional type to Fisk students.... Among the educators, moreover, professional association extended to the offering of advice, the attendance of Southerners as guests at Fisk ceremonial and concerts and, to a limited extent, of the observation by Fisk students of science and their teachers of demonstrations and experiments in the laboratories of others institutions.” A.A Taylor, “Fisk University and the Nashville Community, 1866-1900,” *The Journal of Negro History* 39:2 (Apr., 1954), 118-119.

⁷⁵ White, George to E. M. Cravath, 29 September 1871, AMAA, H9821; Spence, Adam to E. M. Cravath, 13 September 1871, AMAA, H9806.

tour of the North. Despite initial reluctance from AMA members and university faculty, who feared both the prospects of failure and the denigration of their cause through music-making's inevitable association with "entertainment,"⁷⁶ officials relented. On October 6, 1871, Contraltos Minnie Tate, and Eliza Walker, basses Isaac Dickerson and Greene Evans, tenors Benjamin Holmes and Thomas Rutling, and sopranos Jennie Jackson, Maggie Porter, and Ella Sheppard (also the group's pianist) set off for Cincinnati, and a tour that would take them from the Middle West to New England, and as far south as Washington, D.C.⁷⁷

White early on recognized the importance of a carefully orchestrated promotional apparatus. Within six weeks, he crafted a plan to ensure full houses. "Please do what you can to stir up a public sentiment ahead of us through the papers and churches," he solicited university principal E. M. Cravath. "How would it do to print a *circular*, setting forth the facts regarding the class—and the enterprise." By February, 1872, he spoke with the expertise of four busy months: "We have found that the advertising must have time to soak into the people—and that it must be done systematically."⁷⁸ In fact, the entire promotional apparatus was more elaborate: informative notices were placed in newspapers, providing date, place, and time of concerts, and reprinting testimony to the group's "benevolent design"; posters with the same information were plastered throughout the city; "*dodgers*," or slips of paper with favorable testimony, were distributed to stores and even private residences; and notices were sent to churches to be read to worshippers. The result, at \$100 a city, meant that touring was almost prohibitively expensive, especially when added to the cost of hall rental (\$50 to \$100 per night), and an additional \$100 to \$200 per day to account for "ushers, ticket-sellers, programs, pianos, hotel bills,... and car fare." AMA agent Gustavus Pike, who accompanied the Singers on their first tour, and would shortly after write a detailed account of it, explained the troupe's appeal largely in terms of its didacticism. Obstacles to acceptance were overcome by using testimony from respected members of society to position the Singers outside the orbit of "entertainment."⁷⁹

Tapping into a network of sympathetic clergy and civic leaders, the chorus proceeded, initially unnamed. Appearing in evening dress, and opening with brief speeches setting down the group's fundraising ambitions for Fisk University,⁸⁰ they performed a staid repertoire of popular and ethnic folk songs that were *de rigueur* for concert performances at the time. Numbers included both patriotic tunes such as the "Star-Spangled Banner" and "Red, White, and Blue"; sentimental songs such as "Away

⁷⁶ Moore, "Historical Sketch," *Fisk University News*, 42; Spence, Adam to E. M. Cravath, 8 May 1871, AMAA, H9714.

⁷⁷ This chapter does not intend to provide a narrative of the singers' tour, but rather, a qualitative analysis of the ways in which they were received and debated by white audiences in the popular press. Those interested in a rigorously detailed narrative account should seek out Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise*.

⁷⁸ White, George to E. M. Cravath, 26 November, 1871, AMAA, 116517; White, George to E. M. Cravath, 16 February, 1872, AMAA, 12744.

⁷⁹ Pike, *Jubilee Singers*, 146, 111.

⁸⁰ "Fisk University. Statement" (1873), JSS 1873-1874. The statement commemorated and summarized the chorus' ambitions for its first tour.

to the Meadows”]; and a few slave spirituals that would have been, by then, well known to audiences.⁸¹

By November the group had, at George White’s goading, assumed the title, “Fisk Jubilee Singers.” The name was derived from *Leviticus* 25:10, with its injunction,

Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you shall return to his family property and each to his own clan. The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines.

“Jubilee” had long served in slave culture as a symbol of the millennial moment of Emancipation.⁸² As White explained to a colleague, the title was uniquely suited to the transitional status of African Americans, especially in the South, after the war. “Jubilee” was a name whose associations crystallized around the experience of the people under whose name it was operating. It “se[t] forth their peculiar position before the people,” White noted, “as standing on the border between ‘the old and the new,’ reaching back, as they do, in their experience and memory, in the ‘old,’ being actively identified with the work of the ‘new’ and looking forward with hope to a future full of promise.”⁸³ White’s evocation of typology as the appropriate lens through which to view his singers’ condition vindicated the slave vernacular, which, as Lawrence Levine has noted, “fuse[d] the precedents of the past, the conditions of the present, and the promise of the future into one connected reality.”⁸⁴ “Jubilee’s” association with renewal, ancestral return, and release from labor spoke to a progressive vision of history. But it nevertheless illuminated how the past, as embodied in the term’s layered associations (biblical and antebellum histories), formed the bedrock of narratives of self-development. It retained a “dignity,” Sheppard remembered, “which appealed to us.”⁸⁵

Thus, by evoking the past, the Fisk Jubilee Singers looked forward, representing the promise of Reconstruction era upward mobility. As such, they served as a counterpoint to other visions of blackness then emerging in the North. Indeed, the Moonlight and Magnolias vision of a patriarchal, proud, premodern, abundant, simple, and happy southern plantation “family” was ascendant in culture and politics alike. Writers like Thomas Nelson Page created what Henry Nash Smith called “an apparently indestructible part of the national store of literary themes” that appealed equally to a North fearing tectonic shifts in race relations, as to the beleaguered South, especially after the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870. White readers gloried in the Edenic southern myth, replete with its noxious stereotypes and racist dialect.⁸⁶ As the states

⁸¹ Pike, *Jubilee Singers*, 75.

⁸² *Leviticus* 25:10. “The Old Testament ‘year of jubilee’ had always been the favorite figure of speech into which they slaves put their prayers and hopes for emancipation. The year of jubilee had come—this little band of singers was a witness to it, and outgrowth of this.” Marsh, *Story of the Jubilee Singers*, 26.

⁸³ White, George to E. M. Cravath, 26 November, 1871, AMAA, 116517.

⁸⁴ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 51.

⁸⁵ Moore, “Historical Sketch,” *Fisk University News*, 47.

⁸⁶ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), 172. See also Blight, *Race and Reunion*; and Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

above the Mason-Dixon Line received an exodus of freed blacks, racism and discrimination remained intact, and were even invigorated by the new job competitors. Racism, lamented Peter Clark, an African American living in Cincinnati, “hampers me in every relation of life; in business, in politics, in religion, as a father or as a husband.” Indeed, Eric Foner shows, the “bulk of the North’s black population remained trapped in urban poverty and confined to inferior housing and menial and unskilled jobs (and even here) their foothold, challenged by the continuing influx of European immigrants and discrimination by employers and unions alike, became increasingly precarious.”⁸⁷

For cultural critics, the racial stereotypes of literature provided an index for interpreting African American behavior. George William Curtis editorialized in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in May, 1872, “The actual, practical social condition and status of the freedman seems to be, up here in the North, pretty much as it was before we had a Fifteenth Amendment.” Curtis did not look to economic poverty or social prejudice for his explanation. Rather, he turned to the stereotypes of the plantation to describe a “Sambo,” pathologically incapable of living up to the standards of freedom set for him by white society: “To all appearances he doesn’t study any more than he used to; certainly doesn’t work harder; doesn’t go to meeting more frequently; and differs from Sambo of old only perhaps in this, that he votes. Perhaps—and it is to be hoped that it will—the sense of his great privilege may in time arouse his ambition for better things.” Two years later, Curtis would hold black music to a similar standard of unfulfilled promise, opining that “[t]he negro melody is commonly very sweet, but the negro theology is somewhat grotesque.”⁸⁸

A Fisk Jubilee Singers concert was not “grotesque,” though it could be emotional. Commenting in 1880 on the music made by black performers in general, Theodore Seward, editor of the *New York Musical Gazette* and Stage Manager for the Fisk Jubilee Singers, sought to explain their unique sound through the kinesthetic qualities of their performance, believing the songs’ triple time was the consequence of “the beating of the foot and the swaying of the body which are such frequent accompaniments to the singing.”⁸⁹ The only extant evidence of the performance’s tableau, an artist’s rendering of a concert that was printed in the *New York Day’s Doings*, is so overlain with the physical markers of blackface minstrelsy—tufts of wild hair, wide bellowing mouths, googly-eyes—that it more accurately provides a picture of a particular kind of racial fantasia that was at cross-purposes with the expectations of the singers’ target audience. In fact, the title to the cartoon gives a sense of its various inaccuracies: “The Jubilee Singers.—Rev. Henry Ward Beecher as the Manager of a Negro Minstrel Troupe.”⁹⁰ (Although the singers were performing in Rev. Beecher’s Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, and although Beecher was a vociferous champion on their cause, he never managed the chorus.) But this article seems to have been the exception that proved the rule. Blackface stereotypes were frequently implicitly and explicitly evoked as denigrated counterpoint to the pure,

⁸⁷ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 471-472.

⁸⁸ “Editor’s Drawer,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 42:252 (May, 1871), 951; and “Editor’s Drawer,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 49:294 (November, 1874), 901.

⁸⁹ Theodore F. Seward, “Preface to the Music,” in Marsh, *Story of the Jubilee Singers*, 122.

⁹⁰ “The Jubilee Singers.—Rev. Henry Ward Beecher as the Manager of a Negro Minstrel Troupe.—Extraordinary Attractions at Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, Wednesday, January 3, 1872,” *New York Day’s Doings*, 4 January, 1872, JSS 1867-1872.

pathos-ridden music of the Jubilee Singers. Indeed, the terms of Mark Twain's private affinity for the singers were given public voice in critical appraisals emphasizing the belief that what the chorus expressed could "never be repeated or imitated by grinning apes and mountebanks calling themselves minstrels"; or that it could even be "a relief from the labored fun and dubious sentiment of professional negro minstrels."⁹¹ *Harper's Weekly* noted of that same Brooklyn performance that produced the denigrating cartoon, "They sang with a pathos and sweetness that appealed to every true heart the songs of their bondage, interspersing melodies of other kinds; and their whole demeanor before the enthusiastic crowd was... quiet, unaffected, and sincere."⁹²

A nostalgic article in a Peoria paper in 1881 provides a sense of what an "unaffected" and "sincere" performative grammar would look like: "They had all the fervor and the excitement of a people whose feelings, repressed in every other direction, had only religion and song in which they cared to give vent. They acted while they sang. They shook hands and embraced each other."⁹³ Certainly, the singers expressed a degree of un-self-conscious spontaneity that underscored their emotional attachment to the music and seemed to provide unmediated contact with "the real thing." The music itself became a window into historical experience. The "ever-recurring refrains of both melody and words... pitched in a minor key" could only have been "born... of intensest [*sic*] anguish, and of utter earthly hopelessness." The Singers "told their own story, by their appearance and their songs, far better than any one else could tell it for them."⁹⁴

The singers did not reject such claims. Within a month-and-half of the chorus's Cincinnati debut, the repertoire of secular and sacred music, an average ratio of 17:2, remembered Sheppard, was "inverted." Clearly, the "inversion" was personally edifying and professionally pragmatic. Sheppard noted this complementary relationship, evoking both the subjective benefits of spirituals, which had long served as ballast amidst struggle, and their appeal to a consuming public: "Our suffering, and the demand of the public changed this order." The result was concert as imaginative tableau, effectively drawing audiences into the past. Georgia Gordon Taylor recalled, "Every night some of

⁹¹ C.P., "The Jubilee Singers," *Waterbury Daily American*, 6 February, 1872, JSS 1867-1872; "The 'Jubilee Singers,'" *New York Tribune*, 28 December, 1871, JSS 1867-1872.

⁹² "Home and Foreign Gossip," *Harper's Weekly* (20 January, 1872), 59. See Melville's description of Cuffie in *The Confidence Man* (1857): "... throwing back his head and opening his mouth like an elephant for tossed apples at a menagerie." Herman Melville, quoted in Lott, *Love & Theft*, 61. It would be illuminating to know what the black press made of the singers. But as Genithia Hogges points out, "African-American periodicals... [were d]isturbingly silent.... From *Freedom's Journal* ... to the *Christian Recorder*... no attention was paid" to the chorus. Genithia Lilie Hogges, "Canonization Reconstructed: Inclusion and Exclusion in Nineteenth-Century African-American Periodicals, with an Ear to the Music of African-Americans," *American Periodicals* 12 (2002), 155.

⁹³ "The Fisk Jubilee Singers," *Peoria Journal*, 29 May, 1881, JSS 1881-1882.

⁹⁴ "Amusements," *Detroit Tribune*, 31 May, 1872, JSS 1867-1872; "A Novel Service. A Colored Choir from Fisk University, Nashville, at Plymouth Church—'Songs of Zion' as Sung by the Slaves in the South," *Cleveland Herald*, 13 November, 1871, 1867-1872; Goodrich, quoted in *Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University, (Nashville, Tenn.) Under the Auspices of the American Missionary Association*, ed. Theodore Seward (New York: Biglow & Main, 1872), 32; L., "The Jubilee Singers, letter to the editor, *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 31 March, 1872, JSS 1867-1872.

them would tell the story of having mother sold away and then sing, ‘No More Auction Block for Me,’ ‘Nobody knows that Trouble I See’ [*sic*], ‘Steal Away to Jesus.’” Taylor nevertheless emphasized the sincerity of this venture, as suturing both intergenerational and interpersonal fissures. “Does one wonder,” she asked, “that the tears rolled down the cheeks of those who listened? What comes from the heart reaches the heart.”⁹⁵ The white American middle-class public was accustomed to consuming African American music by 1871. “Go Down, Moses” had been a best-selling composition upon its transcription in 1861 by the Reverend Lewis C. Lockwood at Fortress Monroe, Virginia. It was first published in the *New York Tribune*, and reprinted in the abolitionist journal, the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, published by the AMA.⁹⁶ By this time, a vision of African American culture as “the key to the recovery of a forgotten past” had become an “interpretative gestalt.”⁹⁷ Taylor, though, imagined the ways in which authentic historical practice provided listeners with newly subjective experiences, a dalliance with slave epistemology rather than a foray into artifact collection.

For the vast majority of critics, though, the fact that the Fisk Jubilee Singers conveyed the spiritual as cultural product was important insofar as it tied them to the American landscape and conjured romantic visions of sublime nature. Few imagined any deeper personal and communal meanings contained in the music and music-making. It is significant that even though concerts drew an array of citizens, from poor African Americans to wealthy whites, reviewers almost invariably emphasized the presence of a certain class, variously noted as “elite,” the “leading white citizens,” a “splendid array of elegantly dressed people,” or a “cultivated... assemblage.”⁹⁸ Audiences relished the spiritual’s ability to collapse class distinctions, noting its transcendent appeal. Critics described the music as “touch[ing] a chord which the most consummate art fails to reach,” it was “an infection... that is rarely felt amid the artistic coldness of our fashionable churches.” A “cultivated Brooklyn assemblage was moved and melted under the magnetism of [the] music” as it “touched the fount of tears, and gray-haired men wept like little children.” Theodore Seward, then-editor of the *New York Musical Gazette*, and soon to become stage manager for the Singers, was “certain that the critic stands completely disarmed in their presence.”⁹⁹ Cleveland’s Reverend W. H. Goodrich

⁹⁵ Moore, “Historical Sketch,” *Fisk University News*, 47-48; Taylor, “Reminiscences,” *Fisk University News*, 29-30.

⁹⁶ Cruz, *Culture on the Margins*, 129.

⁹⁷ Radano, “Denoting Difference,” *Critical Inquiry*; Cruz, *Culture on the Margins*, 130.

⁹⁸ “Music Extraordinary. Jubilee Concert of ex-Slaves at the First Congregational Church,” *Newark Evening Courier*, 17 January, 1872, JSS 1867-1872; “The Fisk Concert,” *Cincinnati Gazette*, 18 October, 1871, JSS 1867-1872; “The Jubilee Singers,” *Brooklyn Herald*, 28 December, 1871, JSS 1867-1872; Theodore L. Cuyler, “Our Native Music—The Jubilee Singers,” letter to the editor, *New York Tribune*, 18 January, 1872, JSS 1867-1872. For a nuanced recovery of the perspective of the African American spectator at a Fisk Jubilee Singers concert, as well as a discussion of the methodological dilemmas in attempting to recover it, see Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 293-303.

⁹⁹ “Concert at the New England Church,” *Brooklyn Times*, quoted in the *American Missionary*, n.d., JSS 1867-1872; Theodore L. Cuyler, “Our Native Music—The Jubilee Singers,” letter to the editor, *New York Tribune*, 18 January, 1872, JSS 1867-1872; Theodore F. Seward (1872), quoted in “The Jubilee Singers. Ex-Slave Students of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, Will Give a

remembered his own experience as though it were a first encounter with “the real thing” of backwoods camp meetings. Indeed, for the clergyman, historical circumstance was the matrix for the affective response that followed:

Born of ignorant emotion, uncorrected by any reading of Scripture,... confused, broken in language, broken in connection, wild and odd in suggestion, but inconceivably touching, and sometimes grand. At first you smile or laugh out at the queer association of ideas, but before you know it your eyes fill and your heart is heaving with a true devotional feeling. You see clearly these songs have been, in their untaught years, a real liturgy, a cry of the soul to God.¹⁰⁰

Goodrich’s description provides a primer for the kind of emotions one could expect, or would be expected to manifest, a gamut of expressions from mirth to pathos to pure communion.

Reviewers attested to the “harmony of these children of nature and their musical execution... beyond the reach of art.” They described the sounds as “beauty unadorned.” The concerts were “without embellishment”—nor could they be, since they were performed by “a race of people... who never heard of Mendelssohn, Beethoven, or Straus.” Ohio’s *Meriden Republican* declared,

Too often [it is] the case with the “cultivated,” who have really fine voices, that the air of affection and the evident effort put forth to make an impression, destroy entirely the melody. But these dusky sons and daughters are children of nature—they are not *made* by music teachers—they let the themes about which they sing inspire them, and thus they impart inspiration to others.¹⁰¹

Artistic merit was thus mediated through a trope of “purity” rather than “cultivation.” The performance hinged on the extent to which it divested itself of the markers of theatricality.

“At last, the American school of music has been discovered,” announced the eminent *Dwight’s Journal of Music*. Rather than proposing what “an American school of music” entailed, *Dwight’s* described what it did not. “We have had accomplished virtuosi, skillful vocalists and talented composers,” the anonymous editorialists continued. “They have, however, all trodden the beaten track. It has remained for the obscure and uncultured Negro race in this country to prove that there is an original style of music peculiar to America.”¹⁰² Thus, as embodied by the performers of spirituals, a

Service of Song Under Distinguished Patronage, in the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, on Tuesday, January 13th” (1874), JSS 1873-1874.

¹⁰⁰ W. H. Goodrich, quoted in Pike, *Jubilee Singers*, 31-32.

¹⁰¹ “The Fisk Students,” *Akron Daily Banner*, 1 December, 1871, JSS 1867-1872; Cuyler, “Our Native Music,” *Cleveland Herald*; “Amusements. The Jubilee Singers,” *Syracuse Journal*, n.d., JSS 1867-1872; *New Haven Daily Palladium*, 12 July, 1872, JSS 1867-1872; “The Jubilee Singers,” *Meriden Republican*, 6 March, 1872, JSS 1867-1872.

¹⁰² “Negro Folk Song. Slave Melodies of the South.—The Jubilee and Hampton Singers,” *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, 32:26 (5 Apr., 1873), 412, 411. *Dwight’s Journal of Music* had long positioned itself as an arbiter of musical taste and throughout its run in the middle-nineteenth century painted a portrait of white critics’ visions of African American music as consisting of, among other things, “novelty and pathetic sentiment” and an “effectiveness” born of African influence. Thomas Riis, “The Cultivated White Tradition and Black Music in Nineteenth-Century America: A Discussion of Some Articles in *J. S. Dwight’s Journal of Music*,” *Black Music in Perspective* 42:3 (Jul., 1976), 175.

truly national music could be defined by what it seemed to lack: “culture” and “education,” imitation and cultivation. In an era when politicians, intellectuals, and artists sought an “organic nationalism” and when cultural critics believed that the nation’s ethnic heterogeneity bedeviled the flowering of a truly national music,¹⁰³ it was piety, expressive purity, and a distillation of autochthonous experience that rendered an art form “American.” Privileging the music as natural represented a patriotic investment. The singers and their songs embodied an originary American motif that would eventually be codified by Antonin Dvorak and W. E. B. Du Bois.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, a Fisk Jubilee Singers concert offered an experience with a mythicized American tradition that seemed to embody the pietistic, organic, and antimodern values that formed the core of a threatened American identity.¹⁰⁵ Many reviewers appraised the performance as valuable precisely insofar as it could be measured *against* the bland imperatives of the concert performance. Rare were reviews touching on values of high art and musical merit.¹⁰⁶ Rather, most critics referred to the Fisk Jubilee Singers as “children of nature” emerging from an organic American experience.

¹⁰³ Joseph Robert Moreau, “Schoolbook Nation: Imagining the American Community in United States History Texts for Grammar and Secondary Schools, 1865-1930” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1999), 40; Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 221. See also, Cruz, *Culture on the Margins*; Steven Conn, *History’s Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973); and Radano, “Denoting Difference,” *Critical Inquiry*.

¹⁰⁴ Dvorak: “I am now satisfied that the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the negro melodies. This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States. When I first came here last year I was impressed with this idea and it was developed into a settled conviction. These beautiful and varied hymns are the product of the soil. They are American.” Antonin Dvorak, *New York Herald*, 21 May, 1893, quoted in Joseph Horowitz, “Dvorak and the Teaching of American History,” *The Magazine of History*, courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Museum Office Files, Buffalo Bill Historical Center. Du Bois: “[T]here is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave.” Du Bois, *Souls*, 7. See also “Negro Folk Songs. Slave Melodies of the South.—The Jubilee and Hampton Singers,” *Dwight’s Journal of Music* 32:26 (5 Apr., 1873), 411. There is some debate over the authenticity of Dvorak’s statement. Horowitz notes that music historian Michael Beckerman “has recently demonstrated that these words were in fact written for Dvorak by the Yellow Journalist James Creelman.” Horowitz, “Dvorak,” n.p. In any event, the fact that so prominent and respected a composer would lend his imprimatur to this statement seems notable enough.

¹⁰⁵ Mary McAleer Balkun, *The American Counterfeit: Authenticity and Identity in American Literature and Culture* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2006); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹⁰⁶ “The Fisk University Concert,” *Cincinnati Gazette*, 18 October, 1871, JSS 1867-1872; “Concert at the Tabernacle,” *Brooklyn Union*, 2 January, 1872, JSS 1867-1872; “The Jubilee Singers,” *New York Musical Gazette*, April, 1872, JSS 1867-1872.

For some, that is, *meaning* was entirely beside the point. Writing to the editor of the *Waterbury Daily American*, “C. P.” was transported by a Jubilee Singers concert. Writing of himself in the third-person, he was recalled to another time:

He was waiting in the cars at City Point from midnight until daylight for the train to start for Petersburg. About daybreak the “hands” on an adjoining plantation passed on their way to the tobacco field to begin their hopeless and to them profitless toil. They were singing; not in joy for the song was too sadly plaintive for that; not in despair for the hopeless do not sing. What the words were I could not tell, nor did I care to know; but wave on wave of wild, weird melody, that told what no language can tell came rolling over us, as the ghostly shadows of the night, a long, dark, wearisome night it had been, were flying before the beautiful morning.¹⁰⁷

Ignoring the songs’ content, “C. P.” tied their music to labor, making it a rhythmic articulation best imaged in natural metaphor as “wave on wave.” The songs’ psychological and lyrical inscrutability only made them more profound as expressions of a “wild, weird melody,” produced in concert with the culture of the plantation economy. It moves “C. P.” without instructing him or imparting anything meaningful about the traumas and hopes of the slaves he’d watched tramping past him. The music adds warmth to “C. P.”’s own experience, as the “ghostly” night becomes the “beautiful morning,” but the singers themselves remain set pieces within this southern tableau.

A touristic fetish underwrote many of these reviews. Critics frequently imagined the plantation tableau that the Singers conjured with their songs, a pastiche of slave cabin, cotton field, and camp meeting. A journalist in Detroit, for instance, was transported by a vision of slave monoculture that collapsed regional and temporal distinctions: “The simplest of songs, with their ever-recurring refrain of both melody and words, have been sung in thousands of lowly cabins, scattered all over the South for scores of years past—have been sung in the rice swamp and cotton field.” Others similarly dwelt upon the varied markers of the plantation experience: “Listening to their rich, plaintive voices, one might imagine himself in the veritable Uncle Tom’s cabin of the ‘old dispensation’”; “they make their mark by giving the spirituals and plantation hymns as only *they* can sing who know how to keep time to a master’s whip”; the music had “the real plantation twang.”¹⁰⁸

In Newark, the belief that the singers did not just represent the mass of slaves who should be singing but *were* the spiritual’s “proper interpreters” hinged on the naturalness of their “wild harmonies.” “[T]hey sing as if they couldn’t help it,” the reviewer attested, describing a transcendent experience:

Music, like eloquence, knows no law. In its very essence it must be unconstrained. Abolish poetic license and poetry itself is destroyed. The audience at the Clinton street [*sic*] Congregational church instinctively knew these truths, and setting criticism aside reveled in a

¹⁰⁷ C. P., “The Jubilee Singers,” *Waterbury Daily American*. For memories from soldiers and abolitionists, see Pike, *Jubilee Singers*, 89.

¹⁰⁸ “Amusements,” *Detroit Tribune*, 31 May, 1872, JSS 1867-1872; Cuyler, “Our Native Music,” *New York Tribune*; “Jubilee Singers Correspondence between Rev. Henry Ward Beecher and the Rev. Henry Allon, D.D.” (pamphlet, 1873), JSS 1867-1872; L., “The Jubilee Singers,” letter to the editor, *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 31 March, 1872, JSS 1867-1872.

NEW MUSICAL SENSATION.

Whether or not this was an accurate assessment of the slave spiritual qua performance is the subject of much debate. But in twinning performance and reception—the performers’ “wild harmonies” and the Clinton Street Congregational Church’s audience “instinctively” recognizing this as the core of musical expression—the reviewer privileged and valorized the spiritual as art’s highest form. The double entendre of “NEW MUSICAL SENSATION” calls our attention to the music’s affective qualities.

But in providing for this new “SENSATION,” the Fisk Jubilee Singers were drawn hopelessly into the past. The literal centerpiece of this review was a cast list. It read,

Lot 1.—Negro man, very black, six feet high, worth in old times, \$2,000 under the hammer.—Basso.

Lot 2.—Mulatto, \$1,500.—Tenor.

Lot 3.—Mulatto, \$1,500.—Tenor.

Lot 4.—Jennie Jackson, full-bodied brunette; very dark eyes and hair, which seem light in contrast with a brow like that in which Shakespeare’s lover saw Helen’s beauty.

Lot 5.—Maggie Porter, a constructive blond with curly hair.—Soprano.

Lot 6.—Miss Shephrd [*sic*], a handsome, intelligent-looking quadroon.—Pianist.

Lot 7.—Minnie Tate, a charming little quadroon of about 15 years of age, with Straight hair, falling loosely down her back.—Contralto and Soprano.

Lot 8.—Young girl with eyes and hair (and face) as black as a beaver.—Contralto.

Lot 9.—Pickanniny, about 12 years old, black as the... devil.—Alto singer and Orator.¹⁰⁹

Karen Sánchez-Eppler has written of the ways in which, in the context of sentimental literature, “the valuation of depictions of slavery may rest upon the same psychic ground as slaveholding itself.”¹¹⁰ Paradoxically, the liberation at the core of their music could only exist within the matrix of enslavement and in what the singers could provide for their auditors.

Part of that provision was an assertion that American history represented the culmination of sacred history. The *Newark Evening Courier* made the connection: “Pharaoh and Chariot, and the Trumpet, and Daniel, and the Hebrew Children, and The Lord, were largely dwelt upon, calling the hearer’s attention to the fact that not in all history, profane or sacred, has an event been recorded of greater grandeur than that which will bloom forever in the crown of America as its brightest jewel—the emancipation of her slaves.”¹¹¹ Crucially, though, the Newark review did not allow for agency among the singers, whom it described as “a band of gentle savages from Tennessee” who “sang as if they couldn’t help it” and were best imaged through the language of the auction block.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ “Music Extraordinary,” *Newark Evening Courier*.

¹¹⁰ Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 25; Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 98.

¹¹¹ “Music Extraordinary,” *Newark Evening Courier*.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

They became set pieces in a drama, artifacts instead of agents. Theodore Cuyler similarly averred, “Our people can now listen to the genuine soul music of the slave cabins, before the lord led his children out of the Land of Egypt and the house of bondage.”¹¹³ Cuyler does not only twin the experience of African American slavery with Scripture. In fact, he speaks in the typological language of the spiritual itself, seeing the events of history as a holy struggle in much the way that slaves themselves frequently did, by evoking the Old Testament as lived experience.¹¹⁴

The limits of that experience are telling. The spiritual had no purchase beyond the plantation. Some believed that the Fisk Jubilee Singers would “give many the *best*, and perhaps the only opportunity to hear a class of music which can never be produced again after the present generation of freedmen have passed away.” Others averred that their songs, “rendered in a genuine musical and weird style, will soon belong to the past, if indeed, they do not now” and that they performed “music that can never be heard again when those who have endured [slavery] shall have passed away.”¹¹⁵

And yet, the performance of spirituals by the Fisk Jubilee Singers provided a hidden transcript, a strain of lived experience under the layers of public acclaim and fetishization. As such, the music provided a dramatic example of its utility to contemporaneous ideologies of self-making. With their capacious typological metaphors of emancipation, revolt, transcendence, and redemption through suffering, these songs were fluid enough to register present circumstances. The music’s elasticity was such that songs like “Gospel Train” (“Get on board, children, / For there’s room for many a more”) and “Room Enough” (“For my Lord says there’s room enough, Room enough in the Heavens for you”)¹¹⁶ could, on an immediate level, signify Heaven, and on a subtler one, the United States after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. The martial imagery in numbers such as “Turn Back Pharaoh’s Army” (“You say you are a soldier, / Fighting for your Saviour”) and “Children, You’ll Be Called On” (“Children, you’ll be called on, / To March in the field of battle”) resonated as much with the Civil War as it did with the everyday struggles under the slave regime.¹¹⁷ Nor did that struggle have to end with emancipation. Indeed, “Children, You’ll Be Called One” made struggle and the possibility for redemption a crucial part of existence, and one that had to be maintained following Emancipation:

Children, you’ll be called on
To march in the field of battle.
When this warfare’ll be ended,
Hallelu.

When this warfare’ll be ended,
I’m a soldier of the jubilee,
This warfare’ll be ended,

¹¹³ Cuyler, “Our Native Music,” *New York Tribune*.

¹¹⁴ Robert Darden, *People Get Ready!: A New History of Black Gospel Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 88.

¹¹⁵ “The Jubilee Singers Last Night,” *New Haven Daily Palladium*; “Amusements. The Jubilee Singers,” *Syracuse Journal*; C. P., “The Jubilee Singers,” *Waterbury Daily American*.

¹¹⁶ Pike, *Jubilee Singers*, 190, 167.

¹¹⁷ *Jubilee Songs*, 11, 13; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 53.

I'm a soldier of the cross.

The spiritual has long served as a source of scrutiny, and a good deal of this has centered on the tension between individuality/agency and community/tradition. As modern ethnomusicological and historical scholarship has demonstrated, this tension was actually a delicate rapprochement, even a symbiosis, what Lawrence Levine has termed “an improvisational communal consciousness.” That is, they were

simultaneously the result of individual and mass creativity. They were products of that folk process which has been called ‘communal re-creation,’ through which older songs are constantly re-created into essentially new entities.... Slave songs, then, were never static; at no time did slaves create a “final” version of a spiritual. Always the community felt free to alter and re-create them.¹¹⁸

More to the point, “the form and structure of slave music presented the slave with a potential outlet for his individual feelings even while it continually drew him back into the communal presence and permitted him the comfort of basking in the warmth of the shared assumptions of those around him.”¹¹⁹

The communal matrix here served as a springboard for a project of self-actualization that was attentive to history, but not fettered by it. Consider “Many Thousand Gone,” a six-verse spiritual that appeared in *Jubilee Songs*:

No more auction block for me.
No more, no more.
No more auction block for me,
Many thousand gone.

No more peck o' corn for me, etc.
No more driver's lash for me, etc.
No more pint o' salt for me, etc.
No more hundred lash for me, etc.
No more mistress' call for me, etc.¹²⁰

The song is certainly the most evocative song vis-à-vis slavery's everyday brutality, touching as it does upon the commodification, near-starvation, corporal punishment, torture, and calls to obedience that were intrinsic to the slave regime. Simultaneously, it charts a path between belonging and transcendence. The singer is at once a member of a community of “many thousand” who have also experienced these horrors and a unique individual whose future is premised on the negation of this life (“No more”).

But what seems most striking about a song such as “Many Thousand Gone” is its insistence upon the first-person singular, the “me” of the first and third lines. For not only is the spiritual's “fundamental theme... the need for a change in the existing order,” but its syntactical structure revolves around agency. According to musicologist John Lovell,

The deity is mentioned numerous times in the spiritual, but one person is mentioned more times, *I*.... The spiritual *I* is very much like the Whitman *I*. The poet is not bragging or complaining as a matter of course. He believes in self-

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹²⁰ *Jubilee Songs*, 27.

reliance and self-responsibility.... In his estimation the greatest thing that can happen to him on heaven or earth is fulfillment.¹²¹

Singing spirituals for white northern audiences was a stratagem as well: encoded in the music was a message to donate money and sympathy to the cause of southern black education and empowerment. It was complex aspiration masquerading as simple music-making. This was made clear to audiences when, during a Middletown, Connecticut, concert, “some white boys and colored people in the galleries disturbed the singers and the audience by noises that called forth a well-merited rebuke from the soprano of the troupe.” The unnamed singer broke character, telling her “‘colored friends’ that in addition to singing songs, one part of their mission was to prove that the black race were susceptible of refining influences, but if the colored folk behaved like monkeys all the Republicans in the world would not cause them to become respected.”¹²² Having raised \$40,000 through admissions, sales of songbooks, and private donations, frequently prefacing their concerts with introductory speeches setting forth their ambitions,¹²³ they were nevertheless struggling for recognition on their own terms

Self-Narration in the Culture of Fisk University

The Fisk Jubilee Singers conceived of the spiritual, *qua performance*, as a vehicle for self-development as American citizens, of drawing from the past—both as a marketable product and as a framework for ambition—without being fettered by it. They used their prominence repeatedly to reorient the narrative being imposed upon them by enthusiastic critics. One of the clearest indicators of purpose can be found in a pre-embarkation group photograph (1871) produced for the school. (It quickly became part of the official Fisk University culture, reprinted in yearbooks, the school paper, and eventually forming the core of the university seal.) Facing the camera in a semi-circle, with the young women seated and the young men standing, they are all in evening clothes, the men in tuxedos, the women in dark gowns closed up firmly with a white collar. Some stare directly into the camera, others away from it, but all have an ease and confidence in their pose. It is clear from the frank attitudes on many of their faces, that they knew, even as they set out for the North, that their mission was invested with purpose. As a statement about the university, the backdrop is telling: a parlor with tables, column, and heavy curtains. This is a scene of Victorian elegance with some (more than

¹²¹ Lovell, *Black Song*, 223, 252. See also Daphne Brooks’s discussion of the twenty-four verse “Go Down, Moses” in Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 308. The connections between slave-borne expressivity and Whitman’s “I” extend still further. Karen Sánchez-Eppler argues that Whitman’s “I” is a conscious, and vexed, reflection of attempting to embrace slaves’ physicality. “Whitman’s project of poetic embodiment,” she writes, which would permit his multiple migratory ‘I’ to inhabit the body of the other in all its difference, and his project of poetic merger, which would encompass and negate all difference within his single swelling ‘I,’ contradict each other, yet both locate the possibility of social reconciliation within the speaking self.” Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*, 10. See ch. 2 in her book.

¹²² “Jubilee Singers’ Concert,” n.t., 12 November, 1872, JSS 1867-1872.

¹²³ See, for instance, White, George to E. M. Cravath, 9 February, 1872, AMAA, 12731; and Graham, “The Fisk Jubilee Singers,” 379.

others) reflecting ease and confidence that would be pointedly echoed throughout this period in official portraits for university publications.¹²⁴

Respectability and ambition remain salient themes in the group's self-construction. Perhaps the first sign that the Fisk Jubilee Singers were becoming significant commodities to a middle-class consuming public was *Jubilee Songs* (1872), a twenty-five cent collection of twenty-four spirituals sold at Jubilee Singers concerts. (It abjured the non-religious songs of Root and Foster that had also long been part of the blackface minstrelsy repertoire, and which they themselves had initially performed.¹²⁵) In fundamental ways, the songbook reprinted the familiar platitudes, both in a section entitled "Notices from the Press" ("They seem to have sprung among the colored people without outside aid, and they are sung by none else"; they were "delivered with... a freeness of affectation"¹²⁶) and in E. M. Cravath's introduction. "The most of them they learned in childhood," he asserted, "—the others, which were not common in the portion of the South in which they were raised, they have received directly from those who were accustomed to sing them." Nevertheless, because these songs evoked a plantation milieu, they, "being in words and music the same as sung by their ancestors in the cabin, on the plantation, and in their religious worship," spoke to a common racial experience that favored archetypal characterizations. The songs could be "relied upon as the genuine songs of their race." Even the act of assembling the repertoire was "genuine." Cravath noted that their teachers were "those who were accustomed to sing them."¹²⁷

Yet even as the introduction situated the music firmly in the past and in the plantation milieu, a concept emphasized in so many reviews, it positioned the *performers* elsewhere. It is significant that the music was imparted through instruction and not through any vague assertions of innate musicality or African Americans' self-definition as slaves. (Their "ancestors" sang the music, not necessarily the chorus.) Cravath also sought rapprochement between the songs and the goals of the AMA. The music, he continued, was shaped as much by pathos as by "the severe discipline to which the Jubilee Singers have been subjected in their school-room." Discipline, that is, including being "educated out of the peculiarities of the Negro dialect." More to the point, proper elocution was envisioned as marking off a critical distance not only between the singers

¹²⁴ "Jubilee Singers, 1871" (photo), JSV, box 3, folder 2; see, for instance, "Photo: Misc." (n.d.), JSV, box 3, folder 13: A genteel dining hall scene with groups of well-dressed students sitting round well-appointed tables, staring forthright into the camera.

¹²⁵ *Jubilee Songs* featured "Been a listening," "Children, we all shall be free," "Children, you'll be called on," "Didn't my lord deliver Daniel," "From every graveyard," "Give me Jesus," "Gwine to ride up that chariot," "Go down, Moses," "I'm a rolling," "I'll hear the trumpet sound," "I've just come from the fountain," "I'm traveling to the grave," "Keep me from sinking down," "Many thousand gone," "Nobody knows the trouble I see, Lord," "O Redeemed," "Room enough," "Roll, Jordan, roll," "Rise, mourners, rise," "Swing low," "Steal away," "Turn back Pharaoh's army," "The Rocks and the Mountains," "We'll die in the field."

¹²⁶ "Notices from the Press," *Jubilee Songs*, 32.

¹²⁷ E. M. Cravath, "Introduction by the American Missionary Association," *Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University, (Nashville, Tenn.) Under the Auspices of the American Missionary Association*, ed. Theodore Seward (New York: Biglow & Main, 1872), 29. Other, smaller-scale sheet music followed, such as "Service of Song by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, U.S.A.," published by the AMA and Freedmen's Mission Aid Society (1874).

and blackface minstrels but also between the singers and the popular image of ecstatic African American music making. “They do not attempt to imitate the grotesque bodily motions,” Cravath assured readers, “or the drawling intonations that often characterize the singing of great congregations of the colored people in their excited religious meetings.”¹²⁸

Beyond the simple collection and publication of the music, the singers’ story inspired a number of commercially successful historical narratives in the wake of their first tour, most prominently Gustavus Pike’s *The Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars* (1873), J. B. T. Marsh’s *The Story of the Jubilee Singers, with Their Songs* (1876) and a starring role in James M. Trotter’s *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (1878).¹²⁹ All three were well-intentioned studies of musical production and the power of spirituals, even if, per Trotter’s title, they relied on an essentialized vision of African Americans as an innately “*Musical People*.”¹³⁰ But Pike’s, the American edition of which “attained a circulation of nearly ten thousand copies in three months,”¹³¹ was both the first narrative history to emerge and also the best, richly detailed in its first-hand account of what it felt like to experience the trials and travails of the Singers’ first tour. What scholars of the Fisk Jubilee Singers have failed to recognize in their use of *The Jubilee Singers* as historical narrative is its critical discursive framework. Pike, an AMA member who served as press agent for the tour, locates the chorus’ belonging within a positivistic national history, favoring progress and self-making over primal attachment to the soil.

In response to the overwhelming curiosity among audience members seeking to learn more about the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Pike wove a narrative account, written up as a series of public lectures, that compiled newspaper reviews, private conversation, and the contemporaneous “under cover” tradition of reportage that would soon take flight with muckraking journalism. He writes as one who both observed and participated: “We had been borne onward by the applause of the people. The speed and furor experienced was

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹²⁹ Pike, *Jubilee Singers*; Marsh, *Story of the Jubilee Singers*; James M. Trotter, *Music and Some Highly Musical People: Containing Brief Chapters on I. A Description of Music. II. The Music of Nature. III. A Glance at the History of Music. IV. The Power, Beauty, and Uses of Music. Following Which are Given Sketches of the Colored Race* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1878). Marsh’s text sold over 180,000 copies. John Lovell, Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame: The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 407.

¹³⁰ The *uses* to which such innate musicality was put was an equally strong concern. Pike’s text, for instance, announced the singers’ intent from its very cover. The seventh edition, published in 1877, featured a dark-blue cover, in the center of which was a gold-embossed, highly detailed image of Fisk Hall. J. B. T. Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers; with Their Songs* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1877).

¹³¹ Pike, *Jubilee Singers*, 5. Cf. Blight, who argues, “Unfortunately, stories of slave sales, of displaced black migrants seeking new lives in new places, of the deprivation and humiliation of slavery, did not sell in a culture eager to purchase tales of reunion and soldiers’ glory.” Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 313.

such as I imagine one would find if riding a comet.”¹³² Indeed, at first blush, *The Jubilee Singers* recapitulates the more empathetic responses of the popular press, stressing the triumphalist story that continues to mark discussions of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. “[N]o matter how the crowd was called,” he early noted, “when once under the magnetism of their music, prejudice melted away.” At Boston’s Park Street Church, for instance, Pike himself saw “an eminent D. D. spitting his hands with an energy that I fear would have put to blush the fathers who stood where he did during the early history of this venerable church.”¹³³

Nevertheless, from the opening pages, *The Jubilee Singers* draws a critical line between public reception and private ambition. Pike writes about the Fisk Jubilee Singers as individuals rather than cultural abstractions or anachronisms for satisfying nostalgic yearnings for an authentic past. He opens by describing a recent conversation between himself and a physician friend, resolving the dialectic between faith and science by couching his millennialism in a positivistic vision of history:

Like the great upheavals that have changed the configuration of the globe during periods when the sea and land have exchanged places, and mountains have melted into the depths of the sea, so has society transformed in the last decade. It is not seen so much North, as West and South. If the world advances as rapidly for the next half century as it has for the past fifty years, we shall come upon some era more golden than prophet ever saw, or poet, in wild imagination, conceived.

Enumerating some of the same forces of modern life, including newspapers and modern technology, that George Beard would denounce as enervating in his famous text on neurasthenia, *American Nervousness* (1881), Pike saw a cultural and social boon, couching the new technologies in a providentialist vision. “If we mark the great changes God is making these days,” he continued, “I think we shall apprehend how he [*sic*] is marshalling events for some grand movement to bring joy and gladness to his people.” Significantly, Pike employs a simile of theatrical technology in emphasizing the Singers’ importance in this endeavor: “the Jubilee Singers are as a most brilliant calcium light thrown out upon the darkness, calling the attention of thousands upon thousands who flock to hear them sing, to the work that is to be done for their people.”¹³⁴ The calcium light, or limelight, was a relatively modern technology popular in the theater of the day.¹³⁵ In comparing the singers to “a most brilliant calcium light,” Pike, if only implicitly, rejects the typical primitivist bromides (he could just as easily have described them as a bonfire) and underscores their role of performers on a stage.

Pike recognizes that the chorus’ mission was about pragmatic results as much as mystical inspiration—and in this, his views have resonance with the spiritual and its uses. *The Jubilee Singers* knits its eponymous group into a narrative of American history that reaches back to 1620 and forms the core of national development. Rather than calling for

¹³² Pike, *Jubilee Singers*, 130. For the undercover tradition as a narratological device at this time, see John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), 208.

¹³³ Pike, *Jubilee Singers*, 77, 149.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 18, 20-21, 22. (Emphasis in original.) For discussions of neurasthenia, see Lears, *No Place of Grace*; Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹³⁵ Ebbe Almqvist, *History of Industrial Gases* (New York: Plenum Publishers, 2003), 72.

a recognition of ancient African genius, or anecdotal evidence of African Americans' participation in a larger national history, as had William Wells Brown in *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863),¹³⁶ Pike positions the singers as *central* to an understanding and appreciation of American history. "It is not so much what one *intends* as what he *accomplishes*," the author avers, before telescoping two-and-a-half centuries of American accomplishment, bracketed by the Puritans "start[ing] for the mouth of the Hudson, but land[ing] at Plymouth" and the Grand Army of the Republic "carr[ying] on the war for the restoration of the Union, but... accomplish[ing] the emancipation of the slaves." In this same way, and at the end of this anecdotal history,

Mr. White commenced to teach Sunday school songs, but went on to drill his choir to sing operatic music. He started North in '71 to sing the more difficult and popular music of the day, composed by our best native and foreign artists; but he found his well-disciplined choir singing the old religious slave songs, his audience demanding these, and satisfied with little besides, till the cries of the oppressed went echoing all over the North, as some rare heaven-born relic of a bondage past, the history of which had been near the heart of God for the past two hundred years.¹³⁷

Indeed, in Pike's account, George White holds a prominent position. A lithographic reprint of a photograph of the choirmaster is printed on the frontispiece. Later, he describes as White "the chosen captain."¹³⁸ The strict accuracy of these claims—especially that White "found his well-disciplined choir singing the old religious slave songs"—is dubious. Indeed, Pike's depiction of a chorus naturally inclined to the spiritual contradicts Sheppard's claims that "[t]o recall and learn of each other the slave songs demanded much mental labor, and to prepare them for public singing required much rehearsing."¹³⁹ And Pike's obvious admiration for White occasionally divests the Singers of agency. Crucially, though, *The Jubilee Singers* frames the entire project as steadfastly and traditionally American, the capstone to two-and-a-half centuries of pragmatic

¹³⁶ Brown "admit[ed] that the condition of my race, considered in a mental, moral, or intellectual point of view, at the present time cannot compare favorably with the Anglo-Saxon." But he was quick to point out that "The negro has not always been considered the inferior race. The time was when he stood at the head of science and literature." But Brown proved his point by resorting to his own brand of racialized history. The "Ethiopians were really negroes," while Anglo-Saxons, according classicist Thomas Macaulay were of a stock "little superior to the Sandwich Islanders." As to their importance in American history, Brown made it epiphenomenal rather than essential: "From the fall of [Crispus] Attucks, the first martyr of the American revolution in [the Boston Massacred of] 1770, down to the present day, the colored people have shown themselves worthy of any confidence that the nation can place in its citizens in the time that tries men's souls." William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1863), 32, 33, 49.

¹³⁷ Pike, *Jubilee Singers*, 47-48.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹³⁹ Moore, "Historical Sketch," *Fisk University News*, 47-48.

achievement.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, Pike's full title speaks to a self-consciously remunerative project: *The Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars*.

In this way, the text trades one kind of historical inclusion for another, rooted in a process of self-making amidst struggle. The Jubilee Singers were participating in a project of self-mythologization extending back at least to Benjamin Franklin and gaining credence in the success cults of modern businessmen and robber barons—but also of a piece with African American works of self-development such as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845).¹⁴¹ This myth was imaged most dynamically in the singers' biographies, which form an entire chapter,¹⁴² and are accompanied by lithographic reprints of individual Singers. Sketched from the shoulder up, and each nattily attired, they echo White's frontispiece portrait: noble, respectable individuals. Ranging in length from a single paragraph to multiple pages, the biographies point up the diversity of the African American experience in the South. In Pike's narrative, interested audience members at his lectures request to hear the singers' stories from the singers themselves.¹⁴³ Of the nine singers who relate their biographies, seven were born slaves and the other two were raised in dire poverty. The histories they tell retain the graphic brutality of bondage. As if to underscore their venture's aspirational quality, they preface their orations by singing "No More Auction Block for Me."¹⁴⁴

In these narratives, readers are confronted with the brutality of slavery through slaves' eyes. The singers relate their stories in ways privileging subjective experience. "The very earliest thing that I remember," Thomas Rutling told the crowd,

was [the] selling of my mother. I must have been about two years old then.... I just remember how the steps looked to our sitting-room door, where I was when she kissed me and bade me good by, and how she cried when they led her away. Some two years after, my mistress told me, as I was playing round in the house, that she had heard from my mother; that she had been whipped till she was almost dead: and that was the last news from her. My father was sold before I was born, and I know nothing of him.¹⁴⁵

There is no solace here, no sublimation of suffering in song. Quite the contrary, Rutling's experiences at once offer a vision of slavery that is neither romantic nor insistently

¹⁴⁰ This was an uncommon view. Thomas Wentworth Higginson's *Young Folks' History of the United States*, for instance, was in its attempts to "embrace[e] African-Americans as integral part of the national community." Moreau, "Schoolbook Nation," 40.

¹⁴¹ John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man: Changing Concepts of Success in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965); Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches* (New York: The Free Press, 1954); Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1993 [1791]); Frederick, *Narrative*.

¹⁴² Pike, *Jubilee Singers*, ch. 4: "Personal Histories of the Jubilee Singers." Ella Sheppard, Eliza Walker, Thomas Rutling, Benjamin Holmes, Maggie Porter, Isaac Dickerson, and Greene Evans were born into slavery. Jennie Jackson and Minnie Tate were born into freedom.

¹⁴³ Ella Sheppard, Eliza Walker, Thomas Rutling, Benjamin Holmes, Jennie Jackson, and Minnie Tate speak on the occasion. Maggie Porter, Isaac Dickers, and Greene Evans were mysteriously unavailable. Consequently, their histories are related by "a former teacher at Nashville, who was in the [audience],... as she remembered hearing them from themselves or others." *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

naturalistic. Families are torn apart forever. Instead of backwoods camp meeting or slave cabin, we see the “sitting-room door.”

Nor do their narratives track the emancipationist teleology central to the Jubilee Singers’ mythology, and to progressive histories of America at large. In fact, several of the narratives Pike transcribes collapse the traditional structures of “*public narratives*,” the psychological term for historical narration whereby “circumstances or conflicts set others in train that are resolved by still other occurrences.”¹⁴⁶ Individuals are not carried along by the triumphant forces of history—from slavery to freedom—but instead struggle against, or take advantage of, history’s caprices. Unwilling to flee the plantation with his master during the Civil War, Benjamin Holmes and his family were sent to “the slave mart.” Holmes “read Lincoln’s Proclamation in the prison [the slave pen].” And in spite of so much “rejoicing,” his optimism was tempered by his immediate circumstances: “I was finally sold to Mr. Kaylar, who gave me five dollars, told me to go and bid my mother good by, and meet him at the depot.”¹⁴⁷ Indeed, the individual—struggling, suffering, overcoming, taking advantage of opportunities or set adrift in a cruel world—unites this diverse array of autobiographies. That diversity is itself significant. It shows that the slave experience was not distillable to the fantasied cotton field, rice swamp, slave cabin, or covert church.

Such stories of self-making and the struggle for upward mobility point up a number of tropes perceived during the era as essential to success in the United States, forming the core of a “middle class Protestant ethic which stressed the values of piety, frugality, and diligence in one’s worldly calling.”¹⁴⁸ Jennie Jackson described how she “saved my money, hoping some time to go to school.... My mornings were spent at the wash-tub, and the afternoons in learning my letters.” In the three weeks following Appomattox, Isaac Dickerson “wandered about trying to find work, and finally was engaged as table waiter at Colonel Boyd’s hotel.” There, he “received ten dollars a month, and after saving up a little sum, went to Chattanooga.” Greene Evans “commenced taking night school, and shortly after left work, that he might have the greater advantage of the day.”¹⁴⁹

Music appears in these histories, but not always in the form one would expect from the public mythicization that emerged in the press. Rutling had been initiated into the more traditional sites of African American music making, and could recall hearing the older slaves on his plantation “sing... all though the slave quarters” as “the rebels kept getting beaten.” Although the sentiment of these songs was not kept entirely hidden from the mistress, the slaves clearly excluded her from the full meaning of the music: “Old missus asked what they were singing for, but they would only say, because we feel so happy.”¹⁵⁰ The ambiguity here points towards the ways in which slaves could subvert the very racial stereotyping that had served to justify the peculiar institution: Were they happy slaves or happy that they soon wouldn’t be slaves?

¹⁴⁶ Norman R. Brown, Steven K. Shevell, and Lance J. Rips, “Public Memories and Their Personal Context,” *Autobiographical Memory*, ed. David C. Rubin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 138.

¹⁴⁷ Pike, *Jubilee Singers*, 58-59.

¹⁴⁸ Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, 4.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 61, 68, 70,

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

But if Rutling's experiences with music point toward a deep-seated comprehension of the double entendres and coded meanings at work in the spiritual, other Jubilee Singers abjured the spiritual altogether as the source of their musical foundations. Ella Sheppard had, as a young girl, begun piano lessons under the tutelage of "a German lady" who gave her "lessons on the piano a year and a half." After being orphaned, and adopted by "Mr. J. P. Ball, of Cincinnati," she was allowed to resume her musical education. Mr. Ball, Sheppard recalled,

offered to give me a thorough musical education, with the understanding that I was to repay him at some future day. I took twelve lessons in vocal music from Madam Rivi; was the only colored pupil; was not allowed to tell who my teacher was; and, more than all that, went in the back way, and received my lessons in a back room up stairs, from nine to quarter of ten at night.¹⁵¹

Sheppard's personal history is marked by the challenges of postwar racism, but it also bespeaks postwar aspiration, through an education decidedly other than that which emerged from the cotton field, slave cabin, or camp meeting.

In other ways, as well, Fisk positioned itself within—and not against—classic American aspirational narratives. Two years after the publication of Pike's detailed history, administrators, faculty, and members of the student body assembled in Jubilee Hall, the Gothic dormitory constructed with funds the Singers had raised through their first tour. The crowd at the dedication, having passed through front halls "wainscoted with beautiful wood, alternated in light and dark, brought from the Mendi Mission, West Africa,"¹⁵² were in a self-congratulatory mood. The gloom of a citywide cholera outbreak in 1873 had quickly ceded to a regenerative élan. Visiting Nashville in 1874, Edward King "saw plenty of life, activity and industry" in the population exceeding 40,000 and in a city "rapidly growing in wealth, and commercial importance." It was market and modernity, King noted, that allowed Nashville and her citizens to recover from wartime decimation—a vision underscored by King's prior journey through rural Kentucky, where gaunt, shiftless men loitered around taverns and "a few negroes slouch[ed] sullenly on a log at the foot of the levee." Sectionalism, at least in King's travelogue for the middle-brow journal *Scribner's*, could be annihilated by modern industry. It was not North against South, but rather, urban modernity against rural backwardness, that mattered.

So it was that Fisk University came in for special praise as a symbol of the extent to which modern life had penetrated the lives of southerners. It was one thing for a reconstructed white Nashville to regain its pride and industry, quite another entirely to describe the lives of ex-slaves. King reprinted "a report of a recent commencement... show[ing] what progress the ex-slaves have already made": Freshmen were examined on *The Aeneid*, geometry, and botany; Sophomores on Cicero's *De Amicitia* and *De*

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 52. In the commemorative edition of the *Fisk University News* devoted to the Jubilee Singers, Fisk registrar M. L. Crosthwaite provided a "Résumé" of the chorus that updated readers on the fate of the original Singers. Crosthwaite proudly pointed to their subsequent activities, which included solo singing careers, musical instruction, home ownership, and business. M. L. Crosthwaite, "A Résumé," *Fisk University News: The Jubilee Singers* 2:5 (October, 1911), 6-10.

¹⁵² *Fisk University. History, Building, and Site, and Services of Dedication at Nashville, Tennessee, January 1st, 1876* (New York: Published for the Trustees of Fisk University, 1876), 10.

Senectute and on Livy (all in Latin), on *The Iliad* (in Greek), and on botany. All of this, the journalist concluded, showed “conclusively that the people of the colored race are capable of acquiring and mastering the most difficult studies, and attaining the highest culture given by our best colleges.” The University had itself, the previous year, internally circulated a pamphlet announcing the variety of courses offered (including “Theology; Book-keeping; and Instrumental and Vocal Music”), trumpeting the successes of Fisk University graduates (110 of whom were currently employed as teachers), and noting a total attendance of 10,000.¹⁵³ The Jubilee Singers were at the heart of the university’s triumphant flowering. As King averred, “a little band of the students, young men and women, went out into the North to sing the ‘heart-songs’ in which the slaves used to find such consolation, and by means of concerts to secure the money with which to erect the new University’s buildings.”¹⁵⁴

The dedicatory exercises, held over the course of New Year’s Eve, 1875, and New Year’s Day, 1876, seemed to reenact the millennial expectations of slaves on the eve of Emancipation.¹⁵⁵ Thirteen years later, the crowd in Jubilee Hall enacted its own national belonging. Through a long night of speeches, singing, and worship, encomia poured from the stage, imbricating the struggles of slavery with American development. Elaborating on the history he’d first set down in *The Jubilee Singers*, Pike described a dialectic vision of history that played on, and ultimately revised, a popular homily in postbellum African American education.¹⁵⁶ The “Dutch vessel [that] brought twenty Negro slaves for sale to Jamestown, Virginia” in 1619 was not an aberration but central to everything that followed: “the foundations of a civilization were laid in the degradation of labor, but these foundations have finally given way, and now we are endeavoring to build up a civilization on the basis of free, remunerated, educated, and Christian

¹⁵³ King, “The Great South,” *Scribner’s Monthly*, 151, 135, 152; “Fisk University. Statement” (Nashville: Banner Print, 1873), JSS 1873-1874.

¹⁵⁴ King, “The Great South,” *Scribner’s Monthly*, 151, 135, 152, 154.

¹⁵⁵ William Wells Brown, for instance, recounted his own experiences at a Contraband camp in Washington, DC, on 31 December, 1862: The men, women, and children “waited patiently for the coming day, when they should become free. The fore part of the night was spent in singing and prayer, the following being sung several times:-- ‘Oh, go down, Moses,/ Way down into Egypt’s land;/ Tell king Pharaoh/ To let my people go.’” Brown, *The Negro in the American Rebellion*, 111.

¹⁵⁶ Litwack describes how “teachers devised dialogues which their pupils would memorized and then often recite to visitors...”:

Q. Where were slaves brought to this country?

A. Virginia.

Q. When?

A. 1620 [*sic*].

Q. Who brought them?

A. Dutchmen.

Q. Who came the same year to Plymouth, Massachusetts?

A. Pilgrims.

Q. Did they bring slaves?

A. No.

New Era, 24 February, 1870, quoted in Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 481.

labor.”¹⁵⁷ Similarly, Clinton Fisk, who seems to have undergone a change of mind since 1866, asked,

How could we better do our part in the ushering in of 1876? How better celebrate the centennial year of the nation’s birth than by the recognition of our grateful duty to God and our country? How magnificent that outgrowth of the century of our national existence!... You stand a representative not of America only, but of the friends of liberty and supporters of the rights of human nature in the whole world.¹⁵⁸

Secure in its sense of purpose, the Fisk community could come to consensus about where they stood in the national imaginary, laughing (or so the transcript from his speech shows) when General Fisk described the singers’ first advertisement in a Cleveland paper as “Gen. Fisk’s negro minstrels from Tennessee.”¹⁵⁹

But if the Fisk Jubilee Singers had, as so many contended, sung the University into existence, they were notably absent from the dedicatory exercises, leaving other students to perform the “Jubilee Anthem,” specially penned by James Merrylees of Glasgow.¹⁶⁰ By this time, the chorus guarded against its own exploitation by imitators as early as 1875,¹⁶¹ as well as the sentiment, expressed by New York theater critic C. D. Odell, that there was “no end to jubilee singing.” It did so by pointing up its own edifying aims. Other groups, a Fisk-sponsored “Caution to the Public” read in 1875, were “unfounded” in their claims “to be singing for the ‘benefit of a University.’”¹⁶² The group never abandoned the name. But as early as 1873, it sustained a shifting cast of characters, most already Fisk University students, but some recruited for the express purpose of performing under George White’s aegis. Both choirmaster and chorus were soon aware of what being a Fisk Jubilee Singer meant. Traveling to Memphis to court the tailor Benjamin Loudin (basso), White reportedly asked, “if he thought he could ‘stand being

¹⁵⁷ *Fisk University*, 36.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁶⁰ “Jubilee Anthem. Dedicatory Services of Jubilee Hall” (Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1876), n.p., Spence Family Collection, Series VIII, box 76, folder 7, Archival and Manuscript Collections, the John Hope and Aurelia Elizabeth Franklin Library, Fisk University. For the occasion, the singers sent a telegraph from Leeds: “To Fisk University, Nashville British friends and Jubilee Singers send greeting. Hitherto hath the Lord helped us. May Fisk University be inspiration to struggling humanity in America...” Quoted in Marsh, *Story of the Jubilee Singers*, seventh edition, iv.

¹⁶¹ These included Slavin’s Original Georgia Jubilee Singers, the Wilmington Jubilee Singers, the Virginia Jubilee Singers, the Juvenile Jubilee Singers, the Carolina Jubilee Singers, the Slave Troupe of Jubilee Singers from Virginia, and Tinker’s Jubilee Singers. Southern, *Music of Black America*, 254.

¹⁶² Brooks, *Lost Sounds*, 103; “Caution to the Public” (1875 [sic]), JSS 1873-1874. See also, Cruz, *Culture on the Margins*, 169; “The Hampton Colored Students,” *New York Times*, 24 March, 1873. Of imitators, Ella Sheppard Moore recalled in 1911, that by 1875, “[a] few concerts in the North brought to our notice the fact that many other companies had entered the field, each claiming to be the original company from Fisk University. Some of them appropriated our testimonials and impersonated our singers, reaping unharvested fields, much to our loss.” Moore, “Historical Sketch,” *Fisk University News*, 53.

flattered & praised for one year.” He would go on to write, “I have found a first rate man as bass singer.... He is an Ohio man, is a musician *naturally & professionally*.”¹⁶³

Professionalism indeed became a crucial component for the chorus’ new incarnation. By 1873, a Fisk Jubilee Singer earned an annual salary of \$500. This was \$100 less than the average Massachusetts factory operative made, which was frequently not enough to support a family. But the singers’ salary was in stark contrast to the rest of the Fisk community (its white professors typically earned an annual salary of \$180) and to southern black field hands (whose wages in the post-emancipation years fluctuated between an annual average of \$60 and \$120). It also entailed the signing of a contract, written up by the AMA, and including two-months’ summer vacation, strict codes of conduct, the promotion of an explicitly Methodist cause, the adjudication of inter-group conflict by the “Officers of the American Missionary Association,” and the effort “to engage heartily in the work of training and developing the voice and power of execution.”¹⁶⁴ Extant evidence points to a chorus that took neither holidays nor evenings off from practice, and could become “furiously angry” when practice and arrangements did not go smoothly.¹⁶⁵

In the winter of 1875-1876, the chorus was charming British audiences, earning as much as \$1,000 a night, part of European tour that would, with occasional trips home, occupy the Fisk Jubilee Singers until 1878, taking them as far east as Germany.¹⁶⁶ The British press repeated the same visions that had marked Americans’ first impressions. “There is a genuiness [*sic*] and simplicity about them that are charming,” the *Harwick Advertiser* concluded earlier that year, “and though their singing may not altogether please the cultivated ear of the connoisseur, it cannot fail to enrapture.”¹⁶⁷ While British reviews did not indulge in fantasies of southern life to the extent that their contemporaries in the northern United States did, the Fisk promotional machine relied on familiar formulas. White and Pike circulated a joint statement asserting that the Singers “do not appear before the public as professional musicians.” Even had they wanted to, the “time since Emancipation has been too short, and opportunities for culture too limited, for them to compete with those who through the aid of labour and study of centuries have brought the music to its present state of perfection.” But this lack could easily be rendered an asset, as with an advertisement for a Manchester concert on January 13th, which reprinted a two-year old testimony from Theodore Seward. Seward is here listed as “Editor of the

¹⁶³ Diary of Ella Sheppard, November, 1874, Jubilee Singers Archives, Archival and Manuscript Collections, the John Hope and Aurelia Elizabeth Franklin Library, Fisk University (hereafter, JSA); White, George to E. M. Cravath, 16 December, 1872, AMAA. While Shepard does not provide the day for her recording, it appears on pages between entries for Dec. 13 and 17. This is further supported by the date affixed to White’s letter.

¹⁶⁴ Graham, “On the Road to Freedom,” *American Music*, 4-5, 15, 17, 7; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 475; Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 411. “This afternoon we sing to some 1500 S.S. [Sunday School] children. We hope some of them may decide for Christ and become *earnest* workers in His vineyard.” Maggie Porter to Gustavus Pike, 10 May, 1874, JSV, box 6, n.f.

¹⁶⁵ 25 December, 1874, “Diary of Ella Sheppard, Nov. 7, 1874-Nov. 7, 1876,” Archival and Manuscript Collections, the John Hope and Aurelia Elizabeth Franklin Library, Fisk University; Monday, 19 November, 1877, “Diary of Ella Sheppard, 19 October, 1877-15 July, 1878,” JSV, box 2, folder 2.

¹⁶⁶ Moore, “Historical Sketch,” *Fisk University News*, 52.

¹⁶⁷ “The Jubilee Singers,” *Harwick Advertiser*, 9 January, 1874, JSS 1873-1874.

New York MUSICAL GAZETTE,” and his promotion of the Jubilee Singers attests to simplicity and purity as at the heart of the chorus’ unique allure:

It is certain that the critic stands completely disarmed in their presence. He must not only recognize their immense power over audiences which include many people in the highest culture, but, if he be not thoroughly encased in prejudice, he must yield a tribute of admiration on his own part, and acknowledge that these songs touch a chord which the most consummate art fails to reach.¹⁶⁸

Ironically, “experts” are used to talk about the music’s ability to explode expertise as an asset to appreciating the music. Crucially, as well, the Jubilee Singers apparatus was well aware of its allure, tethered to a fantasy of contact with “the real thing.”

This fantasy, recognized as commercially viable, contended with the private lives of the Singers themselves. As they toured Western Europe twice between 1874 and 1878 (with brief forays home), the Fisk Jubilee Singers spoke of themselves and their mission in self-conscious—and not just self-confident¹⁶⁹—terms, taking advantage of a tour through Western Europe to indulge in the privileges usually reserved for the Grand Tour. In letters home to her fiancé, James Burrus, America Robinson, a recently minted Jubilee Singer, flaunted her fluency with European cultural traditions ranging from opera (“Wagner I believe is the greatest musical man”) to romance (“I visited all the scenes of Scott’s ‘Lady of the Lake’”).¹⁷⁰

Ella Sheppard’s prim Victorian manners left her aghast at German galleries where “the paintings of the old Dutch school [were] too voluptuous to be enjoyed.” Significantly, she recognized the tenor of white audiences’ celebrations of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. While staying at a Leipzig hotel, a local band struck up in song in honor of a fellow guest, a “Major General.” The band played “beautifully,” Sheppard recorded, “but I fancy the crowd paid most attention to our dark faces which always annoys me.”¹⁷¹ The “always” in this entry points to a vexed performer, acutely aware that praise and popularity could be underwritten by curiosity and fetishization.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ G. D. Pike and George White, “Statement,” in *Service of Song by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, U.S.A.* (London: Freedmen’s Missions and Society, n.d.), JSA box 1, folder 3; “The Jubilee Singers. Ex-Slave Students of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, Will Give a Service of Song Under Distinguished Patronage, in the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, on Tuesday, January 13th” (advertisement, 1874), JSS 1873-1874.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Graham, “The Fisk Jubilee Singers,” 297, which asserts that in Europe the Singers “tasted a life relatively free of prejudice, developing a self-confidence that would have found little nurture in America.”

¹⁷⁰ America Robinson to James Burrus, May, 1877, JSA, box 1, folder 11; America Robinson to James Burrus, 20 September, 1877, JSA, box 1, folder 11.

¹⁷¹ Entries for 2 January, 1878; 18 November, 1877, Diary of Ella Sheppard, 19 October, 1877-15 July, 1878, transcribed by Andrew Ward, JSV, box 2, folder 2.

¹⁷² Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, is most explicit about this in its formulation of “double consciousness.” Three decades later, Langston Hughes would poke fun at white audiences avid for an “authentic” experience with African American primitivism in his story, “Rejuvenation through Joy” (1933). Joel Pfister provides an excellent discussion of this story in context in *Individuality Incorporated: Indians and the Multicultural Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 176-177.

Second National Tour

Fetishization would continue to bedevil the Fisk Jubilee Singers, even as they harnessed it to their own private ends. Financial exigencies prompted a second major American tour in 1879-1881 and as the Singers returned to churches and concert halls, many of which they had not seen for nearly a decade, critics gauged their performances by the extent to which the chorus adhered to the markers of its original appearance, evoking what Daphne Brooks has called the “crisis of representational timelessness projected onto blackness.”¹⁷³

Much had changed in the United States since the first tour. With the codification of Jim Crow, the national focus had shifted from southern reconstruction to urban reform, while most white, native-born Americans were beginning to formulate a clear idea of “the Negro’s proper place”—an idea manifested in segregated public space, local and state disinvestment from African American schools, and lynching. Even as the white South brutally and pervasively reinforced its local dominance, the white North generally turned a blind eye.¹⁷⁴ By the mid-1880s, Democrat Grover Cleveland was officially supported by a coterie of Independent Republicans. A three-column letter of endorsement appeared in *The New York Times*, signed by disaffected Republicans. Historian Robert Kelley has written of Cleveland’s first election to the presidency (1884), that it was believed his government “meant a new day for the South. Cleveland’s election in 1884 was widely regarded as the signal that the South was once more to be [considered a part of the nation].” Perhaps, vis-à-vis sectional reunion, nothing quite compares in symbolism to President Cleveland returning captured Confederate flags to their states,¹⁷⁵ at least not until Confederate and Union veterans shook hands on the Gettysburg battlefield in 1913.

Indeed, as Robert Wiebe has shown, most white, native-born Americans had a clear idea of “the Negro’s proper place” by the mid 1880s:

Treated as curse, clown, or barbarian, told by the Supreme Court to find his own social level, manipulated by employers and politicians North and South, he roused a few sympathetic voices only when he was most flagrantly abused. The quiet subordination that many whites found implied in Booker T. Washington’s emphasis upon economic self-help would bring him spontaneous national acclaim in the mid-nineties. To some degree almost all whites found the Negro’s presence both disturbing and convenient. In a loose, ostensibly egalitarian society, who could tell where the Negro might try to wander, how he might upset the order of things? At the same time, that diffuse society with its blurred hierarchies placed inordinate importance upon all visible distinctions.¹⁷⁶

Whereas the Fisk Jubilee Singers had previously crystallized debates around a distinct struggle over the meaning of citizenship—that is, a struggle with newness in the wake of the Fifteenth Amendment—by 1879, they could become touchstones for discussions of stasis. Audiences did not suddenly abandon their sentimental faith in the Singers to evoke

¹⁷³ Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 6.

¹⁷⁴ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 58; Kelley, *Transatlantic Persuasion*, 301-302.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 301-302.

¹⁷⁶ Wiebe, *Search for Order*, 58.

an American landscape or to express the profound emotions of slavery, but they rejected the possibility that this milieu could be transcended.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers retraced many of their earlier steps, even as they hoped to present themselves as exceedingly more cultivated and worldly than they had been during their original tour. “Dodgers” anticipated “Moral rather than large pecuniary results.... Convinced by what is seen in these singers of their susceptibility of refining influences, it is hoped that the same respect and honorable treatment they compel for themselves shall be give to the race to which they belong.” Even so, such promotional material relied on critical assessments emphasizing innate, emotional, and historically-rooted performance by quoting from both the Republican *New York Tribune* (“There was never singing more intensely dramatic than this.... It was not an exhibition of art; it was the expression of real emotion”) and the Democratic *New York Times* (“The secret is, the melodies they sing are ‘the songs of their captivity’”). Claims to “the expression of real emotion” and the Singers’ “susceptibility to refining influences” are not necessarily antithetical: it was a development from past practice, not a rupture from it, which formed the crux of their mission. Similarly, they emphasized continuity, rather than rupture, with the past in the headline of this promotional broadside: *Fisk University Jubilee Singers: Original Company from Nashville, Tenn., 1871-1880*.¹⁷⁷

Many critics, though, were preoccupied with gauging the extent to which the chorus had changed over time: they were judged by the standards they themselves had ostensibly set as “children of nature.” *The Rutland Herald and Globe* asserted, “their music had not changed [since 1871]. Their songs are the same, plaintive, soul-stirring melodies that set rules at naught, defy analysis, and yet stir the hearts of the people as no class of composition can.” *The New York Times*, which was nonplussed by the Singers’ first series of Manhattan concerts, similarly found that the concert was “not to be judged from any artistic stand-point, and they make no pretentions [*sic*] to this.” Rather, “their singing appeals ... to the emotions..., and, therefore, should be considered for what it is, the peculiar melancholy or else the rollicking with the same mixture of religious sentiment and grotesque humor, in which the former slaves were wont to indulge.” Similar visions abounded, finding “sentimental charm” and “natural, not artificial music.”¹⁷⁸

The *Daily Evening Traveler* (Boston) noted the “great perfection of ensemble and most careful drill,” but ultimately emphasized an innate musicality. Of Loudin, it found, “whatever crudeness his style may have, has a production of tone that many more finished singers might envy him.”¹⁷⁹ Of the Singers’ return Boston performance in January of the following year, the same paper grew increasingly assured in its vision, while maintaining the same themes: “they give the very soul of music. It is natural, not artificial. It seems to well up from the soul, and thus breaks up the fountain of tears. The

¹⁷⁷ *Fisk University Jubilee Singers: Original Company from Nashville, Tenn., 1871-1880* (Boston: J. A. Cummings & Co., 1880), JSA, box 3, folder 1.

¹⁷⁸ “The Jubilee Singers’ Concert,” *Rutland Herald and Globe*, 24 December, 1879, Jubilee Singers Scrapbook, 1879-1881, Archival and Manuscript Collections, the John Hope and Aurelia Elizabeth Franklin Library, Fisk University (hereafter, JSS 1879-1881); *New York Times*, 13 February, 1880, JSS 1879-1881; *Daily Evening Traveler*, 3 October, 1879, JSS 1879-1881; *Boston Daily Traveler*, 15 January, 1880, JSS 1879-1881.

¹⁷⁹ *Daily Evening Traveler*.

singers seem to be at times almost inspired. Men who are never moved by what had been denominated ‘artistic music,’ of the Italian or German school, listen, with tears, to the music of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.”¹⁸⁰

“Is It True Music?” this review’s title asked. The answer was obvious, as were the ramifications for other forms of musical production. In this critical grammar, it was the ability to ossify the spiritual in its “original,” ostensibly unwieldy, form that made it so alluring. It was not the spiritual’s evolution that made it seem “true,” but its atavism, as well as its nostalgic preoccupation with history’s noble past. As Washington’s *National Free Press* claimed, “It was these [songs] which gave our Union boys in blue such delight, as foot-sore and weary they struggled ‘up the country’ from Andersonville and Libby.”¹⁸¹

Others were not convinced, ferreting out the musical interventions that seemed to tarnish the Singers’ “authentic” sound. In charting such negative receptions, not predominant but unique in their stridency, we can fully discern the ways in which the Fisk Jubilee Singers became codified in the public imagination. The *Hartford Daily Times* lamented how the group had “lost the wild rhythm” and posited two possible explanations as to why “[o]ne fails to find now much of the quality that thrills”: “Either it has lost its novelty or the cultivation of the singers has toned down the rough pathos and intense earnestness that characterized their singing.” The paper weighed in on the side of the latter. Whereas the original Jubilee Singers performed “with all the flavor of pine woods, of camp-meetings,” by 1881, such “flavor” had been “softened and refined away.” The *Peoria Journal* gauged the Singers’ return concert through what it had “lost;” namely, “the barbaric melody, the passion, the intense emotion, the free intonation that was like the cries of wild birds.” The *Journal* explained the cause by explaining the performers who, “[w]hen they first started out were but a short remove from slavery. They had all the fervor and excitement of a people whose feelings, repressed in every other direction, had only religion and song in which they cared to give vent.” Similarly, Cincinnati’s *Church’s Musical Visitor* found that “the peculiar undulation like a groan was wanting.” The reason was in the changed figurations of the music making:

They are no longer hunted slaves, but free people, received into society and ready to converse on the topics of the day, having sung before all the crowned heads of Europe and been accorded the praise of having rescued their university from debt.... They are evidently weary of singing the old songs and most of their selections.... The troupe as an exhibition of the possibilities of the race are a great success, but they are no longer jubilee singers; they smack of the north, of free schools and equal rights, respectability and order, and not of the southern cane brake, the blood-hounds, the rice swamps, the camp meetings, the pine woods where the torches flash up and where are men and woman [*sic*] crying, shrieking, protesting, scourged by fear of Satan, tortured by the intensity of their emotions, and overcome by the enormity of their sin. Then, another thing, the organ was a perpetual disenchantment. Such songs should have no instrumental accompaniment, because the listener must have in imagination the times and places where they were first sung. He must see the cotton fields, the presence of the overseer; he must hear in imagination the crack of the whip, the baying

¹⁸⁰ “Is It True Music?,” *Daily Evening Traveler*, 15 January, 1880, JSS 1879-1881.

¹⁸¹ “The Jubilee Singers,” *National Free Press*, 20 March, 1880, JSS 1879-1881.

hounds, the splash of the dark waters of the rice and must, as a solemn undertone, catching the wild refrain, “Will you let my people go?”... Having lost this, they must now be judged by the rules of art, and, when judged in this way, they will suffer.¹⁸²

This critic recognizes the act of transformation that was so vital to the chorus’s ambitions. And yet, he utilizes it as a springboard for a harsh criticism that insisted on struggle, though not redemption.

What is so striking about the critical denunciations of the singers is the explicit recognition of them as having declined from their initial authentic, though brutalized, state of grace. The above review recognizes, and in fact attests to, Fisk’s ultimate ambitions, noting, “The troupe as an exhibition of the possibilities of the race are a great success.” But this is figured as a betrayal of the music’s original purpose. Furthermore, that reworked music represents a disavowal of history. Had the performance actually changed? Did the Fisk Jubilee Singers look and sound palpably different in 1881 from how they looked and sounded in 1871? Surely a decade of practice, performance, and acclaim had left its mark. (By the end of this tour, the Singers had raised, over the course of their decade of existence, \$150,000.¹⁸³) In any event, and more crucially, the answers to these questions matter less than the ways in which the answers were sought; namely, a belief that only one kind of musical configuration marked a centuries’-long tradition of music-making as response to, and expression of, lived experience.

Before and After Emancipation

Ella Sheppard Moore, professionally and financially successful like many of her fellow Jubilee Singers,¹⁸⁴ well knew the ways in which the slave spiritual could harness the past towards self-betterment. Sometime between her marriage to fellow Fisk University alumnus George Moore in 1878 and her death in 1915, Moore composed an eight-page pamphlet under the auspices of the AMA, which she entitled, *Before Emancipation*. In a period when white Americans were fanning out into the countryside to record the remnants of “authentic” African American music—imagining a pilgrimage traveled back in time to a mystical site of exuberant music-making that was strange, dissonant, and compelling¹⁸⁵—Moore crafted an eloquent and unnerving account of the antebellum plantation milieu from which such sounds emerged.

Before Emancipation opens onto a brutal plantation tableau, constituted by family dissolution, infanticide, the “inevitable liability to separation of man and wife, and parents and children,” and other atrocities “[i]t is not proper to tell.” In this setting, the

¹⁸² “The Jubilee Singers, Before Lawrence’s Old Residents,” *Daily American*, 22 October, 1879, JSS 1879-1881; “The Fisk Jubilee Singers,” *Hartford Daily Times*, 7 February, 1880, JSS 1879-1881; “The Fisk Jubilee Singers,” *Peoria Journal*, 29 May, 1881, JSS 1879-1881; “The Jubilee Singers,” *Church’s Musical Visitor*, June, 1881, JSS 1879-1881.

¹⁸³ This roughly translates to just over \$2,500,000 today. Ward, *Dark Midnight*, 394.

¹⁸⁴ Crosthwaite, “Résumé,” *Fisk University News*, 6-10; Thomas Rutling, “My Life Since Leaving the Jubilee Singers,” *Fisk University News: The Jubilee Singers 2:5* (Oct., 1911), 36-37; Anderson, “*Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus*,” 183.

¹⁸⁵ See, for instance, Henry Cleveland Wood, “Negro Camp-Meeting Melodies,” *The New England Magazine*, 12:1 (April, 1892), 60-64; Maude Caldwell Perry, “Negro Spirituals,” *The Century* 58:4 (August, 1899), 576-581.

slave body retains little romance. “The girls,” Moore avers, “looked like old women, the old women like dried up animals. They had been so abused that even the little girls of ten were misshapen.”¹⁸⁶ This was the environmental matrix from which the spiritual emerged and in which it served not only as psychic balm or release, but as stratagem: “The slaves often communicated with one another, as well as with the Lord, through their songs. The master only heard the song, but the slave received a message. When they sang, ‘Steal Away to Jesus,’ it meant that there would be a secret meeting that night to worship the Lord, to pray for a better day.”¹⁸⁷ The profane uses of the spiritual easily elided with its more sacred associations. The music was spiritually empowering, as well:

The training of the religious life of the Negro was unique. In some places they had their own churches, and their illiterate pastors had literally to open their hearts and mouths for the Lord to fill them... How the slave caught on to the essentials of Christianity and the many incidents of the Bible, except that they were taught by the angel of the Lord, will remain as hidden a mystery as the Burning Bush was to Moses.... The Negro in slavery believed [himself] in direct communication with the Divine, as expressed in voices and visions of God, and the Heavenly land.¹⁸⁸

Moore points up the specific ontological experience of slavery, rendering it unique and, even for herself, born free, ultimately unknowable.

But all of this was ballast for a narrative of self-development. Bound by the cultural valuations of her time and place, Moore nevertheless folds the slaves’ history into a larger national mythos of self-making. “It was a great advance over the heathen life in Africa, to have even a crude conception of God and the Christian life, which are so well expressed in their religious songs,” she asserted, echoing a trope extending back at least as far as colonial-era African American poet Phyllis Wheatley.¹⁸⁹ Moore’s concluding vision reached far forward, as well, proposing self-actualization and cultural accretion that celebrated the past as handmaiden to the future. “And we see that language, religion and labor were the three great factors learned in slavery,” she concluded, “used by our Lord when He saw that we were ready to enter the door of a greater opportunity.”¹⁹⁰ If Moore believed that the divine had uniquely blessed slaves, she did not see that blessing rooted in a stultifying or marginalizing condition, but as forming the bedrock for self-development.

As the vision of black difference was formally codified in society, politics, economics, and the law, Fisk University, which had transformed an Army fortress into a school, again became a kind of garrison, protecting the increasingly besieged causes of black education in the South. In an 1889 article, for instance, the *Fisk Herald* described whites “who are even more hostile and bitter than the older ones.” W. E. B. Du Bois

¹⁸⁶ Ella Sheppard Moore, *Before Emancipation* (New York: American Missionary Association, n.d.), JSV, box 3, folder 6.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 6. As Wheatley wrote, “’Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,/Taught my benighted soul to understand/That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too./Once I redemption neither sought nor knew./Some view our sable race with scornful eye;/’Their colour is a diabolic dye.’/Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain/May be refined, as join the angelic train.” Phyllis Wheatley, quoted in Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 45.

¹⁹⁰ Moore, *Before Emancipation*, 8.

could recall of his own undergraduate days at Fisk, from 1885-1888, how the personal ambitions of African Americans in the postbellum South frequently contended with Jim Crow's realities of economic and political disenfranchisement. Spending his summers teaching primary school in the "hills of Tennessee":

I have called my tiny community a world, and so its isolation made it; and yet there was among us but a half-awakened common consciousness, sprung from a common joy and grief, at burial, birth, or wedding; from a common hardship in poverty, poor land, and low wages; and, above all, from the sight of the Veil that hung between us and Opportunity. All this caused us to think some thoughts together; but these, when ripe for speech, were spoken in various languages. Those whose eyes twenty-five and more years before had seen "the glory of the coming of the Lord," saw in every present hindrance or help a dark fatalism bound to bring all things right in His own good time. The mass of those to whom slavery was a dim recollection of childhood found the world a puzzling thing: it asked little of them, and they answered with little, and yet it ridiculed their offering. Such a paradox they could not understand, and therefore sank into listless indifference, or shiftlessness, or reckless bravado.

Du Bois left the rending of the veil to the youngest generation, "to whom War, Hell, and Slavery were but childhood tales, whose young appetites had been whetted to an edge by school and story and half-awakened thought."¹⁹¹

What Ella Sheppard Moore was proposing in her own, modest way, was the ambition and quest for self-actualization that comes not from "story and half-awakened thought" but from a full acknowledgment of the past. Simultaneously, and in concert, she sought a reclamation of African American history, away from the stereotypes of a regressive, wild mind and body and towards a process of self-actualization rooted in an egalitarian sense of opportunity. Hers was the impulse to use the past—both to be inspired by it and to harness it toward material gain—as the basis for a lifelong project of self-actualization and for a claim on her own personal sense of belonging.

¹⁹¹ *Fisk Herald*, VII (October, 1889), 11-12, quoted in Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 421-422; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 37, 41-42. When Du Bois returned, in curiosity, to the homes of the families he taught, ten years after, he was unnerved by what he saw: "I had feared for Jim. With a cultured parentage and a social caste to uphold him, he might have made a venturesome merchant or a West Point cadet. But here he was, angry with life and reckless." Each home offered a similar story of dashed hopes. Du Bois, deep in thought about whether or not what he'd witnessed was "the twilight of nightfall or the flush of some faint-dawning day... rode to Nashville in the Jim Crow car." *Ibid.*, 42, 45. For Du Bois's experiences at Fisk, see Elliott M. Rudwick, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Study in Minority Group Leadership* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960), 19-20.

Chapter Two

Frontier Central: Performing Frontier America in *The Drama of Civilization*

Two Dramas of Civilization

One hundred and forty students of the Carlisle Indian School took the stage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on February 5, 1887. They sang the song, “America.” They enacted “a tableau representing the various industries carried out” at Carlisle. Capt. Richard Pratt gave a speech on the merits of the school he had founded eight years earlier in the fertile Cumberland Valley of South Central Pennsylvania, dedicated to the socialization and industrial education of Native American youth. Emphasizing the understated-but-noble vision of citizenship embodied in these students singing patriotic songs and demonstrating their utility in a productive nation, Pratt contrasted their edifying performance with the sensationalism then transpiring across the East River. The following day, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* paraphrased his remarks:

[I]f he had come here with a troupe of savage Indians in war paint and half naked and pictured in a false light, like Buffalo Bill[’s Indians], thousands of people would have gone to see them. But he had come with a few children. Some of them the children of those who dance in the Wild West, and the audience could see the result. If these people were allowed to live in this country it must be by the industries they had exhibited. He represented the Government in the matter.

Following this speech, and as the student band played more patriotic music, the audience was invited to inspect the “industrial display on the stage,” including “a case of tools which showed the handwork of the sons of the savage,” “[s]ilver mounted harnesses,” and “[h]ousehold articles of tinware and wood.” Although the *Eagle* failed to mention which songs, precisely, the band played, it provided a summation of the music’s general tone. It was “decidedly of a more pleasant character than what the fathers of the musicians extended as a greeting to the early settlers of the country.”¹⁹²

For Pratt’s students, belonging resided in the substitution of cultural traditions with industrial expertise. In this, his vision for the Carlisle School hinged on a progressive philosophy of modern selfhood and self-making. Amidst the racial taxonomies and hierarchies of turn-of-the-century American science, Joel Pfister argues, the school principal’s unflagging commitment to turning Native Americans into Modern Americans through hair cut, clothing, education, and reverence for the essential justice of U.S. history and government, was not *just* another form of institutional violence. It could also be a welcome counterpoint to the era’s beliefs in the persistence and insurmountability of racial difference. As Pratt would sum up his long-standing position in 1904, “It is a great mistake to think that the Indian is born an inevitable savage. He is born a blank slate like the rest of us.”¹⁹³ This faith in the cultivation of individuality

¹⁹² “Bright Indian Students,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 6 February, 1887, William Frederick Cody Papers, Cody Institute for Western American Studies, Cody, Wyoming (hereafter, WFCP).

¹⁹³ Joel Pfister, *Individuality Incorporated: Indians and the Multicultural Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 41. For racial typology during the era, see John S. Haller, *Outcasts from Evolution: Attitudes of Racial Inferiority, 1859-1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); and Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), ch. 4. For the question of Indian integration into American modernity, see

eventually led Pratt to work with the Hampton Normal and Industrial School (est. 1868), dedicated to the cause of African American education after the Civil War. (Ironically, even as Pratt's cultural politics involved jettisoning indigenous folkways, Hampton was at work pioneering efforts to preserve and study the slave spiritual.¹⁹⁴)

Onstage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, respectability, uplift, and modernity were all gauged through a presentation of Indians-cum-Americans, the kind then being molded in such "civilizing" campaigns as the Indian Rights Association (est. 1882) and the Dawes Allotment Act (1887).¹⁹⁵ Whereas contemporaneous authors and educators imagined the ways in which one might draw from the past to ensure future success—an ideology running through fiction, in Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* (1867) and the *Zeitgeist* it spawned, and pedagogical and pietistic discussions of "self-improvement"¹⁹⁶—the Carlisle School proposed a rupture. Rather than continuity, Indians' relevance to American society would be measured by the extent to which they separated themselves from traditional folkways and patterns of labor, and integrated into a society of individuals, each capable of making his own way through his own expertise. In Pratt's formulation, then, a generational fissure epitomized uplift. While misguided fathers were caught up in Buffalo Bill's exploitative and retrograde fantasy of frontier derring-do, children were proving their value in industrial modernity. No longer the threatening primitives who had once stood as obstacles to Anglo American continental expansion, they were now expansion's benefactors and, indeed, its perpetuators.

But in quite another sense, they were its prisoners. The tableau onstage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, with audience members inspecting the students' worth through their "handwork," underscores the commodity fetishism at this performance's core. Pratt celebrated a cultural politics in which people were contained in their products as the ultimate testimony to contributive citizenship in a market-based nation.

Col. William Frederick "Buffalo Bill" Cody was similarly invested in presenting Indians as commodities. Whereas the young students from Carlisle were positioning themselves as producers, Cody's Indians were raw materials in historical tableaux that constituted an American narrative. Both Pratt and Cody, that is, were busy engaging the question of what would constitute national belonging. Over four months, between November 24, 1886 and February 22, 1887, the latter oversaw the regular performance of a spectacle that mythologized and sentimentalized capitalist development as emerging from the substrate of frontier struggle, danger, and exuberance. The "savage Indians in war paint and half naked" whom Pratt so forcefully attacked were participating in an historical reenactment, the political implications of which were implicit in its title: *The Drama of Civilization*. What would form the core of a progressive American history? What would be the necessary struggles and the values imparted from those struggles?

Frederick F. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

¹⁹⁴ See ch. 1, fn. 27 of this dissertation.

¹⁹⁵ I explore these at greater length below.

¹⁹⁶ For an extended discussion and critique of Alger, see Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 105-106, and John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man: Changing Concepts of Success in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), ch. 4. For a general discussion of "self-improvement" as foundation for success, see *Ibid.*, ch. 3.

The Carlisle students pointed in one direction. Cody's performers—Native American and Anglo American alike—pointed in another by dramatizing a national narrative whose greatness was premised on indebtedness to, rather than a rejection of, a particular mythology of the past.

In the preceding chapter, I traced how the slave spiritual as vernacular *framework* and *practice* became a prism refracting varied—though ultimately compatible—ideas of what constituted authentic national history and citizenship. With the end of Reconstruction in 1877, the political debate shifted from the American South to the American West, where new spaces for economic and social development seemed poised to affirm the nation's greatness. As such, in this chapter I turn my attention to how American history was evoked and conveyed in *The Drama of Civilization*; namely, as rooted in the circumstances of frontier living. While scholarship on this performance—unique in the career of Buffalo Bill's Wild West—tends to lump it in with a contemporaneous, sanguine vision of “progress,”¹⁹⁷ I argue here that the show privileged the frontier as the unique site of nation- and self-making because it provided a myth of America as shaped by the full spectrum of messy, dangerous frontier living. It was thus a sanguine vision of how the past shaped the present and future. But it could also register anxiety over what happens when that past no longer becomes an index for shaping meaningful engagement with the present.

In the first section of this chapter, I trace how, in its dramaturgy, *The Drama of Civilization* was a window into the life of the frontier, celebrating the ways in which the hard lessons of that life provided the bedrock for Anglo American expansion and power even as the frontier itself was fast becoming a “settled” space. Next, I home in on Buffalo Bill himself and the ways in which he was transformed—not least by his own efforts—into a mythic frontiersman embodying the unique attributes that spoke to the conflation of personal and national development. From there, I explore how, in the experience of spectatorship, the motifs of frontier living were conveyed, destabilizing a positivist vision of modern progress and social development. In my conclusion, I note the existence of yet another critique, this time from Ogalala Sioux holy man Black Elk, who recognized the ways in which distinctions between frontier and metropolis collapsed amidst a celebration of Anglo American power. For Black Elk, who acted in *The Drama of Civilization* and used the lessons he learned there to formulate his own counter-myth, the American West existed as another kind of historical space which could be drawn from to inspire revolt against marginalization and displacement.

Towards a Narrative History of Frontier America

One of late-nineteenth century America's biggest celebrities, Buffalo Bill today illustrates the paradoxes of the mythicized frontier. A Far Western renegade who earned

¹⁹⁷ Louis S. Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 277-278. For a more general discussion, see Sarah J. Blackstone's *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business: A History of Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986); Thomas A. Freeland, “The National Entertainment: Buffalo Bill's Wild West and the Pageant of Empire” (Ph.D. dissertations, Stanford, 1999); Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 33.

his nickname by feeding hungry railroad workers¹⁹⁸; an apostle of the Strenuous Life who built a grand estate in North Platte, Nebraska, and enjoyed “the good life”; and a self-proclaimed “Indian fighter” who nurtured a long friendship with Chief Yellow Tail.¹⁹⁹ For his earliest audiences, though, “Buffalo Bill” was a simple character. Child of Bleeding Kansas; former Union Army scout and buffalo hunter; tour guide for hunting parties of well-heeled Easterners and European nobility²⁰⁰; and consummate champion of Far Western living, his outsized exploits on the Plains had, by the 1870s, made him ready fodder for Prentis Ingraham’s dime novels and for Ned Buntline’s staged melodramas. In literature and theater, “Buffalo Bill” stood at the epicenter of a vogue for the romance of the American West, especially the racial violence between cowboys and Indians.²⁰¹ Cody, in fact, acted in many of Buntline’s plays and quickly understood how to craft an admired and in-demand public persona. It was apparent that a mass audience existed for Cody’s magnetic presence. As the Chicago *Interocean* noted of his first appearance onstage in 1872, “Beginning from the irrepressible, sparkling gamin,” the magnetic presence of the authentic frontiersman “traveled, row by row, through all intervening grades of intelligence, up to the hard-handed, sable-browed mechanic, who rests on Saturday night and devours his dime novel, his *New York Weekly*, for their thrilling tales of the plains, and to whom the title ‘pale face’ for a white man has still some tincture of romance.”²⁰²

An early proclivity for self-mythologization is evident in Cody’s first autobiography, published in 1879, when he was just thirty-three and toggling between eastern stage celebrity and western exploits. By his own telling, Cody was a rural naïf, befuddled by the social cues of eastern society. The result approximated a drawing room comedy. In New York, he “received numerous dinner invitations, as well as invitations to visit different places of amusement and interest; but as they came in so thick and fast, I soon became badly demoralized and confused. I found I had accepted invitations to dine at half a dozen or more houses on the same day and at the same hour.” When feted by admiring theater crowds, his “utterances were inaudible even to the leader of the orchestra. Bowing to the audience,” he remembered, “I beat a hasty retreat into one of the cañons of the stage. I never felt more relieved in my life than when I got out of the view of that immense crowd.” Indeed, Cody recalled that his only real theatrical success was in staged scenes of frontier violence. There, he was “at home” amidst the simulated rifle

¹⁹⁸ As a young man, he was paid the then-significant monthly sum of \$500 to kill twelve buffalo daily, providing meat for workers laying the Kansas-Pacific Railroad. A grateful rail splitter penned an honorarium: “Buffalo Bill, Buffalo Bill, / Never Missed and Never Will; / Always aims and shoots to kill, / And the company pays his buffalo bill!” Quoted in Louisa Frederici Cody and Courtney Ryley Cooper, *Memories of Buffalo Bill* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1919), 113.

¹⁹⁹ See, for instance, the promotional video, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* (Ford, n.d.), #2 Archival Footage, McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.

²⁰⁰ See, for instance, “Alexis Among the Buffaloes,” *Frank Leslie’s* (3 February, 1872), p. 325, William Frederick Cody Collection, MS 6, McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, box 20, folder 3 (hereafter, WFCC).

²⁰¹ For Cody in the context of a vogue for the Wild West, see Roger A. Hall, *Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²⁰² *The Interocean*, 17 December, 1872, p. 4, quoted in William S. E. Coleman, “Buffalo Bill on Stage,” *Players Magazine* 47:20 (Dec.-Jan., 1972), 83.

shooting and “hand-to-hand combat” while all the while “long[ing] for a hunt on the Western prairies once more.” The 1876 theatrical season, in fact, was prematurely closed, Cody explained, “because I was anxious to take part in the Sioux war which was then breaking out.”²⁰³ The very title of this first autobiography bespeaks a young man eager to carve out his own legend by emphasizing a persona at home in the varied tasks of frontier existence but not those of celebrity or staged performance: *The Life of Hon. William F. Cody Known as Buffalo Bill: The Famous Hunter, Scout, and Guide: An Autobiography* (1879).²⁰⁴

Yet behind this public persona—both the self-conscious celebrity onstage and the self-mythologizer on the page—was a consummate professional. On the cusp of theatrical stardom, Cody privately admonished a friend, “in this business a man *must* be perfectly reliable and *sober*.”²⁰⁵ Professional and financial acumen were what allowed Cody to market himself effectively to audiences and to Eastern and European nabobs willing to pay him to take them hunting. In 1882, a financially successful and popularly renowned

²⁰³ William Frederick Cody, *The Life of Hon. William F. Cody Known as Buffalo Bill: The Famous Hunter, Scout, and Guide: An Autobiography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978 [1879]), 309, 310, 327, 328, 340. At least since Henry Nash Smith, scholars have been intrigued by the intersection of fact and fantasy in the construction of “Buffalo Bill.” See Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular Culture* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2000); Larry McMurtry, *The Colonel and Little Missy: Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley, and the Beginnings of Superstardom in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2005); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), 113-125; and Warren, *Buffalo Bill’s America*. Recently, the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, has altered its Buffalo Bill exhibit to reflect this postmodern instability. See Edward Rothstein, “At the Buffalo Bill Museum, a Showdown between History and Myth,” *New York Times*, 3 August, 2012. For a more general discussion of the creation and commodification of the self during this period, see Mary McAleer Balkun, *The American Counterfeit: Authenticity and Identity in American Literature and Culture* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2006).

²⁰⁴ Cody frequently recounted and reshaped his adventures. See *The Adventures of Buffalo Bill* (New York: Harper, 1904); *An Autobiography of Buffalo Bill* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1920); *Buffalo Bill’s Own Story of His Life and Deeds* (Chicago: Homewood Press, 1917); *Life and Adventures of “Buffalo Bill,” Colonel William F. Cody* (New York: Willey Book Company, 1927); *Story of the Wild West and Camp-Fire Chats* (Philadelphia: Historical Publishing Company, 1888); and *True Tales of the Plains* (New York: Empire Book Company, 1908). Joy Kasson points to *Adventures*’ opening as indicative of Cody’s self-conscious celebrity: “Appropriately, his first chapter begins with a theatrical metaphor: ‘My *debut* upon the world’s stage occurred on February 26, 1845.’ The passage continues with a blend of drama and history. ‘The scene of this first important event in my adventurous career, being in Scott county, in the State of Iowa....’” Kasson, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*, 30-31. It is possible, I would argue, to make too much out of this light-hearted opening. Although Cody wrote about himself as though he were a figure in a Tall Tale, frequently blending “historicity” with the “occasional reverberations from the conventions of folklore and romance” (Ibid., 29), the character he created belonged elsewhere than the New York stage. Focusing too much on the post-modern means by which Cody wrote his public persona into existence obscures the results; namely, the codification of a frontiersman *ne plus ultra*.

²⁰⁵ William F. Cody to “Sam,” 2 September, 187[0s], box 13, folder 29, WFCC. Emphases in the original.

Cody formed his own troupe of western performers who excelled at the art of staging the un-staged: Sharpshooters and trick riders whose skills were borne of attention to the labor and leisure activities of the romanticized West. Cody recalled his assembling of so large a cast as though it were an act of anthropological fieldwork. His ambition, as he announced to his wife, Louisa, was to supplement the public imagination with a dose of the real, to have the West irrupt into the East. “Well, the idea is this,” he explained to her one day, apparently apropos of nothing. “All these people back East want to find out just what the West looks like. And you can’t tell them on a stage. There ain’t the room. So why not just take the West right to ‘em?” It was, he wrote in the posthumously published *An Autobiography of Buffalo Bill* (1920), “a remarkable collection of Indians, cowboys, Indian ponies, stage-coach drivers, and other typical denizens of my own country.”²⁰⁶ Advertised as being “realistic in every detail,” Buffalo Bill’s Wild West presented a fifteen- to twenty-two part mélange of Far Western skill and fun. With exhibitions of half-mile burro races, trick riding, and Pawnee Scalp and War dances, it was not unique among the era’s vogue for traveling western pageantry. But helmed by the nationally famous Cody, and given over to a sheer immensity of the performances—with their outsized cast, real animals, and variety of acts—it proved uniquely alluring. Within four years, “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West” was, at least by the reckoning of Edward Goodman, his nephew and the show’s souvenir seller, “the largest on the road.”²⁰⁷ It was a massive production that had to be carefully orchestrated at each stage. Eighteen-car trains, packed with two hundred and fifty actors—cowboys from the Plains and native peoples from reservations—and a menagerie of deer, elk, bear, and buffalo crisscrossed the United States on a breakneck touring schedule.

Cody, meanwhile, seemed to run himself ragged. While his young cast of cowboys frequently snuck out on all-night drunks in the towns and cities where the show pitched camp, their impresario was, according to his nephew, “on the jump from daylight until dark” and “never touche[d] a drop.”²⁰⁸ By that time, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West had been copyrighted as *The Wild West or Life Among the Red Men and the Road Agents of the Plains and Prairies—A Equine Dramatic Exposition on Grass or Under Canvas, of the Adventures of Frontiersmen and Cowboys* and was well on its ways to having performed for over one million and netting \$100,000.²⁰⁹

Mark Twain, to whom Cody sent three tickets free of charge in 1884, provided lavish praise for these shows. For Twain, the salient features were its objective and subjective markers of authenticity:

²⁰⁶ Cody and Cooper, *Memories of Buffalo Bill*, 281; Cody, *Autobiography*, 314-315. Cody died in 1917.

²⁰⁷ Advertisement (1 October, 1883), box 11, folder 25, WFCC; Program (1885), Buffalo Bill Cody Scrapbook: 1887-1891 [*sic*], roll #4, WFCC; “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Route book” (1884), box 10, folder 2, WFCC; advertisement (1884), box 7, folder 20, WFCC; Edward Goodman to mother, 8 May, 1886, box 26, folder 6, WFCC. Blackstone’s *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business* provides the most detailed and thorough examination of the practical aspects involved in transporting and financing the show as well as competing spectacles.

²⁰⁸ Edward Goodman to father, 29 May, 1886, box 26, folder 6, WFCC; Edward Goodman to mother, 8 May, 1886, box 26, folder 6, WFCC; Edward Goodman to mother, 13 June, 1886, box 26, folder 6, WFCC

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 142; Roger A. Hall, *Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 143.

I have now seen your Wild West show two days in succession, & have enjoyed it thoroughly. It brought wildly back the breezy, wild life of the great plains [*sic*] & the Rocky Mountains & stirred me like a war song. Down to its smallest details the show is genuine—cowboys, vaqueros, Indians, stage-coach, costumes & all; it is wholly free from sham and insincerity, & the effects produced upon me by its spectacles were identical with those wrought upon me a long time ago by the same spectacles on the frontier. Your pony expressman was of as tremendous interest to me yesterday as he was twenty-three years ago when he used to come whizzing by from over the desert with his war news, & your bucking horses were even painfully real to me, as I once rode one of those outrages for nearly a quarter of a minute.²¹⁰

Facilitating the author's authentic spectatorial experience were explicit assurances of realism. By 1885, orator Frank Richmond was given the task of explaining the action onstage. In a script composed by Cody, Richard emphasized that spectators were witnessing a simple dramatization of lived experience, that the romance at the show's core was an implicit part of everyday western life:

Before the entertainment begins,... I wish to impress upon your minds that what you are about to witness is not a performance in the common sense of that term, but an exhibition of skill, on the part of men who have acquired that quality while earning a livelihood. Many unthinking people suppose that the different features of our exhibition are the result of what is technically called "rehearsals." Such, however, is not the fact, and anyone who witnesses our performance the second time, will observe that men and animals alike are creatures of circumstance, depending for the success upon the own skill, faring and sagacity.²¹¹

Richmond underscored the performers' authenticity and the audience's less mediated experience with a culture it had grown accustomed to consuming in literature and stagecraft, but never in so ostensibly spontaneous or vivid of circumstances. Against this setting, papers projected their own anxieties over "culture's" enervating effects. "All the operas in the world appear like pretty playthings for emasculated children by the side of

²¹⁰ Samuel Langhorne Clemens to William F. Cody, 10 September 1884 (UCCL 12811), Catalog entry, accessed 2008-04-05, Mark Twain Paper, the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. If watching a "bucking horse" reawakened the western revelry and broad comedy of *Roughing It* (1872), it also seems to have provided fodder for *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889). When Hank Morgan, the eponymous hero, stops an opposing jousting by lassoing him, his sixth-century audience is agog. Twain writes of them as though they were in the audience of Buffalo Bill's Wild West: "Unquestionably, the popular thing in this world is novelty. These people had never seen anything of that cowboy business before, and it carried them clear off their feet with delight." Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (New York: Bantam Classics, 2005 [1889]), 272.

²¹¹ W.F. Cody, "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" (script for announcer, 1885), Rare Books and Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Of the Native Americans whom Cody drafted from reservations, Blackstone explains, "There was... a concerted effort by the government to get troublemakers and Indian leaders off the reservations, where they were thought to be stirring up trouble and aggravating feelings of discontent among other Indians." Blackstone, *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business*, 86.

the setting of reality and the muse of the frontier as so faithfully and extensively presented,” wrote a reviewer in 1885.²¹²

But as cost of travel came to outweigh proceeds, season-long residences replaced year long touring. By summer 1886, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West camped at Mariner’s Harbor, in Erastina, Staten Island. There, throughout the summer, an average daily attendance of 15,000—including New York’s Governor Hill, Brazilian Prince Dom Augusto Leopoldo, and the New York and Pennsylvania chapters of the Benevolent Order of Buffaloes²¹³—watched a typical Wild West production. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* chose to highlight the performers’ impressive skill with firearms, as though emphasizing what could be gained from frontier life over urban dilettantism. “More of the members of the various gun clubs should visit Erastina, Staten island [*sic*], and see the remarkable exhibition of skill in shooting at glass balls and clay pigeons,” “H. C.” suggested in his review. “... Such shooting has never been seen in the field in the metropolis before. It throws into shade every effort of Brooklyn’s crack club shots.”²¹⁴

Even as papers lavished praise, the promise of an indoor spectacle, with its controllable and even manipulable environment, became a preoccupation for Cody, his co-producer Nate Salsbury, and set designer Steele MacKaye. Such a spectacle necessitated an immense space in which to unfold. “Only in an arena where horses could be ridden at full gallop,” Cody recalled, “where lassoes could be thrown, and pistols and guns fired without frightening the audience half to death, could such a thing be attempted.” Space was booked at Madison Square Garden, then between Fourth and Madison Avenues and Twenty-fifth and Twenty-sixth Streets. Indeed, it was the only place in New York that was “large enough,” MacKaye’s son Percy remembered, “for so spacious a proposition.”²¹⁵

That summer, on August 20, Steele MacKaye paid a visit to Henck’s Opera House in Cincinnati. There, he lost himself at the Matt Morgan War Pictures, with its giant, curved canvases (known as “cycloramas”) of eleven scenes, each 45 by 27 feet in size, that vivified the Civil War battles of Belmont, Donaldson, Shiloh, Vicksburg, Gettysburg, Mission Ridge, Yellow Tavern, Grant in the Wilderness, Atlanta, and Five Forks, as well as the signing of the peace treaty at Appomattox courthouse. During the 1840s, curved, massive panoramic paintings or photographs, known as cycloramas, emerged as a popular attraction for a middle-class public eager to immerse themselves in scenes of history and fantasy. Meant to engulf the viewer in their massive concavity, they typically presented landscape portraits of the American West, the Holy Land, the Moon, and “the Antediluvian World.” Walking along and amidst these immense and immersive images, frequently with guidebooks in hand, viewers encountered ancient, fantastical, or simply foreign narratives unfolding before them. In the postbellum decades, cycloramas

²¹² Quoted in William E. Deahl Jr., “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, 1885,” *Annals of Wyoming* 47:2 (Fall, 1975), 150.

²¹³ “Buffalo Bill’s Reception,” *New York Times*, 25 July, 1886, p. 8; “Gov. Hill See Wild West,” *New York Times*, 4 July, 1886; “The Prince at Erastina,” *New York Times*, 4 July, 1886, p. 12; “Buffaloes at the Wild West,” *New York Times*, 25 September, 1886, p. 8.

²¹⁴ H. C., “The Trigger,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 4 July, 1886, p. 7, WFCP.

²¹⁵ Cody, *Autobiography*, 314; and Percy MacKaye, *Epoch: The Life of Steele MacKaye, Genius of the Theatre in Relation to His Times & Contemporaries. A Memoir by His Son Percy MacKaye, Vol. 2* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1968 [1927]), 75.

underwent a vogue for battlefield scenes that were meant to instruct and vivify history more than to entertain. Typical was Paul Philippoteaux's *Cyclorama of the Battle of Gettysburg*, exhibited in Boston in 1884. Twenty-five feet tall by 400 feet wide, it displayed "the lay of the land and the structures on it, the quantity and condition of the assembled troops and their equipment, even the position of various key commanders."²¹⁶ Taking in Morgan's immense panorama of the entire war, walking from Belmont to Gettysburg to Appomattox, was an unexpectedly profound experience for MacKaye. He wrote his wife in Buffalo that it was "of much greater magnitude and importance than I had supposed." The immersive and narrative qualities, he believed, could be easily replicated within an enclosed space for Cody's show.²¹⁷

A predilection for "history" would thus mark the forthcoming incarnation of the Wild West. Leasing Madison Square Garden, Cody, Salsbury, and MacKaye struggled over how to marry spectacle and veracity. MacKaye, his son Percy remembered, proposed "an unprecedented form of elemental-historical drama." Eventually, they came to some agreement that the show would follow, in Steele MacKaye's words, an "*historic order*," with a "method, coherency and completeness."²¹⁸ In epistolary exchanges with Salsbury, he hatched potential scenes, including "Savage Life," "Pioneer Life," and "Frontier Life," proposing a slow but steady story of social and economic development, an "*historical order* in the presentation of various features of the 'Wild West.'" Some of these features were suited "*more perfectly to the Garden as a winter indoors entertainment*." Only in that immense arena could Buffalo Bill's Wild West do justice to the immense sensorial experience of a "Prairie fire," a "Stampede of wild cattle," and "the formation and bursting of a cyclone in the mountains."²¹⁹

Other aspects of the production would be attentive to a fully fleshed out vision of a more mundane frontier existence, recuperating that world for the audience. Not just spectacle would be presented, but also "Life of mining camp" and "Life of fort."²²⁰ As Cody announced in an anticipatory interview, "Life in the wild west will be depicted true to Nature. The old emigrant trains will pass around the arena as through they were crossing the mountains."²²¹ Of the opening scene, located in a pristine, pre-contact landscape, MacKaye promised,

I shall show even the glow worms in the forest at night, and as the dawn creeps in, the malarial mists of the woods will appear hanging over the pools of water—and

²¹⁶ Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 21; Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 119; Cecile Whiting, "Tromp l'oeil painting and the counterfeit Civil War," Buffalo Bill Museum Office Files, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming, no date or page numbers provided (hereafter, BBMOF). For MacKaye's own career, see David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 167-168.

²¹⁷ MacKaye, *Epoch*, 72.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 75, 77.

²¹⁹ Steele MacKaye to Nate Salsbury, October, 1886, quoted in MacKaye, *Epoch*, 77.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ "Grandest of Amusement Scheme," *Republic and Leader*, n.d., Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave Archives, Golden Colorado, 72.0149-19b.

evaporating before the eyes of the public in the most mysterious manner.... Even the tree toads, and katy-dids, and crickets will be heard.

His proposal of a “realistic picture of the whole life, vegetable, entomological, zoological, and ethnological” was sure to be “as charming to the senses as it is instructive to the mind.”²²² Indeed, even as he reiterated in another letter that the new show would “lead to the organization of an entertainment more coherently historic than those afforded by [the] present programme,” he emphasized the didacticism and patriotic investment at the core of this new production. It would allow for “an instructive value more fully developed than at present.” Of a section on “Frontier Life,” for instance, he proposed, “we find for the first time the fort and the organized forces of the law of the land in their most primitive form... establishing those conditions of order essential to the progress of civilization.”²²³ Salsbury, for his part, recognized the importance of solemnity and he foreswore “dragging Mr. Barnum’s name into our business.... By Jesus Christ,” he declared, “I don’t want any *circuising*.”²²⁴ (This was a stance recapitulated in the souvenir programme that would be produced for this new show.²²⁵)

MacKaye and Salsbury were attentive to the patriotic and historiographical demands of properly recreating the mythic world of the American frontier. Crucial, MacKaye believed, would be the vivification of history through the people who had made it. Even though the production would emphasize historical narrative, the action onstage would be the result of a kind of unself-conscious performance that could only be done justice through the use of “men and women preeminently fitted to illustrate in the most vivid and realistic manner, the life of a Continent.”²²⁶ The producers slowly settled on a narrative they entitled *The Drama of Civilization*, the features of which will be explored below. Except for a few brief restagings over a career lasting from 1882 until 1913, Madison Square Garden in the winter of 1886-1887 was only time and place when Buffalo Bill’s Wild West purported to dramatize a coherent history of the United States.

The West, by this time, had become a physical and profitable space, the exploitation of which was invested with mythic proportions. As the nation lurched westward, adding states, populating them, and focusing capitalist energies in the soil, minerals, and livestock, the West and its settlers seemed poised to overtake New England and its Puritans as the site of, and the archetypes for, national development. It was, in Alan Trachtenberg’s words, “a temporal site of the route from past to future, and the spatial site for revitalizing national energies.” Self could be tested in a patriotic struggle that grew the nation through mineral extraction, farming, cattle ranching, and a general

²²² Steele MacKaye to Nate Salsbury, October, 1886, quoted in MacKaye, *Epoch*, 80.

²²³ Steele MacKaye to William F. Cody and Nate Salsbury, date not given, MacKaye Family Papers, ML-5, Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College (hereafter, MFP), box 19, folder 6.

²²⁴ Steele MacKaye to Nate Salsbury, October, 1886, quoted in MacKaye, *Epoch*, 80. Emphasis in original. P. T. Barnum was, by 1886, a well known figure of American popular culture who, by his own very public admissions, believed “Amusement and deceit could coexist.” Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 62.

²²⁵ In his salutary, General Manager John Burke asserted, “the performance, whole in no wise partaking of the nature of a ‘circus,’ will be at once new, startling, and instructive.” John Burke, “Salutatory,” Programme (1886), MFP, box 220, folder 49.

²²⁶ Steele MacKaye to Nate Salsbury, n.d., MFP, box 19, folder 6.

“taming” of American space. Underlying all of this was a complex economic structure, built around the national and international commodities market, and generally undercutting the yeoman hope of the Homestead Act (1862), with its promise of 160 acres for \$10.

Ultimately, the effect was to knit the frontier of sturdy yeoman farmers into a national agricultural network necessitating complex forms of interaction and marketing, fostering a “cash crop” monoculture that attempted “to anticipate prices in commodity markets centered in distant cities here and abroad.”²²⁷ Western development had, by 1886, become a vexed proposition. President Cleveland, elected two years earlier on a platform of urban reform that abjured the dilemmas of the South, turned to the West to apply the same reformative zeal. In the words of Robert Kelley, he “stopped all land-office activity for a major investigation of fraudulent claims” and “castigated the great frauds that had taken place.” Cleveland lamented how “A beneficent system designed to create family farms... had been corrupted into a monstrous system of land monopoly. Cattle kings, land syndicates, railroads, and lumber barons had wrongfully appropriated incredible expanses of the national domain.” Millions were being invested in the Western Cattle Boom.²²⁸ In an age when western mineral wealth led to mushrooming cities, such as San Francisco and Denver, which seemed to disavow history in the rapidity of their growth (and whose infrastructural and social fragility would eventually be exposed by natural disasters and “urban explosions”),²²⁹ it is significant that Cody’s production stopped short of urban development. Consider the use of the stagecoach in his drama. As he later recalled, it evoked a life “before the railroad made the journey easy and pleasant.”²³⁰

The proclivity towards outsized, historical spectacle would have placed Cody and his colleagues in league with other theatrical producers of the era. Men like Imre and

²²⁷ Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, 17, 21-22. The Homestead Act itself was aimed at corporate expansion. Trachtenberg notes, “its clauses permitted land grabbing by speculative companies, and the eventual concentration of large tracts in private hands.... Rather than fostering a region of family farmers, the Homestead Act would prove instrumental in furthering the incorporation of Western lands in the Eastern industrial system.” *Ibid.*, 22. For a fine-grained analysis of the relationship between agricultural hinterland and industrial center, see William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991). For data on the nation’s movement West, see Howard Mumford Jones, *The Age of Energy: Varieties of American Experience, 1865-1915* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 5. Michael Kammen has written on the anxiety over the decline of the Puritan in the national imaginary: During 1886-87 a connected series of episodes in publishing, art, and politics revealed that the role of Puritanism and of traditions associated with it in American culture had reached a critical turning point. As if to herald this shift and the uncertainties that accompanied it, essays appeared in middlebrow journals of public opinion bearing such titles as “Does the Puritan Survive?” and, more prescient still, “From Puritanism—Whither?” Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 206.

²²⁸ Robert Kelley, *The Transatlantic Persuasion: The Liberal-Democratic Mind in the Age of Gladstone* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 326; Don Russell, “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show,” Don Russell Collection, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Series I:G, box 1, folder 1, p. 6.

²²⁹ Gunther Barth, *Instant Cities: Urbanization and the Rise of San Francisco and Denver* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), xxviii; Nick Yablon, *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of Urban Modernity, 1819-1919* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), ch. 5.

²³⁰ Cody, *Autobiography*, 316.

Bolossy Kiralfy and John Rettig had made their careers overseeing massive pageants whose titles evoked grand dramatic events in world and scriptural history. The last decades of the nineteenth century gave birth to “Nero and the Destruction of Rome,” “The Fall of Babylon,” “Montezuma and the Conquest of Mexico,” and “Moses, or the Bondage of Egypt.” Such productions featured “casts of hundreds... supported by almost as many animals, along with exotic music, dancing, and scenes of violence.” Indeed, “the popular theater in the last decades of the century catered increasingly to a taste for lifelike imitations that floated easily over the border between life and art,” including “everything from real food eaten on stage to horses used to enact battle scenes.”²³¹ With its emphasis on artifactual collection, an impulse extending to the cast, *The Drama of Civilization* put in play many of these elements.

But if its attention to bombast and its attempt to realize the full potential of theatrical realism resonated with other spectacles of the day, *The Drama of Civilization* also resembled a community pageant, which was also becoming something of a vogue during this period. In countless American cities, towns, and villages that were coping with the social and economic developments and dislocations of the Gilded Age, reenacting the story of a community, and simultaneously infusing that reenactment with the “public display of relics” that made “tangible the connection between the [community’s] past and present,” served as ballast for right living in the present by drawing from the past. As David Glassberg notes, community pageants “unfolded both as a sacred text chronicling the nation’s divine mission and as a practical guidebook of moral instruction to outline how local residents should behave in the present”:

Civic officials pile historical artifacts, narrative, and image upon image in antiquarian detail to bring the full weight of tradition to bear upon their neighbors, discharging what they felt was their sacred duty both to teach their beliefs and values to the public and to explain the present residents’ unique place in a succession of past and future residents who together constituted the historical community.²³²

Neither Cody nor MacKaye nor Salsbury alluded to the pageant movement, and its ethical imperatives in formulating their vision of *The Drama of Civilization*. But we may discern a sense of historical reenactment as communal ballast in Cody’s show, as well. This new incarnation of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West would “illustrate fully all the obstacles of the white man’s advance that exist in the wilderness.”²³³

The Garden was a hive of activity. The New York press assiduously tracked the preparations, especially in the *Times*. As early as November 14, the paper was promoting a distinct rupture from earlier incarnations:

The exhibition to be opened on Monday... will be entirely different in form from the Wild West Exhibition which proved so successful on Staten Island last Summer.... Everything will be done on a great scale, and it is expected that one of the most interesting and novel exhibitions ever seen in the vicinity will be the result.²³⁴

²³¹ Harris, *Humbug*, 245; Orvell, *Real Thing*, 34.

²³² Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, 15, 19.

²³³ Steele MacKaye to William F. Cody and Nate Salsbury, n.d., MFP, box 19, folder 6.

²³⁴ “Buffalo Bill’s New Show,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1886, p. 3.

Others noted the progress made in “altering the Garden for the purposes of the show.” Immensity was emphasized in these dispatches, which reported “20 assistants, painting the scenery” and twenty-one border lights (which were also “the longest ever made”), each comprising 240 gas jets.²³⁵ Stage designers worked at full tilt, painting cycloramic backdrops on canvas purchased “by the wagon load” and measuring forty feet tall by fifty wide: giant paintings of craggy mountains and California redwoods so vivid that witnesses described the painted crows on their branches as if they “took flight.”²³⁶ Outside, workers dug into 27th Street, cutting a swath through the concrete to allow them to tap into a nearby steam plant in order to power forty-six foot exhaust fans. Heaps of branches and leaves, collected earlier that autumn, were stockpiled.²³⁷ By November 20, Cody’s nephew, Edward Goodman, noted that, even with four days until the premier, “the scenery [*sic*] [was] not all done.” But Goodman was nevertheless confident that the production would come together. “They are rehearsing day & night,” he wrote his parents two days later, “and tings [*sic*] will be great when they get to running right.”²³⁸

Even as he orchestrated this massive scenic spectacle, MacKaye initiated a promotional blitzkrieg. After days spent overseeing scene-painting, trench-digging, and canvas-hanging, he devoted evenings to “circulating in the Clubs and enthusing the swells regarding this enterprise.” As early as November 8, he promised Salsbury that the “Grand Stand, in the first night will be ablaze with diamonds, shirt fronts, and low necked belles,” among who would be famous New Yorkers such as Fred Gould, J. O’Brien, and John Huey, who had requested boxes “for the season,” and the “Belmont Boys [who] were wild with enthusiasm over the whole scheme.”²³⁹ Greater New York was plastered with promotional materials. Newspaper advertisements promised a “building ablaze with novelty” that was nevertheless suitable for “Women and Children.”²⁴⁰

Even before the opening, the show’s producers made good on their promise of an intimate experience with the culture of a mythicized West. On November 17, in anticipation of the show’s premier the following week, MacKaye sent invitations to a coterie of New York society. “Dear Sirs,” it read,

The Chiefs of the Pawnees and the Cheyenne Tribes of Indians, with the Bravest bucks, will meet for the first time, off the war path, at the Madison Square Garden, Friday next, at 10:30 p.m.... These two tribes have always been hostile, and have never in their whole history made a treaty of peace. The traditions of their race forbids them to go into camp together, until they have gone through with the ancient aboriginal customs of the “*Nappay-obaloose-pappay*,” which means “*The Burial of the Hatchet*.”... As the ceremonies will take place here, at

²³⁵ “Work at Madison-Square Garden,” *New York Times*, November 17, 1886, p. 8.

²³⁶ MacKaye, *Epoch*, 83-84; (untitled photograph), Vincent Mercaldo Collection, McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, box 16, folder 3.

²³⁷ MacKaye, *Epoch*, 78-79; Lew Parker, *Odd People I Have Met* (self-published, 1903), 38-39, McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.

²³⁸ Edward Goodman to family, 20 November, 1886, box 26, folder 6, WFCC; Edward Goodman to parents, 22 November, 1886, box 26, folder 6, WFCC. See also MacKaye, *Epoch*, 79.

²³⁹ Steele MacKaye to Nathan Salsbury, 8 November, 1886, Nathan Salsbury Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, box 1, folder 4.

²⁴⁰ *New York Times*, 24 November, 1886.

the meeting of those tribes on Friday night, the Honorable W.F. Cody would be glad to offer you the opportunity of witnessing a spectacle so unique.²⁴¹

The meaning of this invitation is paradoxical: Buffalo Bill's Wild West would alter history (the two tribes "will meet for the first time, off the war path") by preserving it (the tribes' cooperation depended upon successfully performing the "*Nappay-obaloose-pappay*" ceremony). Cody was playing off contemporaneous ethnology, which imagined the Indian as ahistorical and always bound by ceremonial customs.²⁴² ("These two tribes have always been hostile," "The traditions of their race forbids them.") And yet, he premised change on the retention of folkways. The effort at the show's core, then, was an effort to preserve the authentic figurations of frontier vernacular; to initiate audiences into its practices and values; and to infuse the lavish production with a dose of naturalness.

Performances were given every evening at 8:15, and matinees were held on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays at 2. Ticket offices were set up in Brooklyn, Jersey City, and other locations in the greater Manhattan area.²⁴³ General admission was a quarter for the matinee, 50 cents for evening shows, with graded prices according to more desirable locations. (They could go as high as \$8.)²⁴⁴ This did not include the price of souvenirs and concessions. Expensive for its day—a workingman's average daily wage hovered between a dollar and a dollar-and-half²⁴⁵—the show catered to middle-class audiences. One paper described the presence of "statesmen, artists, military men, teachers, writers, musicians, businessmen, politicians, artizans [*sic*], mechanics, and others who desire to know as much as possible about the history of their country."²⁴⁶ Indeed, spectatorship promoted a communal experience, given its stamp of approval by one's neighbors and society's leaders. The souvenir programme explained "WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT THE WILD WEST": "OVER ONE MILLION people have set you the example," because "You will see YOUR NEIGHBOR there in full force," and because "You will see an Exhibition that has been witnessed and endorsed by—PRESIDENT ARTHUR AND CABINET; GEN. SHERIDAN AND STAFF; GENERALS SHERMAN, CROOK, MLES, CARR & C.... And tens of thousands of well-informed people in EVERY WALK OF LIFE."²⁴⁷

The pageant unfolded across four "epochs." The first, the "Primeval Forest," presented a sublime vision of wild America. "[H]appy moonlight effects" played upon live deer, elk, and bears gathered at a spring, only to disperse under a volley of arrows. At this point, the sun rose on Sioux and Cheyenne warriors whose attempts at "hold[ing] a pow-wow and mak[ing] peace" soon degenerated into "a rough-and-tumble-massacre."²⁴⁸

²⁴¹ Quoted in MacKaye, *Epoch*, 82-83.

²⁴² Steven Conn, *History's Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004). For the larger theoretical implications of framing cultures as ahistorical, especially within the development of the anthropological profession, see Johannes Fabian, *Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

²⁴³ "Still Attracting Crowds," *New York Times*, 23 January, 1887, p. 14.

²⁴⁴ Program (1886), James Wojtowicz Collection, McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming, box 13, n.f.

²⁴⁵ Paul Redding, *Wild West Shows* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 65.

²⁴⁶ *Brick Pomeroy's Democrat*, quoted in Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America*, 280.

²⁴⁷ "Programme," Programme, MFP.

²⁴⁸ "Buffalo Bill in Drama," *New York Times*, 25 November, 1886, p. 5.

This was followed by an ethnographic *entre-act*, “Representations of Indian Life. Their Manners, Customs, and Dances,” and “Fancy Rifle Shooting” by female cast-member Lillian Smith.²⁴⁹ The drama then turned to the second epoch, “The Prairie.” A buffalo hunt cleared the land for an emigrant train. The relationship between death and society was solidified with a domestic tableau of supper and bedding down. Yet nature was not subdued, as a pleasant scene of family and community was overtaken by anarchic nature. The *New York Times* described the culmination of this epoch in breathless language: “a sea of rushing fire—the stampede—deer, buffalo, mustangs, Indians, and emigrants—all fleeing together.”²⁵⁰ Following this was a return to order in an interlude entitled, “Cowboys’ Fun,” whose rodeo-like features of riding bucking horses and steers promised a re-mastering of wild nature through physical striving and brutality. The third epoch, the “Cattle Ranch,” resumed the previous interlude’s trope of mastery, as cowboys rode mustangs and lassoed steer, while also carrying forward the narrative of development, in this case the formation of commodities markets and trade networks implied by the evocation of the cattle industry, rather than the subsistence farming of “The Prairie.” Yet as with the conclusion of “The Prairie,” mastery and sophistication were interrupted by “the curdling war whoop of the Comanches and Kiowas.” The tribes menaced the men and women of the ranch until, “Just at the most exciting point of the massacre, a group of cowboys arrive[d],” quickly dispatching the Indians.²⁵¹ This was concluded with trick-shooting by both Annie Oakley, by then famous for her work in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,²⁵² and Cody himself. Finally came the “Mining Camp,” which provided an even

²⁴⁹ “Programme,” Program, MFP.

²⁵⁰ “Buffalo Bill in Drama,” *New York Times*.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² Similarly, no loose women inhabited Cody’s recreation of frontier towns, and the most visible female in his Wild West was the petite sharpshooter, Annie Oakley. Persuasive scholarship has been done on the semiotics of Oakley’s performance, where she shot, among other things, playing cards and cigarettes held by her husband. Warren finds in “the combination of her targets... a symbolic male profligacy which she restrained with her firearm.” And Sarah Blackstone asserts, “The basis of her act, or message to the audience, became one of normalcy and domesticity because of this choice [of having her husband and pet dog as assistants]. It then became reasonable for Annie to choose a costume that accentuated her role as the woman in her family; hence, she never wore trousers as part of the act.” A photo from New York, 1886, shows a petite young woman in Stetson hat and pleated skirt. Her hair is long. She is composed in her aim. True to form, footage from 1894 shows a dainty, long-skirted woman, being escorted onstage by a man. The entrance has all the elegance of ballroom dance. Her husband stands a distance away, holding a playing card. He doesn’t flinch while his wife carefully aims at and hits her target. Warren, *Buffalo Bill’s America*, 248; Blackstone, *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business*, 105; photo from Reprinted in James W. Wojtowicz, *The W.F. Cody Buffalo Bill Collector’s Guide with Values* (Paducah, Kentucky: Collector Books, 1998), 64; video from “Annie Oakley” (1894), *More Treasures from American Film Archives, 1894-1931: 50 Films*, Courtesy of the National Film Preservation Foundation, Image Entertainment, 2004. Oakley’s performance has provided fodder for much critical scholarship. See Warren, *Buffalo Bill’s America*, 248; Blackstone, *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business*, 105; Tracy C. Davis, “Shotgun Wedlock: Annie Oakley’s Power Politics in the Wild West,” in *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, ed. Laurence Solenick (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1992), 142. Oakley would strike a more ambivalent pose offstage, alternately claiming at points in her life that “Nature never intended that [women] should learn to box” and offering

more sensational vision of frontier life. The domestic tableau of “The Prairie,” and even the mastery of “The Cattle Ranch” devolved into a chaotic mélange. Gunfights and bandits bedevil the scene as forces of law and order constantly vie with disorder. *The Drama of Civilization* culminated in a fatalist recognition of nature’s caprices; namely, “the terrific destruction of the camp by a cyclone.”²⁵³ According to one witness, this last feature, the most technically complicated and sensational of the many features onstage, sent “a gale of wind... with a velocity of 60 miles an hour, and with a roar as if 100 buildings had simultaneously crashed to the ground.”²⁵⁴

An average of 15,000 people daily²⁵⁵ saw this spectacle. The public steadily “thronged” the Garden, giving their “appreciative applause” along with the fifty cents. As the final performance loomed, “hundreds, and on some days thousands, of people have been turned from the doors.”²⁵⁶ Fawning letters of congratulation poured in from officers whose own experiences in the West’s martial conflicts seemed to give them special authority to point out the exhibition’s verisimilitude. Brevet-Major General James B. Fry, former “Adjutant-General of the Division of the Missouri, under General Sheridan” wrote Cody on December 28, 1886, “I take pleasure in observing your success in depicting in the East the early life of the West.” On January 7, 1887, Brigadier-General George Crook wrote Cody that the Wild West was “the most realistic performance of the kind I have seen.” And on February 14 of the same year, from the headquarters of the 7th Cavalry at Fort Mead, in the Dakota Territory, Col. James W. Forsyth proclaimed, “MY DEAR SIR—Your army career on the frontier, and your present enterprise of depicting scenes in the Far West, are so enthusiastically approved and commended by the American people and the most prominent men of the U.S. Army, that there is nothing left for me to say.”²⁵⁷

President McKinley “a Company of fifty lady sharpshooters” if the Army needed assistance in Cuba. “A Physical Culture Talk,” *New York Tribune*, n.d., BBMOF; Oakley to President McKinley, 5 April, 1898, BBMOF.

²⁵³ “Buffalo Bill in Drama,” *New York Times*.

²⁵⁴ “Buffalo Bill’s Drama,” *New York Times*, 28 November, 1886. By the third evening of performances, the *Times* was assuring potential audiences, “The long waits and hitches in the programme that could not be very well avoid the first night are things of the past. The performance now runs along rapidly and smoothly.” The “ponderous machinery” that comprised the cyclone was “in perfect trim.” Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Steve Friesen, *Buffalo Bill: Scout, Showman, Visionary* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, Inc., 2010), 61.

²⁵⁶ “Madison-Square Garden Thronged,” *New York Times*, 28 November, 1886, p.14; “Buffalo Bill’s Near Farewell,” *New York Times*, 13 February, 1887, p. 4; “The Wild West Show,” *New York Times*, 20 February, 1887, p.3.

²⁵⁷ James B. Fry to Cody, 28 December, 1886; George Cook to Cody, 7 January, 1887; James W. Forsyth to Cody, 14 February, 1886. All in Jay Kimmel, *Custer, Cody & the Last Indian Wars: A Pictorial History* (Portland, O: Corey/Stevens Publishing Inc., 1994), 115-116. Not all veterans of the West agreed. John “Captain Jack” Crawford, a former cowboy and former actor in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, was so unnerved by what he believed were the more melodramatic representations of frontier life that he made it his life’s mission to debunk Cody’s claims to veracity. The result was a series of treacly, pious poetry and a scathing communiqué between the two former colleagues. See Captain Jack Crawford Collection, McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, esp. Jack Crawford to Capt. Charles King, 2 March, 1891, Captain Jack Crawford Collection, McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, box 3,

But what had audiences seen? Now that we know of what, exactly, *The Drama of Civilization* consisted, I want to situate its narrative within contemporaneous ideas of the frontier as epicenter of American history and myth. In the most obvious sense, *The Drama of Civilization* was about progress. The teleological thrust of this new production, as it transitioned from “primitive” to “settled” society, would have been familiar to audiences, for whom an evolutionary vision of historical narrative was considered inevitable, especially the “historical and scientific inevitability” of western expansion.²⁵⁸ The frontier had, by 1886, long existed in national discourse as the fulfillment of a national destiny. The earliest English migration to America was envisioned as “continuing a movement of civilization that had been continuous since the earliest times,” so that “[c]ivilization appeared to be passing from Asia Minor to Greece, to Rome, to England, and across the Atlantic to the New World.” But since the American Revolution, the West had become a uniquely patriotic preoccupation, “a visible sign of the success of free republican institutions.”²⁵⁹

It was also a regenerative space. In the industrial age, the West was imaged as a “safety valve,” a technological metaphor implying that the conflicts between Capital and Labor could be resolved by recourse towards self-making yeomanry: America’s excess working population would always have a route of escape for remaking themselves through independent labor. This was a belief developed seven years later by historian Frederick Jackson Turner and his vision of the “composite American” shaped by nature.²⁶⁰ But rather than imagining the West as a marginal space for siphoning off the nation’s excess population, *The Drama of Civilization* imagined how the story of frontier

folder 6; Jack Crawford to Cody, 21 October, 1894, Captain Jack Crawford Collection, McCracken Research Library, box 2, folder 4.

²⁵⁸ Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 6. For progress as inevitability in the Gilded Age, see Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) and *History’s Shadow*; Dorothy Ross, “Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty,” *The American Historical Review* 100:3 (June, 1995), 651-677; Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, ch. 5; and Warren, *Buffalo Bill’s America*, 277-278. Warren, I argue, places too much emphasis on *The Drama of Civilization*’s culmination than its process. See also Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, 33: Slotkin has asserted in relation to the larger mythos of the American West, “Progress itself was to be asserted as a positive good against the aristocratic and peasant traditions that emphasized stasis and permanence in productive techniques and social relations.... Individualistic assertiveness and achievement were to be justified as values in themselves, and reconciled with the traditional claims of corporate solidarity and deference. Social bonds were to be redefined with free contract replacing customary fealties, and social standards varying according to achievement as well as birth.”

²⁵⁹ Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 83, 85.

²⁶⁰ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 188; Ellen Von Nardroff, “American Frontier as a Safety Valve—The Life, Death, Reincarnation, and Justification of a Theory,” *Agricultural History* 36:3 (July, 1962), 123-142; Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008); Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, 16, 24; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Davy Crocket as Trickster: Pornography, Liminality, and Symbolic Inversion in Victorian America,” *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 95.

development—rather than frontier *expansion*—could provide a national history. Its very title made the work of the pioneer crucial, rather than a transitional phase to be succeeded by the forces of “settled” society.

Audiences, no doubt, would have been accustomed to scenes of western development in such popular images as F. F. Palmer’s painting, *Across the Continent—“Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way”* (1868), reprinted in lithographic form by Currier & Ives. Anticipating the next year’s completion of the trans-continental railroad, the painting centers around a locomotive, its windows evincing crowded cars, as it cuts through the middle of the image, jutting at a 45-degree angle towards the painting’s top half, a pristine landscape. The locomotive divides Native American wilderness, on our bottom right, with Anglo American society, on our bottom left. The locomotive stops short two Indians on horseback as the watch white civilization is at work in its varied configurations. Men till the land, children attend a “Public School,” community members congregate in public spaces. As if to underscore the patriotic connotations of the locomotive doing its work of expansion, a wagon train precedes it. Tiny in the distance, and similarly set at a 45-degree angle, it is a mythic figuration of expansion, spearheading progress. The painting pays homage to the past as much as it foretells the future. Indeed, machinery does not erupt into the frontier so much as it represents a natural progression.

The flat, empty land towards which the locomotive shoots in Palmer’s painting; the quaint, sentimental, and peaceful settlement it passes through; and the Indians who “literally eat its dust”²⁶¹ all promise a vision of western expansion untroubled by racial warfare or natural danger. *The Drama of Civilization*, by contrast, was as concerned with salvaging rough frontier living as it was with “progress.” On the one hand, the story told in the show must have been a practical intervention, its heady danger alluring to urban audiences. On the other, the show was attuned to the folksy qualities of that life that resisted easy incorporation into the corporate structures and mechanized methods then marking the life of a western miner.²⁶² Audiences watched, as in the “Mining Camp,” a life of simple pleasure: “The ‘Wild West’ Tavern,” “The holiday,” and “Feats of Jumping by MUSTANG JACK” according to the show’s schedule of events.²⁶³ Actors were instructed not only in their parts, but also in how to properly ape the conventions of everyday life on the frontier. Steel MacKaye, for instance, had “tried to get [one actor] to look as if he were lying when he was telling stories.”²⁶⁴ There was an intimacy and an attention to the colloquial. An “Indian Courier” related a tale in “wonderful sign language.” Cowboy actors at the “Mining Camp” patronized a “‘Wild West’ Tavern” and exclaimed, “Oh! what a good drink” and “Pass it around.”²⁶⁵ Indeed, the progressive narrative at the show’s core was really a loose pastiche of daily activities, some more mundane than others, but all essential to the panoramic vision of an American West rooted in everyday experiences of life, labor, and struggle in the soil.

²⁶¹ John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), 178.

²⁶² Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, 25.

²⁶³ “Programme,” Programme, MFP.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*; MacKaye, *Epoch*, 84.

²⁶⁵ “Programme,” “Program,” MFP.

With the New Year, “Standing Room Only” signs were frequently posted on the Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday matinee shows.²⁶⁶ Cody, MacKaye, and Salsbury only increased the show’s allure by adding a new “epoch,” advertised in the *New York Times* in a proto-modernist design that, in its playful spatialization, prefigures e.e. cummings’s 1920 tribute to Cody. The advertisement read:

BUFFALO BILL’S

WILD WEST

W. F. Cody and Nate Salsbury, Proprietors and Managers

Battle of the

Little Big Horn,

Custer’s Last Rally.²⁶⁷

The tableaux of earlier “epochs” evoked Far Western life while being devoid of any geographic or historical markers more specific than cañons or valleys. (The best a reviewer could do was to venture a guess: “The fourth ‘epoch’ is devoted to the incidents of a mining camp—presumably in Colorado.”²⁶⁸) The very fact of this new scene, though, sited the action in Montana Territory in 1876, and retold a by-then-familiar event in America’s recent past.

Cody had long anticipated that his “Battle of the Little Big Horn” epoch would be the apex of his show’s sensational and patriotic associations,²⁶⁹ an abundance of humanity and sentimentality, with a bewigged Buffalo Bill portraying the ill-fated General. As the *Times* described it,

In the first scene is shown the camp of the troops commanded by Gen. Custer. The troops and scouts march out of camp. One of the scouts discovers the Sioux village. Sitting Bull and his warriors are apparently engaged in the innocent pastime of prairie life. The scout retires and informs Custer that the enemy is at hand and in fair condition to be wiped off the face of the earth. The sound of a bugle is heard. The Indians instantly prepare an ambush. Custer and his men dash into the open space from the Madison—avenue end of the Garden. The bugler

²⁶⁶ “Buffalo Bill as Gen. Custer,” *New York Times*, 2 January, 1887.

²⁶⁷ *New York Times*, 10 January, 1887, p. 7. cummings’s poem reads,

Buffalo Bill’s
defunct

who used to ride a watersmooth-silver
stallion

and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlike that

Jesus

he was a handsome man

and what i want to know is

how you do you like your blueeyed boy

Mister Death.

[“Buffalo Bill’s”], e. e. cummings, *Selected Poems* (New York: Liveright, 1994), 57. Joy Kasson provides a cogent analysis of cummings’s poem as it relates to Cody’s unique brand of celebrity in *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*, 272-273.

²⁶⁸ “Buffalo Bill in Drama,” *New York Times*.

²⁶⁹ “Buffalo Bill as Gen. Custer,” *New York Times*.

sounds the charge. Custer waves his sword, puts spurs to his charge, and, followed by his men, rides down and up the Indian village like a cyclone. Instantly the troops are surrounded by whooping Indians, and “a terrific hand-to-hand combat” ensues. In an extremely short space of time the Indians find [sic] a complete victory. Custer is the last man killed, and he dies after performing prodigies of valor. Then the surviving red men indulge in a war hop and a shrieking match and the curtain falls to slow music.²⁷⁰

Vivid, violent, and melodramatic, Cody’s dramatization of the Battle of Little Big Horn provided a paradoxical appraisal of expansion. On the one hand, this reviewer noted Custer’s genocidal ambitions. The “enemy” was espied and judged “in fair condition to be wiped off the face of the earth.” Indeed, these ambitions are placed in stark contrast to “Sitting Bull and his warrior... apparently engaged in the innocent pastime of prairie life.” At the same time, the scene recuperated Custer’s legacy from naysayers, including President Grant, who in 1876 “publicly claimed that Custer had unnecessarily sacrificed his battalion.”²⁷¹ Not the reckless, solemn, erratic commander of popular condemnation, he is here seen “performing prodigies of valor.” The “settlement” of the West remains a dangerous, sometimes unfair, task that opens up its own opportunities for the expression of a rugged masculinity.

Much like Cody, Gen. George Armstrong Custer epitomized, by 1886, the ambivalence at the heart of western expansion: between celebrating what the West

²⁷⁰ “Custer’s Fate Illustrated,” *New York Times*, 4 January, 1887. “Battle of the Little Big Horn” would recur throughout the career of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,” often as part of the *mélange* of reenactments of recent historical events, such as the charging of San Juan Hill and the Boxer Rebellion. In its later incarnations, though, “Battle of the Little Big Horn” became a moment for Cody’s own self-aggrandizing. In 1897, for instance, it acquired a maudlin denouement with Buffalo Bill playing *himself* and “gallop[ing] into the arena at the head of his cowboy band, react[ing] to the battlefield scene, and doff[ing] his hat in respect for the dead. At this point he would be picked up by a spotlight, the arena lights would be lowered, and a projection of the words ‘Too Late!’ would be flashed on a screen behind him.” Blackstone, *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business*, 20. Blackstone errs in ascribing this scene to *The Drama of Civilization*, though. Her image of a postmodern Custer’s Last Stand first appears as follows: “To this already ambitious program [*The Drama of Civilization*] a fifth Epoch was added: the reenactment of Custer’s Last Stand, complete with a cyclorama painting of the valley of the Little Big Horn. It is not clear if this even was a part of the original plan or not, because it was not included in the early performances. But later reviews talk of little else.” *Ibid.*, 20. Blackstone then relates the preceding scene. The errors in her telling are two-fold. First, a quick survey of reviews of this fifth “epoch” in 1887 makes no mention of a somber Cody doffing his hat under a message of “Too Late!” (One would think that this would be noteworthy in otherwise-detailed reviews.) Second, it is clear that even before the late-November debut, Cody was preparing for this “epoch,” and even invited Custer’s widow to oversee the details as early as late-October, 1886. In an interview he gave during a brief visit to a family member in La Crosse, Wisconsin, in the period between the Staten Island and Madison Square Garden performances, Cody promised that he would “give a historical representation of the battle of the Big Horn [sic].” “Grandest of Amusement Schemes,” *Republican and Leader*, BBMOF.

²⁷¹ Nathaniel Philbrick, *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Big Horn* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 302. See also, Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 42-44; and Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 180.

offered by way of masculine physical expression that seemed threatened by modern, urban life, and using one's power to transform the land into a site of white settlement.²⁷² The scene's faithfulness to death and destruction, its martyrdom of white manhood (Custer's valor is offset by "the surviving red men indulg[ing] in a war hop and a shrieking match"), told a story of valiant struggle against imminent death and destruction. It provided an index for how to face life's trials heroically, even if the task itself was written over with brutality. In an era given over to the sentimentality of wartime death, the valorization of Custer's demise would not have been surprising, and may even have provided a familiar frisson.²⁷³

Character Making

Reviews provide a window into the subjective experience of attending *The Drama of Civilization* and the ways in which it could allow critics to try on the guise of a frontiersman, or at least imagine an expertise born of experience with "the real thing." Critics, though, were a world away from the regenerative effects of that life. To imagine what *this* looked like, they turned to Buffalo Bill. Despite the show's progressive vision of western expansion, middle- and upper-middle-class Americans were, by 1886, accustomed to consuming the American West as antidote. In *Roughing It* (1872), Mark Twain wrote gleefully of his days as a silver and gold prospector, dreaming "all night about Indians, deserts, and silver bars." Even as he wrote, he was "thrill[ed]... through and through to think of the life, the gladness and the wild sense of freedom that used to make the blood dance in my veins on those fine overland mornings."²⁷⁴ Contemporaneously, Dr. George Miller Beard, in *American Nervousness* (1881) purported to account for the elite's modern anxieties (preoccupation with work and time, a lack of social cohesion, stress, and modern technologies) with his theory of neurasthenia, the nervous disease of well-heeled Americans for whom modern technology and managerial work seemed to produce physical and mental enervation rather than perfection. As T. J. Jackson Lears has shown, the neurasthenia *Zeitgeist* produced a range of antimodernist activity that sought real "experience."²⁷⁵ Twain's and

²⁷² Takaki, *Iron Cages*, 180. Furthermore, as Jackson Lears reminds us, "Custer would not have been anywhere near the Black Hills had it not been for the Northern Pacific Railroad, which managed to persuade the Grant administration to provide U.S. Army protection for its surveying expedition along the Yellowstone River in 1873." Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 42. Compellingly, then, even as modern technology becomes the reason for self-destruction, it also sets the stage for self-making in the form of mythologization, much as it did for Cody, hunting buffalo for the Kansas-Pacific Railroad.

²⁷³ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008); and Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

²⁷⁴ Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959 [1872]), 20, 48.

²⁷⁵ Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 4; T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Beard's late-Victorian elite turned to the West as the necessary regenerative counterpoint to modern life.

The Drama of Civilization was not interested in the hard life of the West as regenerative antidote, nor as demographic and personal "safety valve," but as historical motif. In physical descriptions, Cody seemed to literally embody the salubrious effects of a history of struggle and labor on the frontier. Cody underscored his actions in the West within a narrative of development. His *nom de guerre* evoked the hard and bloody work that underpinned progress: his quarry fed workers laying the rail for the Kansas-Pacific line. But progress was an ambivalent proposition. In his *Autobiography*, he pointed up the distinct advantages of a difficult personal history in laying the foundations for successful adulthood:

Many and many a time I have driven myself beyond what I believed was the point of physical endurance, only to find that I was ready for still further effort if the need should arise. The fact that I continued in rugged health during all the time I was on the Plains, and have had little illness throughout my life, seems to prove that living and working outdoors, despite its hardships, is far better for a man than any sedentary occupation could possibly be.²⁷⁶

But in the grand narrative of American expansion spun by *The Drama of Civilization*, Cody's difficult childhood underpinned the true labor of nation-building. A brief biography in the show's programme situated Cody at ground zero for the patriotic project of western expansion: Army Scout, buffalo hunter, "Indian fighter." The raw political wounds of "Bleeding Kansas," the bloody environment into which Cody was born, do not invoke the sectional conflict over the linked questions of free labor, popular sovereignty, and slavery. Rather, they merit attention insofar as they become part of a generalized frontier milieu of self-making amidst struggle. Cody's

youth was passed amid all the excitements and turmoil incident to the strife and discord of that unsettled community, where the embers of political contention smouldered [*sic*] until they burst in to the burning flame of civil war. This state of affairs among the white occupants of the territory, and the ingrained ferocity and hostility to encroachment from the native savage, created an atmosphere of adventure well calculated to educate one of his natural temperament to a familiarity with danger and self-reliance.... [He was] a child of the plains, who was raised there.... By the accident of birth and early association, a man who became insensibly inured to the hardships and dangers of primitive existence and possessed of those qualities that afterward enabled him to hold positions of trust and without his knowing or intending it, made him nationally famous.

The sketch is attuned not just to adventures, but also to a process of becoming, of being "educate[d]" and "inured" by exposure. Those lessons could only be learned through hard living on the Plains.²⁷⁷ Cody was capable of fulfilling his duty only because of his familiarity and fluency with the landscape. Like all good Scouts, he was "a thorough student of nature, a self-taught weather prophet, a geologist by experience, an astronomer by necessity." Such was the acquired knowledge of lived experience.

²⁷⁶ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 46; Cody, *Autobiography*, 286, 279.

²⁷⁷ "Hon. W. F. Cody—'Buffalo Bill,'" Programme, MFP.

The results were borne out in a striking physical presence: “Young, sturdy, a remarkable specimen of manly beauty, with the brain to conceive and the nerve to execute, Buffalo Bill *par excellence* is the exemplar of the strong and unique traits that characterize a true American frontiersman.”²⁷⁸ Critics were equally attentive to Cody’s physical presence. As his troupe was going through its rehearsals for *The Drama of Civilization*, Cody paid a visit to his friend, a Dr. Powell (the White Beaver of White Beaver’s Cough Cream), in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The local paper described Cody as a man who “converses in the same plain, straightforward, firm manner, every sentence clean cut and every statement backed by that earnest expression... that carries with it a charm of interest and the logic of security.”²⁷⁹

The belief in properly harnessing the lessons of the past to a profitable present was one that had purchase in American intellectual culture during this time. Ralph Waldo Emerson, before the Civil War, and developmental psychologist G. Stanley Hall, in the early twentieth century, bracketed the quest to be both “manly” and “civilized.”²⁸⁰ Indeed, Cody’s constant recourse towards his past tacks with Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” (1839), when he announced,

The force of character is cumulative. All the foregone days of virtue work their health into this. What makes the majesty of the heroes of the senate and the field, which so fills the imagination? The consciousness of a train of great days and victories behind. They shed a unique light on the advancing actor.... Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ “Grandest of Amusement Scheme,” *Republic and Leader*. In researching Cody, one finds a long tradition of admiration. His striking physical presence remained a leitmotif among friends and colleagues. “I spent the time noticing that he was tall and straight and strong, that his hair was jet black, his features firmly molded, and his eyes clear and sharp....” recalled his wife, Louisa, of their first meeting. “And he was handsome, about the most handsome man I ever had seen!... Clean-shaven, the ruddiness of health glowing in his cheeks; graceful, lithe, smooth in his movements and in his modulation of his speech.” Appearing in her *Memories of Buffalo Bill* (1919), Louisa provided the capstone on a half-century’s worth of Codyphilia, where authors and journalists lavished attention on his height, carriage, hair, and a general aura that might have just as easily belonged to a banker as a cowboy. Such adulation extended to theater reviews, promotional lithographs, phrenological studies, and, in a lapse in artistic rigor, Mark Twain’s attempts to speak as Buffalo Bill’s horse. Cody and Cooper, *Memories of Buffalo Bill*, 5-6; “Ned Buntline and His Scouts,” *Hartford Times*, 24 February, 1872, p. 2; “Anthropologist,” “Col. W.F. Cody,” n.t., 18 August, 1904, William Frederick Cody Scrapbook, McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, reel #2; Mark Twain, “A Horse’s Tale: A Story in Two Parts: Part I,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* 113: 675 (August, 1906), 327.

²⁸⁰ For Emerson, “the wise workman will not regret the poverty or the solitude which brought out his working talents.” It was, he averred, “a fatal disadvantage to be cockered, and to eat too much cake.” Hall, Gail Bederman explains, believed that Anglo-Saxon children possessed the same characteristics as “primitive” adults. Therefore, “By fully reliving their ancestors’ vibrant passions, Hall suggested, little boys could incorporate a primitive’s emotional strength into their adult personalities.” Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, 89; Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 95.

Emerson emphasized the “transcendent destiny”²⁸¹ of his history, which looked backwards only to look forwards towards the heroic self.

In the 1880s and 1890s, this vision of self-making promoted an “ideology of individual material achievement,” the valorization of a Social Darwinist vision of society borne of an exploitative industrial economy. That same animalistic conflict, the struggle of self against harsh nature, could be embodied in the character of Buffalo Bill. Yet it was deeply interwoven with national expansion, the fulfillment of an American teleology that had been labeled, in 1845, “manifest destiny.”²⁸² The fighting, struggling self in a fearsome world became not financially remunerative, but patriotic. When Cody was rendered as buckskin-clad frontiersman, as he was on the cover of the souvenir programme, it presaged greater things. In profile, and on horseback, pulling the horse’s reins tightly and with his long hair flowing, Cody is depicted on a grassy hill, overlooking flat, grassy plains and snow-capped mountains beyond. He skirts the image of wildness in this portrait: His buckskin matched that of his tanned skin, his rifle juts priapically upward in a 45-degree angle. Yet in the distance, a wagon train wends its way in his direction, promising not less civilization, but more.²⁸³

During his time at Madison Square Garden, Cody was presented as the nexus of character-building past and present-day success. In private, he frequented the exclusive Hoffman House hotel on Broadway. While making his cast sleep in campgrounds in the Garden, he took up residence at the elite “haunt of prominent actors and wealthy businessmen,” equally well known as the home of French painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau’s scandalous *Nymphs and Satyr* (1873). In a later lithograph of Hoffman House, Cody would be pictured among a coterie of Gilded Age celebrities, including Chauncey Depew and Grover Cleveland.²⁸⁴ In public, though, he recalibrated the very meaning of success. In one famous portrait of Cody, plastered around Manhattan in 1886, the impresario was depicted in a natty brown suit and ascot and set against a mustard yellow backdrop: dark, earthy tones that recall soil, forest, and scrub. His tie-pin is in the shape of a buffalo’s head, as is his goatee, with its moustache fanning out like horns and its long, bushy chin beard. His hair and goatee are long, but kempt. Below is the title, “Hon. W. F. Cody. Buffalo Bill.” Half-naked Indians cavort and scheme in the top corners.²⁸⁵ The juxtaposition between Cody’s portraiture and the Indians’ depiction in

²⁸¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 176.

²⁸² The term came from John O’Sullivan, editor of the *Democratic Review*, when he criticized Mexico “for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” John O’Sullivan, *Democratic Review* 17 (July-August, 1845), quoted in Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 219.

²⁸³ Louis Warren writes, “To sit ‘like a centaur’ was a socially respectable aspiration in the nineteenth century, suggesting a command over animals and manly bearing in the saddle, and comparisons of riders to centaurs was a ubiquitous cliché.” Warren, *Buffalo Bill’s America*, 224.

²⁸⁴ Moses King, *King’s Handbook of New York City: An Outline History and Description of the American Metropolis with Over Eight Hundred Illustrations from Photographs Made Expressly for this Work* (Boston: Moses King, n.d.), 364, in BBMOF. One other cast member took up residence elsewhere: Arizona Jack Burke, who roomed at Joe Schmitt’s. “Camp Life in Town.” *New York Sun*, 12 December, 1886, WFCP;

²⁸⁵ *100 Posters of Buffalo Bill*, ed. Jack Rennert (New York: Darien House, 1976), 25.

media res, between his formal attire and its animalistic resonances, establishes an image of a self-made man who remains a palimpsest of his past experiences—buffalo hunting, Indian fighting, outdoor living. Nor is struggle ever truly concluded, as the miniature Indians, in feathered headdresses and carrying bows and quivers of arrows embody ever-present danger. Cody thus functioned as a symbol of integration and progress rather than a safety valve. His show promoted the advancement of Anglo American settlement, not retreat from it, and western experience as the crucible for personal and communal development. Furthermore, it was ushered in by a respectable and gentlemanly Westerner whose show rested on drawing from the precedents of the past, both his own autobiography and a larger national lineage.

Indeed, even if the message of progress were familiar, what made its heroes so heroic remained unfamiliar. As the opening lines of General Manager John Burke's "Salutary" asserted in the program,

There is probably no field in modern American history more fascinating in the intensity of its interest than that which is presented on our rapidly expanding frontier. The pressure of the white man, the movement of the emigrant train, and the extension of our railways, together with the military power of the General Government, have, in a measure, broken down the barriers behind which the Indian fought and defied the advance of civilization; but the West, in many places, is still a scene of wildness, where the sternness of law is upheld at the pistol point, and the white savage and outlaw have become scarcely less dangerous than his red-skinned predecessor.

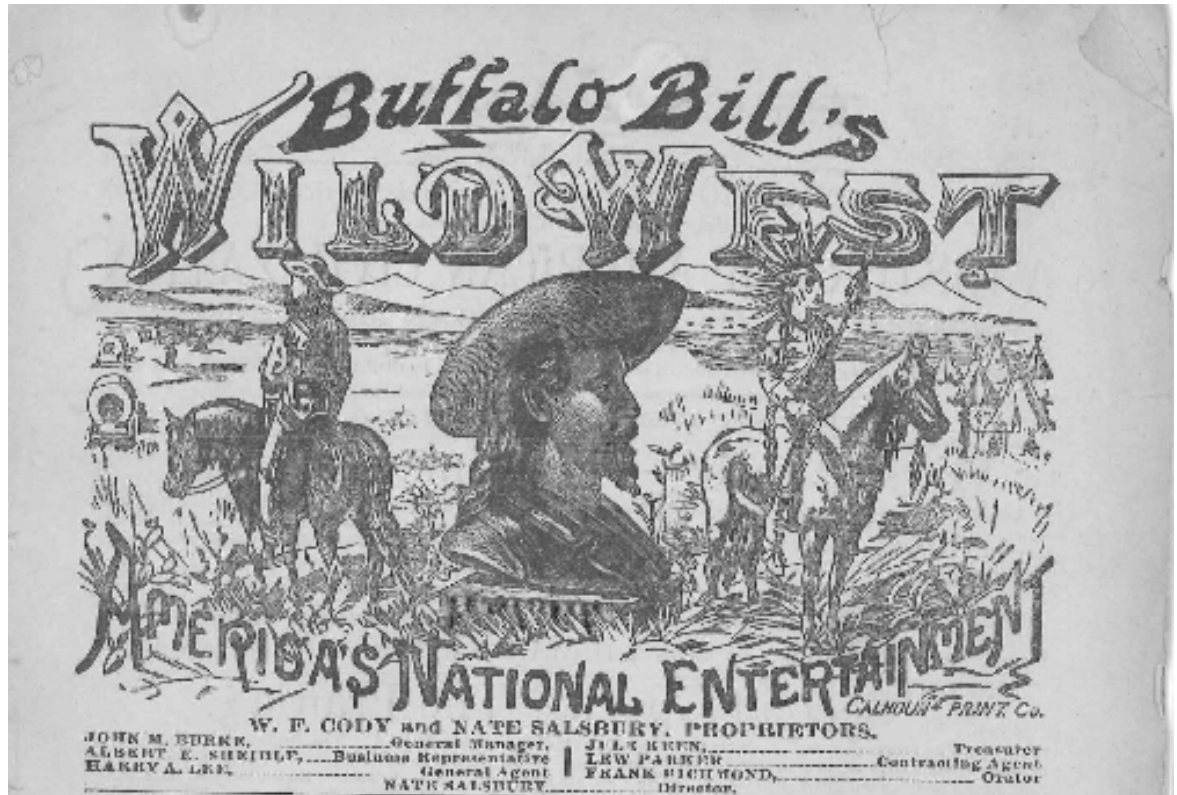
The white lawkeepers, Burke continued—people like Kit Carson, Wild Bill, Texas Jack, and Cody—should be divested of "the halo of heroism" which glowed atop them. Rather, they were great because of "their usefulness and valor." They heralded a patriotic expansion, but they could only do so by channeling personal histories on the frontier that had uniquely shaped them to the task of settlement. They were, "Keen of eye, sturdy in build, inured to hardship, experienced in the knowledge of Indian habits and language, familiar with the hunt, and trustworthy in the hour of extremest danger, they belong to a class that is rapidly disappearing from our country."²⁸⁶

The vexed nature of progress was underscored in a tableau printed above the programme's cast list. Below the words "Buffalo Bill's / Wild West"—the latter half drawn to look like it was carved from wood—are two distinct frontier figurations that will come into conflict over the course of the drama. The first, on our left, depicts an emigrant wagon train approaching a pioneer on horseback. The man's back is to us, as he turns to face the newcomers. It is for them that he has blazed a trail. But he watches their approach—an approach he himself has, in the mythic formulation of Buffalo Bill's drama, made possible. The second vignette, to our right, depicts a Plains warrior with feathered headdress and bow and arrow, on horseback. Beyond him is a tepee village. Straight-backed and regally adorned, the Indian warrior represents a mythic figure soon to be displaced by the emigrants. Between the two vignettes is a bust of a young Cody in Stetson hat and buck-skin coat. Drawn in profile, Cody's portrait looks as though it

²⁸⁶ Burke, "Salutary," Programme, MFP. Cf. Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, 64: The archetypal "hunter-heroes—who later came to include Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, and Buffalo—are solitary plebeian adventurers who are the advance guard of civilization—which is to say, of bourgeois democracy in the American mode."

belongs on coinage. Importantly, Cody does not face the scene of westward migration, but the Plains warrior.

What did his gaze imply? It would be plausible to read into this picture a recapitulation of the Cody-Scout motif: the pathbreaking adventurer looking towards his next conquest and opening ever more land for onrushing society. It would be equally plausible to envision this as a recuperative gaze: Cody looking upon Plains Indian culture as essential to the mythic history of the nation, and yet threatened by the developmentalist thrust at the story's core. It is this tension at the core of *The Drama of Civilization* that places it beyond a simple story of unfettered progress.



“The Wild West,” Program, MacKaye Family Papers, Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

Frontier Central

Earlier in this chapter, I noted the affinities between *The Drama of Civilization* and contemporaneous community pageants, proposing the ways in which both articulated visions of how the past informed the present. Here, I return to the ways in which, in David Glassberg’s words, “public exhibitions of artifacts... served to put the lessons of history in tangible form,”²⁸⁷ to imagine how contact with the “artifacts” of the past provided unique perspectives on the present. *The Drama of Civilization* articulated its claims to historical veracity and knit its spectators into its narrative fabric through a careful use of authentic historical objects and, indeed, characters. During its long career, a hallmark of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was its attention to authenticity. In his *Autobiography*, for instance, Cody claimed that it was common practice “to send men on

²⁸⁷ Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, 15.

journeys of more than a hundred miles to get the right kind of war bonnet.”²⁸⁸ And, as we have seen, a crucial component of Frank Richmond’s early oration centered on the emphasis that one was watching the natural rhythms and rituals of frontier life, not the result of “what is technically called ‘rehearsals.’”²⁸⁹

The Deadwood stagecoach, which made its appearance during the “Mining Camp” epoch, but which earned an entire page in the souvenir programme, epitomized this approach. The programme described the role of the stagecoach in the historical narrative of the nation. Stagecoaches were “the *avant couriers* of Western civilization and the terror of the red men.” But more vividly, the stagecoach that was actually trotted out during *The Drama of Civilization* was a palimpsest of Far Western living, scarred by experience:

It will be observed that it is a heavily-built Concord stage, and is intended for a team of six horses. The body is swung on a part of heavy leather underbraces, and has the usual thick “perches,” “Jacks,” and brakes belonging to such a vehicle. It has a large leather “boot” behind, and another at the driver’s footboard. The coach was intended to seat twenty-one men—the driver and two men beside him, twelve inside, and the other six on the top. As it now stands, the leather blinds of the windows are worn, the paint is faded, and it has a battered and travel-stained aspect that tells the story of hardship and adventure. Its trips began in 1875, when the owners were Messrs. Gilmour, Salisbury & Co. Luke Voorhees is the present manager. The tour was between Cheyenne and Deadwood, via Fort Laramie, Rawhide Buttes, Hat or War Bonnet Creek, the place where Buffalo Bill killed the Indian chief “Yellow Hand,” July 17, 1876.²⁹⁰

Allusions to past owners and to Plains geography, use of technical language, and an emphasis on the literal markings of experience permitted both an initiation into the world of the frontier and a communion with it—a sense that one was privy to something other than fabrication. The same inclination extended to the performers, many of whom appeared in the programme’s cast list along with the states and territories from which they hailed; primarily, Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, and the Dakotas.²⁹¹

The Drama of Civilization recuperated that world for its audience, vivifying the subjective experience of participation in frontier culture. As with all of his shows, a vibrant consumer culture was essential to the Wild West’s fortunes. Souvenir booths at the Garden sold *cartes de visite*, brilliantly-colored die-cuts of scenes from *The Drama of Civilization*, puzzles, and inkblots sculpted into crude renderings of Buffalo Bill’s head.²⁹² Theorizing the role of the souvenir in establishing subjective experience with history, Susan Stewart finds that it metonymically evokes the experience in which it was purchased or received, and thus “moves history into private time.”²⁹³ As if to underscore the importance of the souvenir as personalizing history, Cody occasionally bestowed

²⁸⁸ Cody, *Autobiography*, 314.

²⁸⁹ Cody, “Buffalo Bill’s ‘Wild West’” script (1885), Library of Congress Rare Books Collection.

²⁹⁰ “A Historical Coach of the Deadwood Line,” Programme, MFP.

²⁹¹ “The Wild West,” Programme, MFP.

²⁹² James W. Wojtowicz, *The W. F. Cody Buffalo Bill Collector’s Guide with Values* (Paducah, KY: Collector Books, 1998).

²⁹³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press), 136, 138.

them upon patrons. On the one hundredth performance of *The Drama of Civilization*, for instance, he bestowed upon attending ladies “a handsome souvenir in the form of a medallion plaque of himself.” Four days later, he did the same with a “plaster plaque of Buffalo Bill with his flaming hair and long mustache and goatee, and such portions of his bust as was shown was clad in the costume of an army scout.”²⁹⁴

Stagecraft also created the terms for vivifying and personalizing the culture that was narrated, codified, and dramatized in the arena. Following the premier, the *New York Times* printed a lengthy review. Running to seven full paragraphs, it provided a full-bore description of the spectacle as sensorium. The journalist noted “the cheerful pop of the Winchester,” “the curdling war whoop of the Comanches and Kiowas,” the “thunder... crashing and lightning... flashing,” in what was, overall, “hair-raising business.”²⁹⁵ As historians of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West have been keen to emphasize, sounds and smells were amplified in the arena in ways that outdoor venues could not match.²⁹⁶

But an emphasis on the show as sensorium obscures the ways in which the action created audiences in its own image, providing for a dalliance with a frontier vernacular audiences could feel they had been a part of. The syntax of the first *New York Times* review betrays a personal commitment to, or at least an implication in, the drama enacted onstage. The writer who told readers that “the incidents of frontier life are realistic” was ultimately overtaken by his own zeal for appropriating the language and social cues of the world Cody had created for him. He wrote of the Indian performers in racialized language that also emphasized his familiarity with Native American cosmology. When killed, “the noble red men are sent to the happy hunting ground.”²⁹⁷ Such terminology, with its ready-to-hand, empty phrases that nevertheless sound informed and deep, called out to audience members who read in the souvenir programme an essay entitled, “An Indian’s Religion.” Excerpted from Col. Richard Irving Dodge’s *Our Wild Indians: Thirty-Three Years’ Personal Experience Among the Red Men of the Great West. A Popular Account of Their Social Life, Religion, Habits, Traits, Customs, Exploits, Etc., with Thrilling Adventures and Experiences of the Great Plains and in the Mountains of Our Wild Frontier* (1882), “An Indian’s Religion” explained, “All peccadilloes and crimes bring, or do not bring, their punishment in this world, and whatever their character in life, the souls of all Indian reach, unless debarred by accident, a paradise called by them ‘The Happy Hunting Grounds.’”²⁹⁸ Unimpressed by Frank Richmond’s narration, the reporter passed judgment with all the imagined rough justice of the frontier settlement. Richmond, he averred, “should be boiled down or lassoed.”²⁹⁹

²⁹⁴ “The Fascinating Wild West,” *New York Times*, 6 February, 1887, p. 3; “Wild West Souvenirs,” *New York Times*, 10 February, 1887, p. 2.

²⁹⁵ “Buffalo Bill in Drama,” *New York Times*.

²⁹⁶ Blackstone, *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business*, 104.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ Col. Richard Irving Dodge, *Our Wild Indians: Thirty-Three Years’ Personal Experience Among the Red Men of the Great West. A Popular Account of Their Social Life, Religion, Habits, Traits, Customs, Exploits, Etc., with Thrilling Adventures and Experiences of the Great Plains and in the Mountains of Our Wild Frontier* (1882), quoted in “An Indian’s Religion,” Programme, MFP.

²⁹⁹ “Buffalo Bill in Drama,” *New York Times*.

Critics imagined the myriad ways in which the show promised spontaneous and unmediated encounter with “the real thing.” During an intermission between the first and second “epoch” on opening night, a moose wandered offstage and into the crowd. The *Times* reporter described how “Stick-in-the-Mud, Jumping Polecat, or some other of the chiefs in full war paint came running in full pursuit” and noted “the onslaught of the famous warrior on the denizen of the primeval.”³⁰⁰ When a horse was spooked by the sound of a pistol shot and rushed into the arena during a last-minute rehearsal, Praeto, a Sioux actor, was, “sent to stop the animal.” In the chase, Praeto’s neck was broken and he died soon after at Bellevue Hospital. The horse, for its part, had run “against the projecting wood work at the Twenty-sixth street [*sic*] side and split his skull. The animal was then shot.” The heroes, too, contended with the danger of reenacting their past. “The other day Buffalo Bill, while being hotly attacked by the hostiles, slipped over the edge of a platform and gave his leg a serious wrench,” another reporter noted. “He was helped to his tepee and a surgeon was sent for. Although in great pain he insisted on being absent from his post no longer than one performance.” In that same performance, “Sergt. Bates, the man who has carried the American flag all over the world, received a severe cut over the eye from a saber the same day, and he had to be doctored for 24 hours. Two Indians on Saturday were placed *hors de combat* by being struck with guns in the hands of two soldiers.”³⁰¹ Here the action is couched in the imagined experience of frontier warfare. Indian actors are “hostiles”; Buffalo Bill refuses to be absent from “his post” any longer than absolutely necessary.

The Native American performers, by contrast, were listed *en masse* (“Cheyenne Indians,” “Pawnee Indians,” “Comanche Indians”), with only the tribal chief singled out (“Long Wolf, Chief,” “Cut Meat, Chief”).³⁰² Indeed, while the souvenir programme provided detailed biographical essays of its more famous Anglo American performers,³⁰³ Native Americans are given a single anthropological essay, “An Indian’s Religion,” excerpted from Dodge’s *Our Wild Indians* (1882). The one-page excerpt describes the religion of “The Indian” as a dialectical faith in a “Good God” and a “Bad God,” detailing the paradigmatic “Indians”’ belief in the eternal damnation of the soul of a person who has been scalped. Dodge locates the origins of this “superstition” in a mythical age, asserting, “A Homer might find many an Indian hero as worthy of immortal fame as Achilles for his efforts to save the body of his friend.”³⁰⁴ But such superstition only fits a mythical age. Accompanying this piece is a pen-and-ink portrait of a shaman, carrying a hatchet and what appears to be a thick bundle of sage, and wearing a feathered headdress running the length of his back. Under the portrait is the ironic title, “‘Medicine’—Mystery Man.”³⁰⁵

Where Native Americans fit into a national narrative was more problematic. Their position in the drama is that of primitive men, either doomed to internecine warfare or

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ “A Dead Sioux,” *Ogdensburg Journal*, 13 December, 1886, WFCP; “Too Realistic For Comfort,” *New York Times*, January 16, 1887, p. 3.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ See, for instance, “Hon. W. F. Cody—‘Buffalo Bill’”; “Miss Lillian T. Smith: The California Girl, and Champion Rifle Shot,” “Frank Wheelan, ‘Utah Frank,’” Programme (1886), MFP.

³⁰⁴ Programme (1886), MFP.

³⁰⁵ Dodge, *Our Wild Indians*, quoted in “An Indian’s Religion,” Programme, MFP.

ritualistic comity. But they are always figured as threats to Anglo American settlement and development, whereas Cody belonged to a genealogy of nation builders. Cody's legal responsibilities to his Native American actors epitomized this twinned impulse towards "civilizing" and mythicizing. In a contract he drew up and signed, Cody promised "to protect [his Indian actors] from all immoral influences and surroundings." He agreed to "as far as possible select men who shall be accompanied on the exhibition tour by their wives, and all such women shall be fed and clothed and cared for, and returned to their respective homes."³⁰⁶ Protection from corruption and preservation seem equally plausible impulses here. Despite the opprobrium that could be heaped upon Cody for codifying a narrative of white triumphalism, scholars like L. G. Moses have also posited that Buffalo Bill's Wild West gave Native Americans money, world experience, and an opportunity to retain traditional folkways, both onstage and off. Cody had long made Indian performers a key component of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, drawing up contracts at Western reservations, feeding and housing performers and their families at a time when disease, poverty, and starvation ran rampant on reservations.³⁰⁷

Buffalo Bill's Wild West came to Madison Square Garden at a moment of intense public debate over the place of indigeneity in American life. In 1871, Congress's abolition of the policy of making treaties with individual tribes had presaged both the mythicization of a lost way of life and the creation of organizations and institutions meant to foster "civilizing" campaigns among Native Americans. Along with Pratt's Carlisle Industrial School, the Indian Rights Association, established 1883, sought, in the words of its founder, Henry Welsh, to "educate the Indian race and so prepare it for gradual emancipation into ours." The Dawes Allotment Act, passed by the federal government in 1887, "dismantled reservations" and replaced them with individual plots in the hopes of creating yeoman farmers whose work would represent a kind of Jeffersonian uplift.³⁰⁸

Sympathetic literary and ethnographic endeavors were equally problematic. Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor* (1881) worked to expose government violence and land grabbing against Native Americans. Indians were often held up as artifacts who vivified earlier stages in human evolution and whose ostensible cultural and social stasis provided fodder for discussions of racial taxonomies and the Anglo American inclination towards progress. This was a theory of inevitable expansion in the nineteenth century that joined the professionalization of historiography with the emergence of anthropology, where the vision of ahistorical Native American life threw Anglo American development into stark relief. Frequently, this was twinned with fatalism. Historian Francis Parkman, for instance, had argued in *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* (1851), "the Indian was doomed before the onrush of Anglo-Saxon civilization."³⁰⁹

³⁰⁶ Quoted in L. G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 32-33.

³⁰⁷ Cody to Capt. Charles Penney, 17 March, 1884, in *The Business of Being Buffalo Bill: Selected Letters of William F. Cody, 1879-1917*, ed. Sarah J. Blackstone (New York: Praeger, 1988), 8; Moses, *Wild West Shows*.

³⁰⁸ Henry Welsh, quoted in Hoxie, *Final Promise*, 12; Hoxie, *Final Promise*, 73.

³⁰⁹ Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, 35; Deloria, *Playing Indian*, ch. 3; Conn, *History's Shadow*, 155-156, 209-210; Francis Parkman, *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* (1851), quoted in Jones, *Age of Energy*, 205.

Cody's meditation on historical progress, from his 1920 *Autobiography*, provides a sense of the ethical imperatives that framed his vision of national expansion. "I have always held that in such a country as America the march of civilization was inevitable," he claimed, "and that sooner or later the men who lived in roving tribes, making no real use of the resources of the country, would be compelled to give way before the men who tilled the soil and used the lands as the creator intended they should be used."³¹⁰ This brand of rugged progress remained a dominant concern throughout Cody's life. In the last interview he gave before his death in 1917, the showman recalled of his early labors on the Plains, it was not so much "hunting as it was railroad building, opening the wilderness to civilization." Furthermore, "the buffalo had to go as the first step in subduing the Indian."³¹¹

And yet, *The Drama of Civilization* was as much about positioning Anglo Americans as Indians' inheritors as about their annihilators. Native American descriptors mark the American states, a reminder that some germ of the "primitive" underpinned national history, which was its inheritor. Buffalo Bill's Wild West also asserted the important historical connection between America and Native America, as with the programme providing a list of "Indian Names of States": "Massachusetts, from the Indian language, signifying the country about the hills"; "Mississippi derived its name from that of the great river, which is in the Natchez tongue, 'The Father of Waters'"; "Wisconsin's name is said to be the Indian name for a wild, rushing channel."³¹² Running to sixteen states—East and West, North and South—this etymological index made Indian traditions fundamental, not peripheral, to the development of American identity.

Indians did not just call out from the past, but persisted into the present. Backstage at Madison Square Garden, Cody had recreated a Plains milieu. Visiting the encampments backstage, one observer, writing for the *New York Sun*, took eight long paragraphs to comment on the scene that unfolded before his very eyes. It was, in his telling, a return to the natural rhythms of frontier life during that time of day "When the great auditorium is steeped in deep shadows [and] the show resolves itself into a camp." There, one encountered warriors in a "period of self-communion..., each buck wrapped in his dignity and his blanket"; "squaws cluster[ing] along the balcony rail chattering and laughing, while their jolly, fat little red papooses tumble playfully on the floor behind them"; and "cowboy patrols, who have their fixed tours of duty and reliefs, just as they would have in a real camp on the plains." The author found himself wandering among tepees and tents:

The ceiling is just high enough for the tepee poles. In the middle of the room is an enormous stove that, with the opening of the tops of the tall windows, [provide] a healthful temperature and an abundant supply of pure air. Through the open flaps of the tents valuable property is to be seen carelessly exhibited to the gaze of all. There are costly specimens of the most exquisite beadwork, fire-arms and accoutrements, and many expensive prettinesses of civilized life, all full of fascination to Indian eyes, but such a thing as invasion of private property rights among these Indians is unknown. Each family has a tepee to itself, but the bucks

³¹⁰ Cody, *Autobiography*, 281.

³¹¹ "Buffalo Bill's Last Interview," *Outdoor Life* 39:5 (May, 1917), 493.

³¹² "Indian Names of States," Programme, MFP.

pack in—eight or ten together—in the tepees set apart for them, and so the whole lot of seventy-two Indians are disposed of for the night.

This reporter took the opportunity to imagine the myriad ways in which the Wild West could preserve an authentic past that overran the borders of the stage. It imagined reform, but also became a site for questioning the bromides of popular culture, promising knowledge born of historical experience. The reporter noted, for instance, the Indians' aversion to alcohol, which "disprove[d] the correctness of the popular idea of the Indian's enthusiastic devotion to firewater."³¹³

Other observers indulged similar fantasies of contact that could question the usual distinctions between civilizations and savagery. Another dispatch from the *New York Sun* had its author wandering among the *disjecta membra* of the previous day's performance, only to encounter something other than staged drama:

The Madison Square Garden of yesterday afternoon did not look much like the Madison Square Garden of Saturday afternoon and night. Instead of the thousands of people in the seats watching the hundreds of people in the great "ring," an Indian in gorgeous blanket sat by himself in the highest-priced seats, and looked wisely at a scrap of newspaper he held in his hand, while the half-breed children played "keeping house" in one of the \$10 boxes.

Nearby, "a lot of African buffaloes chewed contentedly at their hay, and some dozen or more ponies snorted and quarrelled [*sic*] comfortable together."³¹⁴ The effect of this description is certainly humorous: Simple children of nature overtaking the expensive seats from which they had previously been observed by Generals, industrialists, intellectuals, and Abraham Hewitt, the recently elected mayor of New York.³¹⁵ But it is also a vision of creatures undisturbed by, but *disturbing*, modern life. Such was the case when Muzza, a Sioux actor, learned of his brother's death at the notoriously impoverished Pine Ridge reservation in the Dakotas and, according to one eyewitness, "began to express his grief... by torturing himself" in an attempt "to prove that this affection for his brother was so great that he would willingly have shared with his brother the pains of the latter's sickness." With clinical precision, the author of these words, again printed in the *Sun*, fixated on the process by which Muzza impaled himself in his chest and both legs with "several pieces of hickory wood," and "paraded through the Indian quarters in the Madison Square Garden from 10 o'clock in the morning until noon." At that point, Cody, whose "civilizing" work was never over, put an end to the scene, making Muzza "promise that he would not put them in his flesh again."³¹⁶

Even beyond the cordoned-off space of the backstage encampment, observers described Native Americans threatening the safe spaces of Protestant respectability. On December first, fifty actors representing the Sioux, Pawnee, and Cheyenne filed into the Madison Avenue Baptist Church and sang "Rock of Ages" and "Near, My God to Thee" in Sioux. The *New York Observer and Gazette* took this not as a call to welcome the new worshippers into the fold, but as an ethnographical rarity. In describing the scene, the

³¹³ "Camp Life in Town," *New York Sun*, 12 December, 1886, WFCP.

³¹⁴ "The Wild West on Sunday," *New York Sun*, 29 November, 1886, WFCP.

³¹⁵ "Unqualified Success: 'Wild West' Transformed by MacKaye to Glowing Drama," quoted in MacKaye, *Epoch*, 84; "Men of Note," *Bismarck Tribune*, 25 March, 1886, p. 4, WFCP.

³¹⁶ "One of Buffalo Bill's Sioux Skewers Himself Indian Fashion," *New York Sun*, 20 February, 1887, WFCP.

articles lavishes attention on the authentic otherness of “fifty live Indians, resplendent in bead-embroidered hunting shirt and parti-colored army blankets,” direct from their encampment “with the pale-faced chief Buffalo Bill in the great tepee, the Madison Square Garden.” Even more than aping what it considers a frontier argot, the article presents a frontier experience that is not so much witnessed as experienced: “Considered from the linguistic standpoint, the rendition [of the hymns in Sioux] was one of the most extraordinary ever heard in a church, and when Rocky Bear, chief of the Sioux, delivered himself of a tremolo whoop at the last stanza, nervous old gentlemen felt of their head to learn if the bald spots had grown larger.”³¹⁷ The implied scalping of these enervated Victorian patriarchs provides more than *shock*. In giving themselves over to Christian worship, the Sioux, Pawnee, and Cheyenne visitors were drawn even *further* into their role in a frontier melodrama. In so doing, they drew other worshippers in, as well. It was not Indians’ rapprochement with their Anglo audiences and Protestantism that was remarkable, but instead, their incursions into the hallowed reserves of “civilization.”

Nor were such incursions unique to Native Americans. The allure of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, in general, and *The Drama of Civilization*, in particular, was not only found in its mythic (albeit ambivalent) codification of national development, but also in the ways it exposed modern corruption and enervation to modern citizens, pulling back the curtain on what Americans may have thought was the normal, natural, divinely and scientifically sanctioned course of national development and civilization. Journalists took the opportunity of the “‘Wild West’ exhibition at the Madison Square Garden, New York, which is just now, the great ‘show’ sensation in New York City,” to reappraise the meaning of the West in America, claiming “It is a good sign when readers sicken of the eternal twaddle of love and society fiction, and demand what is a revelation of the heroic side of American character and civilization.” That it was, “a very good sign indeed when such men as Cody are lionized by the sentimentalists who hitherto have thought a cowboy [*sic*] ‘a horrible creature,’ and a scout or Indian-fighter a white savage.”³¹⁸

Clearly, too, the public saw Buffalo Bill’s Wild West as imparting fundamental truths. The simple actions of the West only threw into starker relief the degradations of modern urban corruption, as in the *Harper’s Weekly* cartoon, “Well may the ‘Wild West’ ask, Is this the civilized East?” A youthful Cody, his hair darker and fuller than it was in 1886, stands on a dais in his favored fringed buckskin suit, his ur-Scout costume, surrounded by his cohort of Plains warriors, cowboys, and a lean old man who clearly represents John Nelson, the consummate Western adventurer, and stagecoach driver onstage.³¹⁹ With the far-looking, sagacious gaze imaged in countless portraits, Cody pulls back the curtain on a scene of political perversion: A corpulent alderman stands atop a “Bribery Box,” overturning a canvas bag marked only with a dollar sign onto a riot of

³¹⁷ “Buffalo Bill’s Untamed Warriors go to Church and Render ‘Rock of Ages,’” *The Observer and Gazette*, 2 December, 1886, WFCP.

³¹⁸ “A Well-Merited Tribute,” n.t., 1886, William Frederick Cody Scrapbook, 1883-1895, roll #2, McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Historical Center. Although there is no date accompanying this article, its location in the 1883-1895 scrapbook means that it was the 1886-1887 season. Cody wouldn’t return to Madison Square Garden until 1907.

³¹⁹ Nelson had been a trapper and frontier guide who published his own autobiography, *Fifty Years on the Trail: A True Story of Western Life*. He was around sixty years old in 1887. Blackstone, *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business*, 83.

grasping hands. Behind the welter, a jury box is filled with shifty-looking elderly men sitting under a banner that reads, “We do not agree!” The typical performers—Buffalo Bill and his players—have reversed the gaze, pulling back the curtain on the behind-the-scenes tumult of the modern cityscape, whose machine politics and jurisprudence are corrupt and enervated. The Westerners’ spare bodies throw into starker relief those of the gluttonous urbanites. The inverted commas around the “Wild West” in the title connote the exhibition’s title, of course, but also underscore the irony of labeling it “wild” when the real chaos is part of the corrupt, mendacious, greedy urban milieu. Cody and his cohort look shocked at what they see.³²⁰

Black Elk’s History Lesson³²¹

In that cartoon, among Cody’s archetypal cohort, looking in stunned silence at the corrupted machinations of urban politics and justice, is a half-naked Plains Indian in feathered headdress. While the *Harper’s* cartoonist imagined the Plains warrior as part of a larger collection of frontier characters who could draw back the curtain in order to expose the failings of modern society, it would be mistaken to imagine the West as presenting a coherent and unified bloc against modern society. Indeed, the narrative of *The Drama of Civilization* ultimately marked the triumph of Anglo American capitalist and social development—even if, as I have shown, it was development of a unique brand. In 1932, Black Elk, an Ogalala Sioux actor in Cody’s show, pointed up the ways in which even a narrative of American-history-as-frontier-experience was overlain with its own racial values, how the ambivalence at the show’s core simultaneously furnished a faith in the capacity of Anglo American power.

Filled with Sioux lexicon, theology, and dream visions, *Black Elk Speaks*, John Neihardt’s transcription of conversations with the Ogalala Sioux holy man, has acquired something of its own mythical aura, with multiple editions (1959, 1961, 1972, 1979, 2000) emerging in concert with the rise in New Indianism, the Red Power movement, and Ethnic Studies. And while its varied problems as an historical document have previously been explored at length, it is important to recognize the ways in which, even in Black Elk’s retrospective assessment, *The Drama of Civilization* provided the fodder for sustained meditation on the racial politics inherent in stories of expansion and settlement.³²²

³²⁰ “Well may the ‘Wild West’ ask, Is this the civilized East?,” *Harper’s Weekly* (4 December, 1886), 785.

³²¹ I take my title from Robert Altman’s *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull’s History Lesson* (United Artists, 1976). In the film, an aging, drunk Cody (Paul Newman) is driven to madness by the haunting apparition of Sitting Bull (Frank Kaquitts), who dies after performing in Cody’s show.

³²² Joel Pfister has surveyed the critical scholarship centered on this seminal text. He notes, “scholars now think of [it] as being more accurately described as a literary narrative that has for its protagonist a fictional character named Black Elk who resembles the historical Black Elk and sometimes speaks his thoughts.” Pfister, *Individuality Incorporated*, 99. In any event, Black Elk’s fictionalizing and nostalgizing of his life doesn’t contradict his assessments of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West (of which below) but in fact emphasizes that it stood as a touchstone for orienting an evolving and imaginative vision of his political development. See, Dana Anderson, *Identity’s Strategy: Rhetorical Selves in Conversion* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), ch. 7.

Black Elk's three-year participation in Buffalo Bill's Wild West began when he was twenty-three years old, living with his fellow Sioux on the Pine Ridge reservation in what is now South Dakota, in "square gray houses, scattered here and there across [the] hungry land, and around them the Wasichus [white people] had drawn a line to keep them in." His own sentimentalized village, marked by the folkways of Sioux life, had vanished with Anglo American encroachments on the land. Where *The Drama of Civilization* was resplendent with frontier derring-do, and where self could be tested in the process of "development," Black Elk saw only greed: "Hunger was among us often now, for much of what the Great Father in Washington sent us must have been stolen by the Wasichus who were crazy to get money." Ironically, then, Wasichus arrived at Black Elk's decrepit and blighted reservation, looking for "a band of Ogalalas for a big show that the Pahuska ["Long Hair", i.e., Cody] had." Black Elk went along, not to mythologize his people's role in an American historical narrative, but for the very pragmatic reason of seeking out a strategy for a new kind of right living that could contend with the new reality of life on the Plains:

They told us this show would go across the big water to strange lands, and I thought I ought to go, because I might learn some secret of the Wasichu that would help my people somehow.... I looked back on the past and recalled my people's old ways, but they were not living that way anymore. They were traveling the black road, everybody for himself and with little rules of his own.... I was in despair and I even thought that if the Wasichus had a better way, then maybe my people should live that way.³²³

In his own memoirs, Cody had warned readers of the dangers in reducing a life redeemed by suffering, of declining from the graceful state of frontier struggle. In this passage, Black Elk similarly sees the dangers in declension, in his people's "not living [the old ways] anymore" and instead "traveling the black road, everybody for himself and with little rules of his own."

In a trying train voyage, Black Elk passed through immense, intimidating American cities,³²⁴ ultimately arriving in New York, where "you could not see the stars." The city as society violated the fundamental framework that bound Sioux society:

We stayed there and made shows for many, many Wasichus all that winter. I liked the part of the show we made, but not the part the Wasichus made. Afterwhile [*sic*] I got used to being there, but I was like a man who had never had a vision. I

³²³ Nicholas Black Elk and John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Ogalala Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000 [1932]), 165-167.

³²⁴ The intimidating effects of rail travel on Native Americans was an important component of socialization at the Carlisle Indian School: "Pratt's tactical confidence in the digestive capacity of American society was evident in his practice to have students travel by railroads through America and later write home about the scale of what they saw. What students were schooled to see was that they were outnumbered, that American cities were towering and permanent..., and that 'progress'—meaning the extinction of the 'Indian' as anything but a usable American 'individual'—was futile to resist." Pfister, *Individuality Incorporated*, 47. Purposefully or not, Black Elk reverses this motif. He describes how "we roared along all night again and came to a much bigger town [Chicago]. There we stayed all day and all night; and right there I could compare my people's ways with Washichu ways, and this made me sadder than before. I wished and wished that I had not gone away from home." Black Elk and Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 166.

felt dead and my people seemed lost and I thought I might never find them again. I did not see anything to help my people. I could see that the Wasichus did not care for each other the way our people did before the nation's hoop was broken. They would take everything from everything that they could use, while crowds of people had nothing at all and maybe were starving. They had forgotten that the earth was their mother. This could not be better than the old ways of my people.³²⁵

Performing in *The Drama of Civilization* allowed for a pleasurable reenactment of Indian folkways, but Black Elk rejected its storylines. ("I liked the part of the show we made," he averred, "but not the part the Wasichus made.") Racialized violence, rough frontier justice, and the tricks that so appealed to audiences as markers of authentic experience were easily elided, from Black Elk's perspective, in a celebration of an America that only produced desperation and callousness. Black Elk's Sioux vernacular, especially his image of the social compact as "the nation's hoop," adds another layer to the American frontier as a space of competing autochthonous identities, of which the Anglo American one privileged in *The Drama of Civilization* was but one, and not necessarily the best conservator of national identity and personal authenticity.

Indeed, even though "Pahuska had a strong heart," involvement in his Wild West exhibition crystallized a number of Black Elk's fears about the future of his people. Of a Cody-chaperoned visit to "a prisoner's house on an island where the big water came up to the town," Black Elk was not impressed by modern social institutions (in this case, an unnamed prison) but frightened. "Men pointed guns at the prisoners and made them move around like animals in a cage," he recalled. "This made me feel very sad, because my people too were penned up in islands, and maybe that was the way the Wasichus were going to treat them."³²⁶

Nevertheless, Black Elk remained with Buffalo Bill's Wild West as it departed for England. In his account, he justified his decision as yet another desperate search for a solution to the problems of the Sioux: "We heard then that we were going to cross the big water to strange lands. Some of our people went home and wanted me to go with them, but I had not seen anything good for my people yet; maybe across the big water there was something to see, so I did not go home, although I was sick and in despair."³²⁷ On March 31, 1887, the cast and crew set off on the steamship, *State of Nebraska*. The *New York Times* described the departure as being "as gay as a Kiralfy ballet." "Monsieur and Madame Eagle Feather," it noted with apparent derision, "... promenaded the deck like tigers and uttered cunning war whoops" while "Buffalo Bill, in his orthodox costume [*sic*] walked up and down."³²⁸ Whatever festive atmosphere the *Times* saw was soon replaced by a trying trans-Atlantic voyage marked by seasickness and frightening storms. During one such storm, Black Elk turned to native cosmology as solace:

Afterwhile [*sic*] the Wasichus came and gave us things to tie around us so that we could float. Instead, I dressed for death, putting on my best clothes that I wore in the show, and then I sang my death song. Others dressed for death too, and sang, because if it was the end of our lives and we could do nothing, we wanted to die

³²⁵ Ibid., 167.

³²⁶ Ibid., 167.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ "Buffalo Bill's Good-Bye," *New York Times*, April 1, 1887, p. 8.

brave. We could not fight this that was going to kill us, but we could die so that our spirit relatives would not be ashamed of us.³²⁹

In the end, only a few bison and elk died. Black Elk stayed with Buffalo Bill's Wild West in London for "six moons"³³⁰ before traveling through Europe with a rival Wild West show.

In 1889, Black Elk returned to Pine Ridge, where his "people looked pitiful," their previous deprivations exacerbated by "a big drouth [*sic*]." All the bison had been "slaughtered" by the Wasichus, and all the Sioux had been "shut... up in pens."³³¹ It was in this context that he experienced a series of shamanic visions of a Sioux utopia:

I had a great vision that was to bring the people back into the nation's hoop, and maybe this sacred man had had the same vision and it was going to come true, so that the people would get back on the red road. Maybe I was not meant to do this myself, but if I helped with the power that was given me, the tree might bloom again and the people prosper.

I could see a beautiful land where many, many people were camping in a great circle. I could see that they were happy and had plenty. Everywhere there were drying racks full of meat. The air was clear and beautiful with a living light that was everywhere. All around the circle, feeding on the green, green grass, were fat and happy horses; and animals of all kinds were scattered all over the green hills, and singing hunters were returning with their meat.³³²

Guided by the beauty of these visions, Black Elk was moved to participate in the pan-Indian uprising of Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890. I do not want romanticize this brutal event, where the U.S. Army used the latest military technology (Gatling and Hotchkiss guns) to massacre over three hundred Indian men, women, and children. What represented, from Anglo America's perspective, the final "settlement" of the wild Plains,³³³ was, from Black Elk's perspective, a nightmare. He recalled, "Men and women and children were heaped and scattered all over the flat at the bottom of the little hill where the soldiers had wagon-guns, and westward up the dry gulch all the way to the high ridge, the dead women and children and babies were scattered."³³⁴

Nevertheless, I *would* suggest that Black Elk's commitment to solving the problems of his world entailed a troubled glance at the world around him, a sense of the importance of his own community's experience as a way to combat the deleterious effects of American modernity.

³²⁹ Black Elk and Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 168.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

³³² *Ibid.*, 180, 186.

³³³ Takaki, *Iron Cages*, 169;

³³⁴ Black Elk and Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 199-200.

Chapter Three

Jane Addams versus the Melting Pot: Preserving “The Patient Performance of Painful Duty” at the Hull-House Labor Museum³³⁵

Chicago’s Urban Pioneers

Anxiety over America’s future, following the declaration in the 1890 census that the frontier was “closed,”³³⁶ came to a head at Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. As Buffalo Bill’s Wild West performed its mélange of frontier skill and daring at the nearby Midway Plaisance, University of Wisconsin Assistant Professor of History Frederick Jackson Turner delivered “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” at the annual convocation of the American Historical Association, held within the neo-classical confines of the Exposition’s White City. Specially constructed to house the many impressive feats of cultural and technological progress, the White City represented, in Alan Trachtenberg’s words, “a consummation and a new beginning.”³³⁷

³³⁵ The title of this chapter is taken from Horace Kallen’s essay, “Democracy *versus* the Melting-Pot,” originally printed in *The Nation* in 1915. In opposition to the liquidation of difference proposed in the metaphor of the “melting-pot” (see below), Kallen argued that American democracy existed to bring out immigrants’ nascent desires for freedom and self-actualization: “The selfhood which is inalienable in them, and for the realization of which they require ‘inalienable’ liberty, is ancestrally determined, and the happiness which they pursue has its form implied in ancestral endowment. *This* is what, actually, democracy in operation assumes. There are human capacities which it is the function of the state to liberate and to protect in growth; and the failure of the state as a government to accomplish this automatically makes for its abolition.” Kallen proposed an alternative metaphor to the melting-pot to imagine how the nation would, in turn, benefit from releasing and harnessing immigrants’ varied “capacities”: “As in an orchestra, every type of instrument has its specific *timbre* and *tonality*, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society, each ethnic group may be the natural instrument, its temper and culture may be its theme and melody and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all may make the symphony of civilization.” Horace Kallen, “Democracy *versus* the Melting-Pot,” *The Nation* (18 and 25 November, 1915), reprinted in *Culture and Democracy in the United States: Studies in the Group Psychology of the American Peoples* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), 123-125.

³³⁶ In 1890, the Superintendent of the Census noted, “Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports.” Quoted in Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 1.

³³⁷ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 209. The literature on the World’s Columbian Exposition, in general, and the White City, in specific, is large but generally repetitive. See, for instance, Rosemarie K. Bank, “Representing History: Performing the Columbian Exposition,” *Theatre Journal* 54:4 (December, 2002), 589-606; John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 30-31; William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), ch. 8; Cecilia Elizabeth O’Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 169; Robert W. Rydell, *All the World’s*

At the end of history, then, Turner looked backwards, eulogizing the frontier as the crucible of uniquely, *insistently* American attributes of industry, self-reliance, and democracy—but all within a regenerative environmental matrix. “The stubborn American environment is there,” he wrote in closing, “with its imperious summons to accept its conditions; the inherited ways of doing things are also there; and yet, in spite of environment and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past.” The closing of that gate, “conclud[ing] the first period of American history,” marked an important shift in the mythic formulation of the frontier, as it transitioned from geographic to conceptual space. Urban Anglo Americans would now be the nation’s pioneers. Indeed, economic opportunity compelled the vision of an American self at the core of Turner’s thesis, what Trachtenberg has described as “inventive individualism.”³³⁸

I retread this well-worn path, but only to arrive at a fork in the road. Seven-year-old Hilda Satt, recently emigrated from Wloclawek, Poland, did not attend the annual meeting of the AHA. She was, nevertheless, attuned to the pioneering spirit that took flight in booming turn-of-the-century Chicago. Amidst the hoopla of 1893, Satt watched a street parade, commemorating the four hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s voyage to the New World. “The great floats went by hour after hour,” she recalled. “Each float depicted some phase of the discovery of America.” As an adult, Hilda Polacheck, née Satt, would turn to this memory as the flashpoint for reflecting upon her own family’s struggles in the wake of her father’s death, shortly after 1893. “Mother,” she wrote in her memoirs,

faced life with the heroism of a true American pioneer. She, and thousands of those immigrant mothers, earned a niche among the heroic women who helped build America. Here she was, with five small children, unable to speak the language of the country, with no training of any kind to earn a living. The only work she had ever done was to care for her family and her home.³³⁹

Crucially, then, and apparently unwittingly, Polacheck redefined the archetypal “American pioneer.” Recognizing it as a meaningful figuration for expressing belonging in the U.S., she implicitly rejected the mobility and mutability on which Turner centered his celebration. Unlike the famous historian, attuned to the ways in which the pioneer and his community were reshaped by life in the wilderness, where the land itself “strips off the garments of civilization,”³⁴⁰ Polacheck’s valorization proposed an alternative pioneer spirit, predicated on steadfastness over transformation.

a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), ch. 2; Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, ch. 7. Christopher Robert Reed has contradicted scholarship on the White City’s racial exclusionism in *“All the World is Here”*: *The Black Presence at White City* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), stressing instead the important role African Americans played within the Exposition.

³³⁸ Turner, “Significance of the Frontier,” *Significance of the Frontier*, 38; Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, 16.

³³⁹ Hilda Satt Polacheck, *I Came a Stranger: The Story of a Hull-House Girl* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 39, 44. Polacheck also imagined *herself* as engaged in the pioneer’s journey to new territory, entitling chapter 7 of her memoirs, “I Discover Hull-House.”

³⁴⁰ Turner’s assertion reads in full, “The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts

Hilda Satt Polacheck's vision resonates with Jane Addams's belief in the role immigrants had to play in American life. Addams, to whom Polacheck dedicated her memoirs, *I Came a Stranger: The Story of a Hull-House Girl*, insisted that a noble life was defined by attention to time-honored social structures and that immigrant folkways could provide an important alternative model of social values to that of the modern era's alienation. Where Turner argued for separation from stultifying Western European tradition,³⁴¹ Addams abjured "inventive individualism" for the sustenance of tradition.

How this philosophy would look in practice is the subject of this chapter. Here, I trace the ways in which America's New Immigrant populations were envisioned as foundational to national history, and fundamental to national citizenship, by exploring the contours and reception of the Hull-House Labor Museum (1900-1935) in its first decade of operation. Opened to the public in November 1900 and consisting of two large, lavishly decorated floors cluttered with hand made objects, didactic exhibits such as maps and timelines, and immigrant crafts instructors, the museum told the story of the United States as the culmination of diverse crafts traditions, rooted in the stable social economies of village life. Arranged in a sequence from "least" to "most" technologically advanced, the space vivified the evolution from "primitive" handicraft technique to the complicated machinery of U.S. industry, including foreign-born populations in a history of American development. Such an evolutionary framework resounded through contemporaneous intellectual culture, from G. Stanley Hall's developmental psychology to the World's Columbian Exposition, where one climbed "the rungs of the evolutionary ladder," from Dahomey village to the rational, efficient, and clean White City.³⁴²

Yet focusing on the cultural politics of this evolutionary framework obscures what I suggest was a yearning at the museum's core: Immigrants' refusal to relinquish communal values, and their time-honored devotion to duty, could recall Americans to their own "true" inheritance, the commonwealth which seemed to be lost amidst the tectonic social and economic changes of the turn of the century. In essence, Addams believed that what Turner denigrated as the "bondage of the past" was actually liberating, since it provided for a life energized by ritual and community, both of which acted as

him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin." Turner, "Significance of the Frontier," *Significance of the Frontier*, 4.

³⁴¹ A decade later, in *The Frontier in American History*, Turner recapitulated the image of liberation from the stale ideas and social relationships of Europe, as "[t]he men of the 'Western World' turned their backs upon the Atlantic Ocean, and with a grim energy and self-reliance began to build up a society free from the dominance of ancient forms." Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (1903), quoted in Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), 304.

³⁴² Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), ch. 3; Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 66-67. Addams did not recall the World's Fair fondly. She described how "general financial depression throughout the country was much intensified in Chicago by the numbers of unemployed stranded at the close of the expedition." Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York: Signet Classics, 1961 [1910]), 106. Indeed, in 1896, the *Sunday Times-Herald* looked in on the Nineteenth Ward, noting, "The Greeks, Syrians, Chinese, Turks and Egyptians got stranded after the fair and drifted over." "How to Reclaim Chicago's Slums," *Sunday Times-Herald*, 12 April, 1896, 1, Hull-House Collection, University of Illinois, Chicago Library (hereafter, HHC), box 70, folder 508.

bulwarks against corrosive, enervating, flippant modernity. History was not the personal struggle of the frontier, to be contended with and alchemized into greatness. Quite the contrary, it was the nurturing bedrock of social cohesion and personal and communal purpose, embodied in the sustaining practice of traditional craftsmanship.

Literature on the Hull-House Labor Museum is large and diverse. Whether celebratory or denunciatory, the crucial point for many scholars is that the site provided a point of contact between native-born Americans and immigrants. Much critical scholarship has emphasized the processes by which these acts of rapprochement only relegated immigrant traditions to quaint, picturesque, and apolitical “immigrant gifts.” In this line of thinking, the Labor Museum belongs with the vogue for European folk songs, legends, and dances that, in one scholar’s words, “spiced the American way of life without dangerously threatening the idealized dream of a clean, ordered, diverse America.”³⁴³ But what such scholarship fails to take into account are the ways in which “immigrant gifts” were deployed within the museum’s insistent historical vision: They did not “spice” the national narrative but in fact restructured it. Instead of racial lineage, political philosophy, or territorial expansion, the nation’s greatness resided in its inheritance of a transnational, transhistorical legacy of production techniques. And while telling a triumphant story of human-history-through-industry, the Hull-House Labor Museum became a safe space for enacting—and not just reenacting—those traditions. In the process, it looked to modern Chicago as a cautionary tale of what happened when “progress” escaped its mooring in community-based ideals.

³⁴³ Shannon Jackson, *Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 161. For the museum’s importance in the shift towards a functionalist approach in social science, see Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressive’s Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), ch. 1, and Christine Louise Holbo, “The Home-Making of Americans: The Invention of Everyday Life in American Literary Realism and Social Science, 1866-1911” (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 2007), 203-215. For its role in the Arts and Crafts movement, see Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 132-133; Bruce Robert Kahler, “Art and Life: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Chicago, 1898-1910” (Ph.D. dissertation, Purdue University, 1986), ch. 2; and T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 79-80. For the museum as an “immigrant gift,” see Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 215-216. For the museum as an affective educational space, see Anne Lindsey Bruder, “Outside the Classroom Walls: Alternative Pedagogies in American Literature and Culture, 1868-1910” (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009), 181-200; and Mary Ann Stankiewicz, “Art at Hull House, 1889-1901: Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr,” *Women’s Art Journal* 10:1 (Spring-Summer, 1989), 38. For the museum in the democratization of the domestic arts, see Caitlin Anne Patterson, “Redecorating the Nation: Creating Democratic Arts from the Settlement House to the New Deal” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1997), ch. 1. For the museum as performative space of social adjustment (“reformance”), see Jackson, *Lines of Activity*, 253-271 and “Performance at Hull-House: Museum, Microfiche, and Historiography,” *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*, ed. Della Pollock (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 261-293.

Communal Belonging in a Miller's Thumb

Of what would American society consist, how would it look, in the industrial, immigrant city? How could one reconstitute community in the midst of a society marked by deracination, anomie, and alienation? These questions drove Jane Addams in mushrooming Chicago. Twenty-seven million men, women, and children deluged the United States between 1880 and 1924, two-thirds of them from Southern and Eastern Europe. Bringing with them alternative religious, linguistic, and cultural traditions, these so-called "New Immigrants" transformed the national landscape, especially booming industrial cities, as urban population growth came to outpace that of rural populations. But New Immigrants were uniquely entwined with the history of Chicago during this period. Rebuilding from the devastating fire of 1871, the city, frequently metaphorized in song and poetry as a phoenix, rose up from its ashes by drawing immigrants to its meat, grain, and timber industries. Benefiting from cheaper and faster trans-Atlantic travel, and escaping rural poverty and (especially in the case of Eastern European Jews) racial violence, New Immigrants made Chicago grow. From the fifth largest U.S. city in 1879, it became the second largest in 1900. By 1890, eighty per cent of the city's total population consisted of immigrants and their children.³⁴⁴

In the impoverished Nineteenth Ward of southwestern Chicago, where Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded Hull-House in a rundown mansion on Halsted Street in 1889, in an attempt to "direct... middle-class energies back into the city that others were ready to abandon,"³⁴⁵ the *Chicago Record* counted "nineteen different nationalities" living within a square mile radius in 1896. In doing so, it pronounced the neighborhood "cosmopolitan."³⁴⁶ Yet for those inhabiting the tenements and congregating on the garbage-strewn streets,³⁴⁷ diversity did not entail the kind of intercultural comity promised by the term. Immigrants lived and congregated with their own ethnic groups, a fact highlighted in the neighborhood map drawn up by Hull-House social workers in 1895, its color-coded city blocks precisely distinguishing where different groups resided.³⁴⁸ Russian-born Alex Elson, who lived in the neighborhood and

³⁴⁴ James P. Shenton and Kevin Kenny, "Ethnicity and Immigration," *The New American History*, ed. Eric Foner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 3, 58; O'Leary, *To Die For*, 50; Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 222, 48; Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 345-348; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1865-1920* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 15.

³⁴⁵ Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 222.

³⁴⁶ "Hull House," *Chicago Record*, n.d. except for 1896, Hull-House Association Records, University of Illinois, Chicago Library, box 48, folder 509 (hereafter, HHAR).

³⁴⁷ For a description of Addams's struggles with sanitation, see *Twenty Years*, 185-187.

³⁴⁸ In 1895, Agnes Sinclair Holbrooke noted eighteen different "nationalities": Italian, Swiss, French, French Canadian, Greek, Syrian, English, Irish, Black, Bohemian, Scandinavian, Russian, Polish, German, Dutch, Chinese, "Arabian," and Turk. Agnes Sinclair Holbrook, "Map Notes and Comments," *Hull-House Maps and Papers: A Presentation of Nationalities and Wages in a Congested District of Chicago, Together with Comments and Essays on Problems Growing Out of the Social Conditions By the Residents of Hull-House, a Social Settlement* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007 [1895]), 60. Perhaps the best study of Chicago's ethnic enclaves, as well as of the tenor of inter-ethnic relations, is Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). My own assessments,

took folk dancing lessons at Hull-House, understood the perils of his polyglot neighborhood. Decades later, he delineated a precise and complicated urban cartography, knowledge of whose frontiers was essential to survival:

From about Fourteenth Street to Roosevelt Road was heavily Jewish, where the area almost all the way to Harrison was primarily Italian. At Harrison it became Greek. If you went any further south of Roosevelt from Fourteenth to about Sixteenth it was Irish with pockets of Bohemian and beyond Sixteenth it was heavily Czech, Bohemian, Polish.

Traveling between his family's tenement apartment and the settlement house, "you really had to win your passage across those various boundaries." Sadie Shapiro, another neighborhood girl of Jewish Eastern European descent, recalled being frightened when she had to walk through the Italian enclave at Taylor Street. Her retrospective explanation underscores the extent to which "New Immigrant" was a designation with little personal meaning for those to whom it applied. "[Y]ou're always afraid of what you don't know," she recalled in an interview in 1984. "And I think maybe they were just as afraid to go elsewhere, the Italians."³⁴⁹ Borders between ethnic groups expanded, contracted, and shifted. The one constant seems to be that they existed as vivid markers of difference for those living within them.

Nor did isolation provide for sustaining community life. *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (1895), a multi-form, multi-authored text that combines the formal elements of muckraking data collection with humanistic portraits of the neighborhood's inhabitants, sheds light on the immigrant condition through a language of declension. Josefa Humpal-Zeman's essay, "The Bohemian People in Chicago," noted that this group had "better food and more of it than... at home." But she framed this as a superficial accomplishment and a point of departure for meditations on the dissolution of Bohemian "social life" in America. What Humpal-Zeman found, in her ultimate assessment, was a hybrid identity considerably less than the sum of its parts:

They miss the free garden concerts that are given in almost every large city in Bohemia; the Sunday walks, the reading-rooms, and various holiday feasts that are almost indispensable to the Bohemian temperament.... Similar amusements are popular with the newcomers; but as they live here longer, and become more Americanized, this social life changes and becomes more formal, more affected, and gradually becomes a mixture of American and European, something unlike

focused as they are on the area immediately surrounding Hull-House, are drawn from the dozens of oral histories of the Hull-House community, and located in the Hull-House Oral History Collection at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle.

³⁴⁹ Alex Elson, interviewed by Babette Munson (11/11/1982), OH-005, box 2, folder 27, Hull-House Oral History Collection, University of Illinois at Chicago Library (hereafter, HHOHC); Sadie Shapiro, interviewed by Mary Ann Johnson (8/10/1984), OH-033, box 4, folder 71, HHOHC. Later visions would make the connection between hostile "tribes" even more explicit. In Michael Gold's *Jews without Money* (1930), the Jewish Eastern European narrator imagines his salvation from a gang of Italian youth, "whooping like Indians" and calling him "Christ-Killer." As Werner Sollors writes, "he views the territory of Hester and Mulberry Streets [on the Lower East Side of Manhattan] as the Wild West and soon yearns for a 'Messiah who would look like Buffalo Bill.'" Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 142.

the real Bohemian, and foreign to the American; entirely original, the “Bohemian-American.”

In “Remarks Upon the Italian Colony in Chicago,” for the same publication, Alessandro Mastro-Valerio pointed up the possibility of self-betterment only by fleeing Chicago for the surrounding countryside. He explained that, since the majority of the city’s Italian population of 25,000 came from “the peasant class,” “the only means for the regeneration of the Italian immigrant from the state in which they [*sic*] nowadays find themselves in the crowded districts of the American cities, is to send them to farming.” Hull-House’s workers, for their part, were preoccupied with the deleterious effects of modernity upon the domestic sphere. “The peasant immigrant’s surroundings begin to be vulgar,” Hull-House resident Ellen Gates Starr declared in the same text, “precisely at the point where he begins to buy and adorn his dwelling with the products of American manufacture.”³⁵⁰

Deracination took its mental and physical tolls. Contemporary observers found the neighborhood tawdry and exploitative, with its “rather cheap collection of tobacco-stands, saloons, old-iron establishments, and sordid-looking fancy shops.” A weekly paycheck of \$9 made someone, in the memories of one former neighborhood girl, a “Big shot.” Grass was rarely seen and children “thought everything was cement.” Bodies, as well as minds, were disfigured. The hardscrabble Nineteenth Ward accounted for 1/36th of Chicago’s population, but 1/6th of the city’s deaths from typhoid. Enervating industry only exacerbated neighborhood blight. Writing, respectively, as State Inspector and Assistant Inspector of Factories and Workshops for Illinois, Florence Kelley and Alzina P. Stevens described for *Hull-House Maps and Papers* the ways in which children had been remade by their sweatshop work:

It is a lamentable fact, well known to those who have investigated child-labor, that children are found in the greatest number where the conditions of labor are most dangerous to life and health. Among the occupations in which children are most employed in Chicago, and which most endanger the health, are: The tobacco trade, nicotine poisoning finding as many victims among factory children as

³⁵⁰ Josefa Humpal-Zeman, “The Bohemian People in Chicago,” *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, 110; Alessandro Mastro-Valerio, “Remarks Upon the Italian Colony in Chicago,” *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, 117; Ellen Gates Starr, “Art and Labor,” *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, 132. One might fruitfully compare the importance Mastro-Valerio places upon a rural Italian atavism with later attempts to render Italians as essential to American “progress.” In 1928, Giovanni E. Schiavo, a fellow in New York University’s Department of Sociology, published *The Italians in Chicago*, a brief, often purple text for which Jane Addams, incidentally, provided the preface. Subtitled *A Study in Americanization*, Schiavo’s text actually places Italians and Italian culture at the *center* of American culture, whether it is emphasizing Columbus’s and Amerigo Vespucci’s obviously fundamental role in the “discovery” (or at least the naming) of America; pointing out that “Probably the first Italian to set foot on Chicago Land was Henry de Tonti, the famous Lieutenant of La Salle”; or noting the importance of Italian immigrants in fueling “the greatest industrial process in the history of the United States.” In other ways, recent Italian immigrants were no different from their English forebears. He explained that recent immigrants’ “lack of culture may be another of the various phases of the immigrant’s life. The English themselves did not cultivate literature as soon as they landed. Sixteen years from the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers passed before Harvard was founded! And the Pilgrim Fathers were not illiterate immigrants!” Giovanni E. Schiavo, *The Italians in Chicago: A Study in Americanization* (Chicago: Italian American Publishing Co., 1928), 13, 23, 28, 71.

among the boys who are voluntary devotees of the weed, consumers of the deadly cigarette included; frame gilding, in which work a child's fingers are stiffened and throat disease is contracted; buttonholing, machine-stitching, and hand-work in tailor or sweat shops, the machine-work producing spinal curvature, and for girls pelvic disorders also, while the unsanitary condition of the shops makes even hand-sewing dangerous; bakeries, where children slowly roast before the ovens; binderies, paper-box and paint factories, where arsenical paper, rotting paste, and the poison of the paints are injurious; boiler-plate works, cutlery works, and metal-stamping works, where the dusk produces lung disease; the handling of hot metal, accidents; the hammering of plate, deafness.

Kelley and Stevens gruesomely inverted the calculus of labor, as products made producers into sad objects, what they called the "The human products of our industry." Kelley's and Stevens's reliance on the measured language of muckraking data collection, with its straightforward presentation ("Among the occupations in which children are most employed in Chicago, and which most endanger the health, are...") and their long litany of examples do not shy away from the grotesque. Children "slowly roast before the ovens."³⁵¹

For many onlookers, though, the hyper-localization of ethnic enclaves or the gruesome victimization of sweatshop labor faded amidst a generalized fear of tempestuous cities. While ethnic groups were frequently envisioned as contributing their own uniquely corrosive pathologies to urban life (journalists codified archetypes such as the shifty Eastern European Jew or the violence-prone Italian Mafioso³⁵²), all were lumped in with an overarching trend: Strangers and social strivers were unmaking America. Critics envisioned the mushrooming cityscape as "a magnet for sin," their trepidations efflorescing in *Ladies' Home Journal* articles giving advice to "The Girl Alone in the City" (1896) and naturalist fiction such as Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), with its many consumerist and interpersonal deceptions. Novels such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), Henry Blake Fuller's *The Cliff-Dwellers* (1893), and Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908) fantasied cataclysmic struggles between Capital and Labor that played out in American cities. Fuller set his work in a dystopian Chicago of the future, the result of class warfare. There, human life had become insignificant, fractured by conflict. The city was a hostile jungle where "nobody really knows who he

³⁵¹ Holbrook, "Map Notes and Comments," *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, 53; Sadie Shapiro, interviewed by Mary Ann Johnson (8/10/1984), OH-033, box 4, folder 71, HHOHC; Judge James Zafiratos, interviewed by Beth Bailey (8/22/1984), OH-050, box 5, folder 87, HHOHC; Polacheck, *I Came a Stranger*, 72; Florence Kelley and Alzina P. Stevens, "Wage-Earning Children," *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, 78, 80. For a further discussion of Kelley's work on, and stemming from, "Wage-Earning Children," see Robert H. Bremner, *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1956), 79. For the importance muckrakers placed on data, see *Ibid.*, 140: The Progressive Era, Bremner writes, "was a time when realism influenced, if it did not entirely dominate, many aspects of American culture. Religion, philosophy, the arts, politics, and philanthropy were all agitated to discover and disclose the tangible truths of actual life."

³⁵² Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 66-67; Robert Anthony Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 188-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 44.

is, or who his people are, or where he is from.”³⁵³ The cityscape held out little solace. The department store, which exploited fashionable *Beaux-Art* styles for their facades, stoked consumerist fantasy through historical and exotic tableaux that existed merely at the level of visual spectacle, and presented goods entirely detached from their “origins... within a particular mode of production,” part of a larger urban aesthetic of “picturesque eclecticism.”³⁵⁴

Distrust of conniving newcomers had its crueler manifestations in anti-immigrant agitation that could boil over in both racial slander and violence. As Carl Smith shows, in the wake of crises such as the Haymarket Square Bombing (1886), when a bomb was tossed into a crowd of Chicago policemen monitoring a workers’ demonstration and prominent immigrant anarchists were sentenced to death in a railroad trial, the popular press stoked the fantasies of racial savagery then playing out at Wild West shows. Journalists rendered the foreign anarchists as Native American caricatures. Their political

³⁵³ Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*, 357 (emphasis in original); Rush Ashmore, “The Girl Alone in the City,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal* 13:12 (November, 1896), 16; Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998 [1900]); Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (New York: Signet Classics, 1960 [1888]); Jack London, *The Iron Heel* (New York: Macmillan, 1908); Henry Blake Fuller, *The Cliff-Dwellers* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 290. For a larger discussion of the cultural manifestations of this preoccupation with self-making as subterfuge, see Mary McAleer Balkun, *The American Counterfeit: Authenticity and Identity in American Literature and Culture* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2006) and Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989). Nick Yablon’s *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of Urban Modernity, 1819-1919* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), devotes ch. 3 to the vogue for novels set in American cities after class warfare, which terms, “prospective histories.” See also, John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), ch. 5. In 1930, Jane Addams herself noted, “The social relationships in a modern city are hastily made and often superficial. Common sense, the household tradition, the inherited custom, the desultory reading by which so much of life is directed, the stream of advice constantly poured over the radio, break down the restraints long sustained in smaller communities by public opinion and in the end certain areas of city life seem to be in a state of dire confusion.” Jane Addams, *The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House, September 1909 to September 1929: With a Record of a Growing World Consciousness* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), 412.

³⁵⁴ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, 133, 119. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 33, proposes the ways in which eclecticism could signal a crisis of identity fostered by the “weightlessness” and “evasive banality” of the modern era: “It is difficult but not impossible to speculate on the larger cultural significance of eclecticism in the visual arts. While a few historians have seen this jumble of pseudohistorical styles as a sign of American energy and exuberance, I suggest that it as energy which often lacked a controlling purpose and which embodied the cultural confusion of men who no longer possessed a coherent vocabulary of symbols.... [I]t both reflected and reinforced feelings of diffuseness and disorientation.” Yablon, *Untimely Ruins*, 194, has explored how the ruins of San Francisco, following the earthquake of 1906, laid bare the “flimsy facades” of the modern cityscape. The distinction between appearance and reality frequently played at the interpersonal level, as well, often provoking an anxiety over social life in the modern city. See, for instance, Balkun, *American Counterfeit*; Bremner, *From the Depths*, 141; and Orvell, *The Real Thing*.

meetings were “war dances.” In this formulation, “Like the feared and hated Indians,... the anarchists were hostile and dangerous savages who only understood force and had no justifiable claim to American space.”³⁵⁵

Even sympathy for immigrants, often manifested in muckraking’s righteous indignation, saw foreign newcomers as parochial, dumb, threatening, and dirty. During this era, the intrepid reporter’s anti-pilgrimage to an urban netherworld became a journalistic trope. Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and Walter Wyckoff all made their names journeying to immigrant slum neighborhoods or posing as sweatshop workers for exposés. Typically, this brand of reportage exploited the frisson of being both near to, and protected from, urban squalor.³⁵⁶ In Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), a combination of illustrations and essays about life in the New York metropolitan area, the photojournalist provided a pathetic depiction of immigrant life, beaten down by poverty, inhumane living conditions, and urban violence. The remedy, Riis proposed, would come through inculcating “American” values of cleanliness, health, sobriety, and education—an “Americanization” that Riis himself underwent in his journey from Danish immigrant and migrant laborer to celebrity who “embraced conventional bourgeois moralism.”³⁵⁷

Hull-House maintained a similar philosophy of reform that placed it firmly within this Progressive tradition. Progressivism encompassed a host of diverse, at times opposing practices. Overall, though, it represented an attempt to stabilize social relationships. As Alan Dawley has shown, “While accepting the general framework of capitalist property relations,... [Progressives] had lost faith in the capacity of the free market to create social justice.” Walter Lippman, closer to the action, described it as “rejecting the ‘drift’ of the market in favor of the ‘mastery’ of social control.”³⁵⁸ Hull-House, true to its intellectual milieu, was an island in the stream; or, in Polacheck’s

³⁵⁵ Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 150-151. For a discussion of the discourse of foreign invasion after Haymarket, see Smith, *Urban Disorder*, ch. 8. See also, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 52. John Higham. *Strangers in the Land*, and, more recently, Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), ch. 3, provide overviews of both the racial philosophies and vigilante violence that culminated in the Emergency Quota Act of 1921. For a fine-grained analysis of how this played out in one particular community, see Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, which focuses on Italian Harlem.

³⁵⁶ Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, 126-127. For Wyckoff, see Bremner, *From the Depths*, 145.

³⁵⁷ Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York: With 100 Photographs from the Riis Collection* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971 [1890]); Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 120.

³⁵⁸ Alan Dawley, *Changing the World: American Progressives in War and Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4; Walter Lippman, quoted in *ibid.* For historical studies of Progressivism, see Crunden, *Ministers of Reform*; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), ch. 7. Victoria Bissell Brown, a recent biographer of Addams, emphasizes Progressivism’s deep philosophical dimension, seeing Progressives as “moved by spiritual and democratic longings for a society in which stewardship was a responsibility shared by all and individual rights operated in harmony with community interests.” Victoria Bissell Brown, *The Education of Jane Addams* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004),

memory, an “oasis in a desert of boredom and monotony.”³⁵⁹ Addams and her cohort of well-educated, upper-middle-class young women devoted to social work, provided kindergarten and cooking classes, lectures on hygiene, and artistic instruction to immigrants and their children. They decorated the mansion, she wrote, “with the photographs and other [objects they] had collected in Europe” on their Grand Tours. The goal of such efforts was to “bring to [the settlement’s] aid all these adjuncts which the cultivated man regards as good and suggestive of the best life of the past.” Lectures hewed to the ideal of “self-culture,” the pedagogical ambition to develop one’s “spiritual and creative potential.”³⁶⁰ That this movement was on the wane by the late-nineteenth century, eclipsed by “an increasing emphasis on vocational and success training, eliminating those broader aspects of human development which the proponents of self-culture had considered essential,”³⁶¹ only reinforces the vision of Hull-House as a safe space of guided self-development.

Within its first few years, as the settlement was catering weekly to between eight hundred and a thousand patrons,³⁶² observers lauded its “uplifting” effects. As the *Charities Review* noted in 1892, Hull-House was a safe space of simple idealism. Its “books, pictures, and furnishings,” the journal asserted, “nowhere suggest an ‘institution,’ but are plainly the choice of cultivated taste, seeking the simplest and the best.” The *Charities Review* emphasized the settlement house as a garrison rather than a crossroads: Within, “Nothing could give the same sense of beauty and restfulness in the midst of much that is discordant.” “Every man who goes there puts on a clean shirt and combs his hair out of deference and scrubs his hands because they are certain to be shaken by clean ones,” the *Chicago Tribune* claimed in 1895, effectively placing interpersonal relationships at the center of social reform. The paper went on to describe how these values could spill over into everyday life. “Every woman, after leaving, goes home, washes her baby and the floor, puts her bed over the back fence to air, rubs the window panes until they shine, and plants a slip of geranium in a tomato can.” “There is an air of permanency attaching to the place,” the *Chicago Record* noted the following year. It was a quality that was “especially marked in this neighborhood of constantly changing population and surroundings.” “Order arises and rules,” wrote Helen Campbell for *The Congregationalist* in 1901.³⁶³ Purpose and permanency thus played twin roles in popular discussions of Hull-House, where the settlement was juxtaposed with its destitute surroundings.

³⁵⁹ Polacheck, *I Came a Stranger*, 97.

³⁶⁰ Addams, *Twenty Years*, 61; “Sunday Lectures and Concerts” (pamphlet, 1892), *The Jane Addams Papers*, ed. Mary Lynn McCreen Bryan et al., microfilm, 82 reels, (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1985-85), hereafter, TJAP, reel #50.

³⁶¹ John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man: Changing Concepts of Success in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 84, 175.

³⁶² Brown, *Education of Jane Addams*, 210.

³⁶³ Alice Miller, “Hull-House,” *Charities Review* (February, 1892), 168, box 70, folder 506, HHC; “What Hull House Really Is,” *Chicago Tribune*, 28 April, 1895, box 70, folder 508, HHC; “Hull House,” *Chicago Record*; Helen Campbell, “Jane Addams of Hull House, Chicago: Her Personality and Philosophy of Life,” *The Congregationalist* (4 May, 1901), 712, box 58, folder 512, HHAR. See also, “Work that Counts. Social Settlements of Chicago Make Good Citizens. Lead and Help by Example. In the Homes of the Poor Are Sown Seeds of True Democracy and Right Living,” *Chicago Post*, 7 October, 189[9], box 48, folder 511, HHAR.

But purpose and permanency could also be realized through ancestral preservation. Indeed, an emphasis on Hull-House as a space for enacting social adjustment, what Shannon Jackson has called “reformance,”³⁶⁴ obscures an antithetical strain, existing in counterpoint to the ideal of self-culture promoted at the settlement house and, I would suggest, providing a window into a deeper ambition. Hull-House was also concerned with preserving the means by which time-honored local custom could provide ballast for right living in the present. Although her experience as the head of Hull-House was central to Addams’s development along these lines, one finds her making gestures towards balancing custom and modernity early in her life.

One of Addams’s earliest memories touched upon the ways in which one could be irreversibly marked by participation in the daily life of one’s community. “I was one of the younger members of a large family and an eager participant in the village life,” she recalled of her childhood in *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910).³⁶⁵ For Addams, the ideal of the American commonwealth—for which Cedarville, with its small-town community of Union Army veterans and satisfied workers—was literally embodied in the mark of common labor. “I had a consuming ambition to possess a miller’s thumb,” she recalled, and would sit contentedly for a long time rubbing between my thumb and fingers the ground wheat as it fell from between the millstones, before it was taken up on an endless chain of mysterious little buckets to be bolted into flour. I believe I have never since wanted anything more desperately than I wanted my right thumb to be flattened, as my father’s had become, during his earlier years of a miller’s life.³⁶⁶

Belonging in the form of a “flattened” thumb, initiation into the endless and (for her) “mysterious” sequence of steady production eluded Addams. The wealth into which she was born, as well as the expectations of genteel womanhood, precluded her working in the flourmill.

Nevertheless, during a privileged upbringing in Cedarville, Addams was weaned on the ethical belief that, in the words of one biographer, “individual rights operated in harmony with community interests.”³⁶⁷ In her schooling and in her post-graduation travels, she developed an ideal of the role of woman as guardian. At the Rockford Female Seminary, Addams first encountered the writings of John Ruskin and William Morris, English heroes of the Arts and Crafts movement. T. J. Jackson Lears’s interpretation of the movement—that it responded to the “[y]earning to reintegrate selfhood by resurrecting the authentic experience of manual labor” and that the craftsman’s “work was necessary and demanding... [and] rooted in a genuine community”³⁶⁸—seems an apt

³⁶⁴ Jackson, *Lines of Activity*.

³⁶⁵ For the discursive techniques Addams employs to situate her life story within Progressive ambitions for reform, see Bruder, “Outside Classroom Walls,” 200-231.

³⁶⁶ Addams, *Twenty Years*, 1, 7.

³⁶⁷ Brown, *Education of Jane Addams*, 21.

³⁶⁸ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 60. Lears provides a general discussion of the Arts and Crafts philosophy in ch. 2 of this text. He is skeptical of the actual social benefit of the Arts and Crafts ideology, as followed by the well-heeled eastern elite upon who his study focuses. He sees it as another example of the “therapeutic” rather than the political, the dillentatish rather than the profound. Eileen Boris devotes *Art & Labor* to the Arts and Crafts movement in England and America.

descriptor of Arts and Crafts' potential in Jane Addams's life. If she could not achieve that level of self-actualizing and community-sustaining craftsmanship championed by Ruskin, Morris, and their acolytes, she was beginning to develop a mythic conception of her unique responsibility as a woman. "Observe our class paper!" she wrote a friend from Rockford when she was nineteen years old. "The design, it may be well to state is of wheat and hops, the *hops* I will admit are obscure but their significance is deep." Meditating on things that were "obscure" but "deep" provided a language for Addams's own understanding of her responsibility in the world. "Our purpose is to give bread to the world in every sense we can," she continued in the letter, "for it surely needs it, 'bread-givers' you know is the old Saxon meaning for the word *lady*, it is a pity that it ever lost its primitive meaning."³⁶⁹

Social life in Europe provided an example of communal harmony in action. From Dresden, she wrote her brother-in-law, George Bowman Haldeman, "I am more convinced all the time of the value of social life, of its *necessity* for the development of some of our best traits." It seems, from letters home, that the "*necessity*" of "social life" was illustrated by its contrast with what she witnessed in Europe's cities, especially London. As she wrote her older brother, John Weber Addams,

We had quite an adventure last Saturday evening, Miss Warner the lady of the house took nine of the guests down into the "East End" to see the Saturday night marketing.... At one time we found ourselves in a Dickens neighborhood past Mrs. Bardell's house, the old debtor's prison, & Louis all alone. We took a look down into dingy old Grubb St. It was simply an outside superficial survey of the misery & wretchedness, but it was enough to make one thoroughly sad and perplexed.

And she lamented the spaces where male-female and intergenerational community failed to penetrate, such as Munich's beer halls, which presented "a disgusting site that I should never see again. There is one side of the german [*sic*] beer-drinking that is social & attractive, to see the entire family at an out door concert each with his huge mug &c but here is the excess again and almost all of them show the miserable result."³⁷⁰

Faith in the nurturing family unit, and in its adherence to tradition, remained with Addams through her years at Hull-House. Attending the Passover *Seder* of a Jewish family that frequented Hull-House compelled a meditation on ways of life under siege by modernity. The celebration vivified a cultural space "where the traditional and religious significance of the woman's daily activity was still retained," the work of maintaining domestic harmony providing the safe space to facilitate the ritual storytelling that was to be undertaken "by... husband and son." Addams was subsequently inspired to imagine a

³⁶⁹ Brown, *Education of Jane Addams*, 83; Jane Addams to Clara B. Lutts, 14 and 17 January, 1880, *The Selected Papers of Jane Addams: Vol. 1: Preparing to Lead*, eds. Mary Lynn McCree Bryan, Barbara Blair, and Maree de Angury (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 318. My thinking on this aspect of Addams's formative years has been informed by Brown, *Education of Jane Addams*, ch. 5, especially p. 89.

³⁷⁰ Jane Addams to George Bowman Haldeman, Dresden, 4 January, 1884, in *The Selected Papers of Jane Addams: Vol. 2: Venturing into Usefulness, 1881-88*, eds. Mary Lynn McCree Bryan, Barbara Blair, and Maree de Angury (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 287; Jane Addams to John Weber Addams, London, 29 October, 1883, in *ibid.*, 270; Jane Addams to John Weber Addams, Munich, 27 January, 1884, in *ibid.*, 297.

kaleidoscopic fantasy of “shifting pictures of women’s labor” that maintained the ancient rituals of familial connection: “Indian women grinding grain outside their huts,” “white-clad Moorish women... at a well in Tangiers,” Southern Italian women “kneeling in a row along the stream and beating their wet clothes against the smooth white stones.”³⁷¹ She was also here speaking to the rituals of the preindustrial village, an allusion to the rural life that many reformers believed formed the basis for egalitarian problem solving, a bulwark against the rapid changes and social dislocations of the modern city.

Indeed, whereas Riis captured America’s newest arrivals in squalid, cramped tenements which left little room for “ethnic color”—leafing through his photographs, one is struck by such isolated examples as the Yiddish broadsides plastered on Hester Street in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, the poster of costumed folk dancers hanging from a decrepit kitchen wall, and the *challah* laid on a table in a filthy cellar³⁷²—Jane Addams personally gloried in contact with the colorful archetypes of folk culture that now greeted her in her own country. In her article, “A Function of the Social Settlements” (1899), she described the frisson of contact with preserved folkways. “No one who has ever read Zangwill’s ‘Children of the Ghetto,’” she claimed in the article for the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, “can afterwards walk through the Jewish quarter of any great city without a quickening of the blood as he passes.” For the ghetto offered the “momentary touch of the poetry and fidelity which are fostered there, the power of an elaborate ceremonial and carefully preserved customs.”³⁷³

³⁷¹ Addams, *Twenty Years*, 159-160.

³⁷² Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, ch. 10, p. 123.

³⁷³ Jane Addams, “A Function of the Social Settlement,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 13 (May, 1899), 37. The vision of the Eastern European *shtetl* transplanted to the American ghetto illustrates what Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett describes as Progressive’s proclivity for imagining an “ethnographic bell jar drop[ping] over the terrain,” transforming a “neighborhood, village, or region becomes for all intents and purposes a living museum in situ.” Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 54. Zangwill’s London Jews, Susan Schweik points out, were themselves literary abstractions, created to counteract the prevailing anti-Semitic vision of Jewish deformity and ugliness. Zangwill “put forward the uncrippled schnorrer and his generous Jewish culture... [i]n contrast to the ‘anonymous atoms’ of ‘Christendom.’” Susan Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 177. But there is a larger issue at stake in Addams’s recourse to literature. Eleven years after this article, she would denigrate allusion, describing it as “The Snare of Preparation” for the ways in which education could prevent one from fully experiencing real life. Hull-House, she explained, emerged from the rapidity with which she refracted a disturbing scene of poverty in London’s East End through the prism of Thomas De Quincey’s “The Vision of Sudden Death,” suggesting the multiple layers of distance from real life that education could produce. “This is what we were all doing,” Addams explained, lumbering our minds with literature that only served to cloud the really vital situation spread before our eyes. It seemed to me too preposterous that in my first view of the horror of East London I should have recalled De Quincey’s literature description of the literary suggestion which had once paralyzed him. In my disgust it all appeared a hateful, vicious circle which even the apostles of culture themselves admitted, for had not one of the greatest among the moderns plainly said that ‘conduct, and not culture is three fourths of human life.’” Addams, *Twenty Years*, 45-46. Was literature the seedbed from which true intercultural contact and interpersonal relationships could flourish? Was it an obstacle? Or was it simply a matter of knowing, as Bruder, “Outside Classroom Walls,” 201, declares, when one should put down the book and immerse oneself in real life?

Addams was equally concerned with the pragmatic ways in which custom could be harnessed to problem solving. As with Hilda Satt Polacheck, the retention of an Old World vernacular was the necessary next chapter in a national story of community. From its inception, Hull-House celebrated New Year's Day with an "Old Settler's Party," replete with much singing, "good cheer," and "speeches about the early days of Chicago." The moment marked the occasion for the recreation of a nostalgic "early Chicago when all its citizens came together in mutual enterprises." For Addams, rapprochement between native-born Americans and immigrants hinged on this common experience within the bosom of village life. At one such event, she recalled "one old man, fiercely American, who had reproached me because we had so many 'foreign views' on our walls." (The settler was commenting upon the settlement house's gallery space, the Butler Museum, with its picturesque European landscapes that might remind immigrants of home while also instructing them in appropriate expressions of beauty.) In response, Addams described how these European landscapes "might afford a familiar island to the immigrants in a sea of new and strange impressions." To this, the man described simply as an "old settler guest," replied, "I see; they feel as we did when we saw a Yankee notion from down East." For Addams, this recognition gave voice to the common struggle to retain folk practices amidst the incursions of modernity. It "formulat[ed] the dim kinship between the pioneer and the immigrant, both 'buffeting the waves of a new development.'" She further emphasized the affinities between "pioneer" early Chicagoans and recent immigrants by drawing from the former's experience in providing "genuine help to our various enterprises for neighborhood improvement, and from their own memories of earlier hardships have made many shrewd suggestions for alleviating the difficulties of that first sharp struggle with untoward conditions."³⁷⁴

If the dilemmas of immigrant life could be solved by recourse to small-town American forms of problem solving, immigrants could also reinvigorate core national values that seemed to be losing the battle with modern industrial capitalism. Hull-House resident Grace Abbot did not apologize that Chicago's Greeks (numbering 4,218 in 1909, with 3,541 foreign born) did not live up to the expectations of the "average American." They may not have embodied "the beauty of an Apollo and the ability of a Pericles," but they were not the criminals and vagrants reported on in "sensational newspaper accounts," she assured readers in *The American Journal of Sociology*. Rather, Greece's constitutional monarchy, universal manhood suffrage, freedom of the press, and anti-aristocratic society, as well as the practice of "peasant proprietorship of land in the Peloponnesus," made its immigrants uniquely suited to American life. And it was to Chicago's Greeks that Jane Addams turned as the last, best hope for social justice. Addams looked to social atavism, not political economy. But as with Abbot, she

³⁷⁴ Jane Addams to Miss McIlvain, 28 December, 1914, Jane Addams Collection: 1860-1935, Chicago Historical Society, box 2, folder 1; Addams, *Twenty Years*, 71. For an extended discussion of the Butler Gallery's pedagogical strengths and weaknesses, see Patterson, "Redecorating the Nation," 50-58. British Journalist William T. Stead's held up Hull-House as a rural island in the urban stream. In *If Christ Came to Chicago!* (1894), he declared, "The healthy natural community is that of a small country town or village in which every one knows his neighbor, and where all the necessary ingredients for a happy, intelligent and public-spirited municipal life exist in due proportion." William T. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago*, quoted in Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 367.

envisioned the ways in which Americans could learn from the retention of cultural patterns and values that others sought to tamp down. Why, when her Greek patrons sat in on W. E. B. Du Bois's Hull-House lecture, did they listen "with apparently no consciousness of that race difference which color seems to accentuate so absurdly?" Perhaps, she surmised, it was a result of "their traditional familiarity with Carthage and Egypt."³⁷⁵

Regeneration through ancestral return was, Addams insisted, central to American narrative and self-development. Even as Horatio Alger and Andrew Carnegie celebrated Abraham Lincoln as the self-made man *par excellence*,³⁷⁶ Jane Addams rejected self-madness as an insidious and perverse myth to trot out in modern Chicago. During her own youth, children were taught "that the career of the self-made man was open to every American boy, if he worked hard and saved his money, improved his mind, and followed a steady ambition." She recalled "that when she was ten years old, the village schoolmaster told his little flock, without any mitigating clauses, the Jay Gould had lain the foundation of his colossal fortune by always saving bits of strings, and that, as a result, every child in the village collected party-colored balls of twine." This was a pedagogical fallacy, from her vantage in the Nineteenth Ward, where a "bright Chicago boy might well draw the inference that the path of the corrupt politician not only leads to civic honors, but to the glories of benevolence and philanthropy."³⁷⁷

Indeed, Jane Addams's vision of Lincoln, whom she always viewed through the rose-tinted lenses of childhood nostalgia, was not forward- but insistently backward-looking.³⁷⁸ His principle attribute lay, much as with Carnegie's and Alger's depictions, in "the marvelous ability to retain and use past experiences."³⁷⁹ Crucially, though, she chose to remember the president not as an accomplished man, but as an active youth. When she commissioned painters for the 400-seat Hull-House Theater, Addams made sure that they painted one of the walls with an image of Lincoln, age nineteen, "pushing a boat down the river in the early morning." In the bow, painted among cotton bales, was "a slave sitting abjectly in their midst, depending for his progress upon Lincoln's stroke."³⁸⁰ Young, vigorous, free labor was the heroic principle and the source of emancipation. But this image of a young Abraham Lincoln, shepherding a slave ostensibly towards freedom, provides another fundamental metaphor for the guiding vision of Hull-House in general, and the Labor Museum as it was taking flight. Like a young Lincoln, ferrying a despondent slave to freedom, Hull-House would usher the "wage slave," a popular phrase

³⁷⁵ Grace Abbot, "A Study of the Greeks in Chicago," *The American Journal of Sociology* 15:3 (November, 1909), TJAP, reel #37; Addams, *Twenty Years*, 168.

³⁷⁶ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 145; Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, 96; Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 205; "Many of the World's Great Men Labored with Their Hands," *Chicago Tribune*, 25 November, 1900.

³⁷⁷ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002 [1902]), 112.

³⁷⁸ Addams, *Twenty Years*, ch. 2 is entitled, "Influence of Lincoln."

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁸⁰ "The Auditorium Frescoes," *Hull-House Bulletin* 6:1 (Mid-Winter, 1903-1904), 20, box 43, folder 430, HHC.

at the time,³⁸¹ into a new era marked by emancipation, purpose, and an altered sense of who and what was to be valued within the new America.

The Hull-House Labor Museum and the Reconstitution of Community

The crucial factor in Hull-House's rendering of Lincoln lay in a return to labor's idealized roots. Often, it was simply a matter of perspective: Lincoln's labor rather than his fame. In Jane Addams's telling, the Hull-House Labor Museum also originated in the "correct" reading of America's most recent arrivals.

Addams had long struggled to understand the plight of her impoverished neighbors, had long struggled to read their daily triumphs and tribulations. Her efforts ranged from measuring industrial laborers' muscle fatigue through the use of an ergograph, a cumbersome machine borrowed from the University of Chicago, to the muckraking and prescriptive *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, with its chapters on "The Sweating-System," "Wage-Earning Children," and "Receipts and Expenditures of Cloakmakers."³⁸² Yet a decade into the settlement house's existence, and even amidst accolades from the local and national presses, Addams was still bedeviled by the problem of disconnection. Her dissatisfaction ran along two axes, as she would describe it in *Twenty Years at Hull-House*. First, "it seemed so difficult to come into genuine relations with the [neighborhood's] Italian women," her New Immigrants *par excellence*. Second, "they themselves so often lost their hold upon their Americanized children."³⁸³

Exasperated over her previously fruitless attempts to bridge a chasm that was both interpersonal and intergenerational, Addams returned to the profoundly simple credo that had initially inspired Hull-House: She threw herself into the bustle of the Nineteenth Ward. "Perturbed in spirit," she took a walk "down Polk Street":

It seemed to me that Hull-House ought to be able to devise some educational enterprise which should build a bridge between European and American experiences in such wise as to give them both more meaning and a sense of relation.... Suddenly, I looked up and saw [an] old [southern Italian] woman with her distaff, sitting in the sun on the steps of a tenement house.

This sun-kissed image acquired mythic proportions. The woman "might have served as a model for one of Michelangelo's Fates." Her face "brightened as I passed and, holding up her spindle for me to see, she called out that when she had spun a little more yarn, she would knit a pair of stockings for her goddaughter." From there, everything fell into place: "My exciting walk down Polk Street was followed by many talks with Dr. [John] Dewey and with one of the teachers in his school who was a resident at Hull-House. Within a month a room was fitted up to which we might invite those of our neighbors who were possessed of old crafts and who were eager to use them."³⁸⁴ Addams and her

³⁸¹ Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 242-243.

³⁸² Bruder, "Outside the Classroom Walls," 171; Florence Kelley, "The Sweating-System," *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, ch. 2; Florence Kelley and Alzina P. Stevens, "Wage-Earning Children," *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, ch. 3; Isabel Eaton, "Receipts and Expenditures of Cloakmakers," *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, ch. 4.

³⁸³ Adams, *Twenty Years*, 156.

³⁸⁴ Addams, *Twenty Years*, 156-157.

colleagues collected “very simple equipment gathered largely from the neighborhood itself, and with workers who lived within a few blocks of Hull House.”³⁸⁵

A sense of just how divergent the Labor Museum was from contemporaneous Progressive pedagogy and didactics might be seen in a comparison with John Dewey, then also at work developing his own theories on the pedagogical merits of labor. In *The School and Society* (1900), Dewey imagined an “ideal school” that would include “a complete industrial museum, giving samples of materials in various stages of manufacture, and the implements, from the simplest to the most complex, used in dealing with them. Accompanying these exhibits would be “a collection of photographs and pictures illustrating the landscapes and the scenes from which the materials come, their native homes, and their places of manufacture.”³⁸⁶ Indeed, through *his* “workshop of democracy,” Dewey sought, in the words of Christine Holbo,

To involve middle-class children in distinctly manual labor; to encourage activity rather than passivity, discipline, and memorization; and to encourage boys and girls to work together at an activity that was not connected to their future vocations, deviated from the norm, but with a purpose: they gave the child a hands-on introduction to the relations between materials and manufacturing, society and nature.³⁸⁷

Such a vision’s insistent pedagogy, its use of labor as diversion that could crystallize a larger social and natural sensibility, effectively stood at cross-purposes with the Hull-House Labor Museum. Dewey envisioned labor as a flashpoint for further, more traditional pedagogical lessons, rather than the reification of traditional handicraft practices as an end in itself. But perhaps most importantly, Dewey’s “ideal school” was not concerned with labor as a return to the bosom of communal life.

Beginning in November, 1900, the Hull-House Labor Museum, which soon came to occupy two stories of the converted Hull-House Gymnasium, was open to the public every Saturday evening, part of an avowed effort to draw in an array of patrons, from well-meaning Progressives to neighborhood workers to their “Americanized” children. Visitors passed through rooms highlighting the relationships between raw materials, production processes, and finished products, especially cotton and wool. Accompanying maps, charts, photographs, and essays placed the work in its proper geographical and temporal relationship, providing a transnational, transhistorical concatenation of human progress. Central to that vivification were its performers: a diverse group of neighborhood men and women, immigrants all, dressed in the peasant clothing of their homelands and working at their native crafts traditions, an image emphasizing the

³⁸⁵ *Hull-House Bulletin* 5:1 (semi-annual, 1902), 3, box 43, folder 430, HHC. See also, “The Labor Museum in Operation” (undated manuscript), box 43, folder 429, HHC. Belying the image of the spontaneous, epiphanic origins of what would become the Hull-House Labor Museum is the fact that, contemporaneously, the Chicago Arts and Crafts Society proposed a similar enactment and exhibition of handicraft. See Jackson, “Performance at Hull-House,” *Exceptional Spaces*, 266. But Addams’s language is nevertheless crucial to the Labor Museum’s framing as organic and revelatory, as a natural form of connection emerging from recourse towards the forms of community building and lived experience that marked the village, rather than the city.

³⁸⁶ Unless otherwise noted, quotes from Dewey are from Bruder, “Outside the Classroom Walls,” 189.

³⁸⁷ Holbo, “The Home-Making of Americans,” 196.

commodity fetishism at the heart of so many “immigrant gifts.”³⁸⁸ Performers were recruited and allotted roles along a strict ethnic taxonomy. As one moved from Syrian to Italian to Russian to Irish, one undertook an evolutionary journey. We might today call this cast a “living history.” In fact, Jane Addams had emphasized the importance of performance to her project’s allure. In a blueprint, she underscored the centrality of its very name to her ambitions. “Museum” would be preferable to “school,” since the latter was “distasteful to grown up people from its association with childish tasks,” and also because “the word museum still retains some of the fascination of ‘the show.’”³⁸⁹

Accompanying the tour were literary readings, “[p]astoral songs and symphonies,” and lectures covering topics such as “Industry Among Primitive Peoples,” “The Guilds of the Middle Ages,” “Factory Conditions of Today,” and “The Day of the Craftsman and the Instinct of Workmanship,” this last by Thorstein Veblen, who had recently dissected elite pretensions through an anthropological lens in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).³⁹⁰

By 1902, the space was offering itself as a museum on Saturday evenings; a classroom for children most mornings, afternoons, and evenings; and a shop where “adult workers, more or less experienced, [were] at liberty to come in whenever they have leisure, using the tools and paying only for material consumed.” Glass cases grew crowded with “twelve frames of Roman plaids and thirty-nine frames of East Indian fabrics.” Climbing the stairs in 1902, one passed “one hundred and eleven frames of textile fabrics includ[ing] German linen and Venetian brocades.” In the upper halls, “fine old tassels and laces” jostled for attention with “ecclesiastic vestments and specimens of ecclesiastical weaving” and Navajo ponchos and belts. In a fiscally necessary, but philosophically antithetical move, the Museum sold these handmade products.³⁹¹

Indeed, although avowedly inspired by the Nineteenth Ward’s diverse population, and meant to connect *their* cultures to modern manufacturing processes, Addams’s ideal was rooted in a totalized vision of human history. At times, she enumerated a logical progression of industry. Of the silk exhibit, for instance, she noted, “Earliest silk culture in the Orient. Silk trade of merchant caravans between India and Southern Europe. Relation of silk carrying trade to discovery of America...” Indeed, industry drove a teleological vision of history.³⁹² Assembled properly, objects could impart lessons in

³⁸⁸ See Higham, *Strangers in the Land*; Hoganson, *Consumers’ Emperium*.

³⁸⁹ Jane Addams, “First Outline of a Labor Museum at Hull-House, Chicago” (1900), 4, TJAP, reel #51.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4; *Hull-House Bulletin* (1902), 6, cover, box 43, folder 432, HHC. See, Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007 [1899]).

³⁹¹ Luther, “Labor Museum at Hull House,” *The Commons*, 8; “Hull-House Labor Museum,” *Hull-House Bulletin* (1902), 12, 10-11; “Hull-House Labor Museum,” *Hull-House Bulletin* 7:1 (1905-1906), 15-16, box 43, folder 432, HHC; “Hull-House Labor Museum,” *Hull-House Bulletin* 5:1 (Semi-annual, 1902), 12, box 43, folder 432, HHC. In fact, when Mertice Buck visited the Museum in 1907, she described a workspace where “Most of the finished work is sold, often before the piece is completed.” Mertice Maccree Buck, “Hull-House Labor Museum, Where Women are Taught Spinning and Weaving, and also the History of These Industries,” *The Craftsman* 13:2 (November, 1907), 230.

³⁹² Addams, “Labor Museum,” *The Commons*, 4.

history. Victorians, argues Morris Vogel, were “the great museum builders.”³⁹³ In the half-century between 1879 and 1926, individuals and institutions constructed museum spaces built around what Steven Conn calls an “object-based epistemology.” The idea, extending back to Giambattista Vico’s belief that objects were “manifest testimony,” posited the importance of an artifact as written over with the social values, traditions, cosmology, and labor practices of the culture that had produced it. In turn-of-the-century America, this belief merged with the Victorian faith in progress. Even as objects were divorced from the contexts from which they initially emerged, in U.S. museums they were aligned with other, similar artifacts from around the world. The result was a “metanarrative of evolutionary progress” pointing towards “a positivist, progressive and hierarchical world view.” Their presence within the curated museum, Conn argues, ultimately “created a sense of unity under the umbrella of western superiority.”³⁹⁴ Addams’s belief, as expressed in an article on the museum, that machines embodied “the ‘seasoned life of man’ preserved and treasured up within itself”³⁹⁵ aligns with “object-based epistemology” that could so easily assemble and hierarchize human civilization.

This was a belief evinced in everything from the many lectures on evolution that were given at the museum (the winter of 1902-1903, for instance, saw speeches entitled, “The Evolution of Industry,” “The Evolution of the Earth,” “Evolution of Tools,” “Evolution of Textiles”) to Addams’s own driving ambition “to present history and human progress from the point of view of the laborer as civilization was developed through his efforts,” to give manual labor the proper “historic interpretation or imaginative uplift.”³⁹⁶ Similarly, Hull-House boosters were attuned to the ways in which a single object—the machine—could serve as crucible for an entire cultural matrix. Hull-House memoranda celebrated the potential for personal regeneration contained in the simple performativity of time-honored labor, the ways in which “the whirs of the wheels recall many a reminiscence and story of the old country, the telling of which makes a rural interlude in the busy town life.”³⁹⁷

But we would be remiss in simply accepting this evolutionary framework and its political ramifications for appreciating those “primitive” characters that participated in the drama. Indeed, Addams worked, from the first, to ensure that the Hull-House Labor Museum did not shy away from the ethical imperatives of her mission for Hull-House more generally. Consider, for instance, her description of the wool exhibit, which contained both the historical teleology that allowed her to organize her sense of history *and* challenged the smooth and benign trajectory of “progress”:

Wool. Map showing early wool-raising sections and general character of wool-raising countries.

³⁹³ Morris Vogel, quoted in Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9.

³⁹⁴ Giambattista Vico, quoted in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 30; Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926*, 5, 90.

³⁹⁵ Addams, “Labor Museum at Hull-House,” *The Commons*, 2.

³⁹⁶ “Courses of Industrial Lectures,” *Hull-House Bulletin* 5:2 (Semi-annual, 1902), 1-2, box 43, folder 432, HHC. The press seized on “evolution” as constitutive of the Museum’s metanarrative. See “The Labor Museum,” *Chicago Tribune*, 23 July, 1900; Addams, “First Outline,” 5-6.

³⁹⁷ “Hull-House Labor Museum,” *Hull-House Bulletin* 6:1 (Mid-Winter, 1903-1904), 12, box 43, folder 431, HHC.

Earliest wool-raising in grassy slopes and plains, first hand spinning—rough distaff and spindle, primitive looms, first crude scouring and dyeing, suggested reproduction of the processes and a comparison of the methods still employed by primitive peoples, such as Navajo Indians, etc.

The effect of pastoral life, both in its named and more settled forms upon primitive culture; illustrated by pictures and related literature. Early Greek and Hebrew development taken as examples.

Medieval wool culture—the flocks of Spain and of England, the invention of the spinning wheel, the development of looms, the domestic system, the growth of organization among the weavers, traced to modern times.

Effect of the eighteenth century industrial revolution in England upon the weavers' first application of steam power to textile industry; the weavers hastily gather in large towns and factories; children prematurely put to work; persistence of many of the weavers in their homes, until driven out by starvation. Similar conditions now in the first application of steam sewing, much of the same persistence among "home workers" who sew in their homes.³⁹⁸

History was the story of the development of industry, but the development of industry was also the story of declension. The conclusion of her drama vivified child labor, loss of the sacred space of the home, death. American modernity was not the culmination of a triumphant history of human craftsmanship, but the disavowal of that legacy. Indeed, within a decade, Addams proposed a narrative of national declension centered on the loss of simple labor. America's deepest roots lay in the inherited traditions of family-based work. In the Puritan village, "the young people still had a chance to find self-expression in their work. Plowing the field and spinning the flax could be carried on with a certain joyousness and vigor which the organization of modern industry too often precludes."³⁹⁹

Hull-House had long emphasized the importance of craftsmanship, both as practice and as art.⁴⁰⁰ But it was in craft's relationship to history that the Labor Museum distinguished itself from contemporaneous Arts and Crafts philosophy. History functioned not only didactically, but also, for those slotted within its narrative arc, psychologically. Suddenly ejected from Old World stability and thrown into a clamorous and atomized modern industrial system, the worker's greatest trial was, in this view, subjective. As Addams wrote in 1902, laborers, "more than other men, need the conception of historic continuity in order to reveal to him [*sic*] the purpose and utility of his work, and he can only be stimulated and dignified as he obtains a conception of his proper relation to society." The past, she believed, "bathes the outer world for us in the hues of human feeling." And, as a corollary, the worker "needs some one to bathe his surroundings with a human significance—some one who shall teach him to find that which will give a potency to his life." This led, invariably, back to a discussion of time; specifically, of one's proper place in the universal human narrative. The worker, she

³⁹⁸ Jessie Luther, "The Labor Museum at Hull House," *The Commons* 7:70 (May, 1902), 10, 3-4, TJAP reel #51.

³⁹⁹ Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1930 [1909]), 108.

⁴⁰⁰ See for instance, "Manual Training," *Hull-House Bulletin* 2:6 (1 October, 1897), 3, box 43, folder 427, HHC; *Hull-House Bulletin* 1:4 (April, 1896), cover, box 43, folder 425, HHC.

believed “can learn to be content to be but a part, although it must be a part of something.”⁴⁰¹

Such assertions have, understandably, been seen as apologia for industrial capitalism.⁴⁰² Rather than making a judgment of value from the perspective of a later century, it is crucial to perceive the Labor Museum as it was seen through the eyes of its boosters. It did not merely seek to *justify* the current, deplorable conditions of modern industry so much as usher in a revolution in values. There was “creative virtue in action itself,” for the worker “gets a great solace and comfort from the labor itself”—purposeful, though difficult, work that stood in stark contrast to the enervating “toil,” reformers’ and novelists’ byword for all that was wrong with industrial labor.⁴⁰³ Indeed, while not thumping for the socialist revolution that Upton Sinclair imagined would sooner or later transform Chicago,⁴⁰⁴ Addams nevertheless sought a revolution in the terms by which history was narrated. In her view, the rich and powerful were the destroyers, not the creators and conservers, of civilization. Workers made the world, and it was only through work that one might tell a positive history of humanity.

The museum’s aims, Addams announced, were to compel a paradigm shift, both in the public valorization, and in the subjective experience, of labor. The foundation of noble work lay in a worker’s “patient performance of painful duty,” the ability to maintain the important social and psychological equilibrium embodied in traditions. This would position the Hull-House Labor Museum as a space preserving the authentic figurations of self-hood amidst the harrowing cityscape, frequently described in Hull-House literature as disease-ridden in its lack of sanitation, socially alienating in its industrial economy, and salacious and superficial in its consumerist temptations. As she anticipated in a blueprint circulated among Hull-House’s settlement workers, this would alter the very terms by which Americans understood, narrated, and mythologized their history.

To put all historic significance upon city walls and triumphal arches is to teach history from the political and governmental side, which too often presents solely the records of war and restrictive legislation, emphasizing that which destroys life and property, rather than the processes of labor, which really create and conserve civilization. Fame and honor still cling to war and non-productive occupations, and there seems to be no way of changing this unless we can make the materials and process [of] daily experience of the workman... more interesting and increase their picturesqueness.⁴⁰⁵

Her sense of history celebrated the producing, not the consuming, classes. It figured the “common man” as a countervailing force to “the men who accumulate riches and gather

⁴⁰¹ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2002 [1902]), 91-93, 96.

⁴⁰² See Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 80; Jackson, *Lines of Activity*, 259-260.

⁴⁰³ Addams, “Labor Museum at Hull-House,” *The Commons*, 3; Bremner, *From the Depths*, 176-177.

⁴⁰⁴ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 395; Jack London, *Iron Heel*. Sinclair drew from Hull-House’s meticulous records while researching his novel. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform*, 172.

⁴⁰⁵ Addams, “First Outline,” 3, 7.

to themselves the result of industry.” She celebrated “the men who really carry forward the industrial processes,”⁴⁰⁶ immigrant and native-born alike.

Indeed, Addams was concerned with what she saw in factories as the “suppression of the instinct of workmanship.” That “suppression” had real, tragic consequences. In *Twenty Years* she recounts how a

Bohemian whose little girl attended classes at Hull-House, in one of his periodic drunken spells had literally almost choked her to death, and later had committed suicide when in delirium tremens. His poor wife, who stayed a week at Hull-House after the disaster until a new tenement could be arranged for her, one day showed me a gold ring which her husband had made for their betrothal. It exhibited the most exquisite workmanship, and she said that although in the old country he had been a goldsmith, in America he had for twenty years shoveled coal in a furnace room of a large manufacturing plant; that whenever she saw one of his “restless fits,” which preceded his drunken periods, “coming on,” if she could provide him with a bit of metal and persuade him to stay at home and work at it, he was all right and the time passed without disaster, but that “nothing else would do it.” This story threw a flood of light upon the dead man’s struggle and on the stupid maladjustment which had broken him down. Why had we never been told? Why had our interest in the remarkable ability of his child blinded us to the hidden artistic ability of the father? We had forgotten that a long-established occupation may form the very foundations of the moral life, that the art with which a man has solace his toil may be the salvation of his uncertain temperament.⁴⁰⁷

The struggles of daily life—of dangerous, monotonous, and poorly remunerated work; of blighted living conditions; of social marginalization—pale in comparison to the “suppression of the instinct of workmanship.” For Addams, labor created the necessary social and cultural scripts for self-actualization. Her depiction of the Bohemian goldsmith represents her attention to revealing what lay just beneath one’s line of sight. Her lamentation has to do with not looking past the ostensibly superficial conditions of the present. Belying the goldsmith’s brutalization of himself (through his unnatural labors) and his family (through his anger) was a delicate craftsman waiting to be noticed. Or rather, waiting to be revealed through a proper appreciation of context, trading the immediacy of his “stupid maladjustment” for the ontological permanency of the Old World. Hull-House’s founder took upon herself some of the responsibility for the tragedy because she had not been keen enough to penetrate the physical manifestations of “maladjustment.” The goldsmith’s work at the Labor Museum allowed Addams to see him anew, for what he really was.

In this way, the Labor Museum proposed a radically capacious counterargument both to nativists who believed that the deluge of Southern and Eastern immigrants would “destroy” America’s “institutions and ideals” and to Progressives who “Americanized” the immigrant by imagining the ways in which his value to his adopted nation lay in how completely he could divest herself of the stultifying traditions and communal surveillance

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁰⁷ Addams, *Twenty Years*, 162-163.

of the Old World village.⁴⁰⁸ The Labor Museum, in fact, proposed that America's "institutions and ideals" were *indebted* to the evolutionary narrative performed there, that America would not exist but for simple people's adherence to their "patient performance of painful duty"—an ideal that Addams first articulated within the context of her description of the Labor Museum. At a moment when government was setting in motion legislation to severely restrict immigrants on the bases of physical and mental disease (1891), political radicalism (1903), and even literacy (1917),⁴⁰⁹ Jane Addams incorporated their traditions into an expanding sense of who and what comprised the nation—measured precisely through their diversity.

Her ambition was not dismissed by the Chicago press, but accepted and celebrated. Three months before the museum opened, the *Chicago Tribune* announced that an important new museum space was being developed, and that it would "rewrite history for the working people." Dropping in four years later for *Harper's Bazaar*, Elia Peattie recapitulated the themes of construction and veneration of the "common man": "Not to destroy with firearms the actual enemies of the republic, but to build up friends for it, to assist in the making of independent, free-thinking, loyal, and happy citizens."⁴¹⁰ American artisans had, for the better part of a century, claimed as much.⁴¹¹

Indeed, what seems to me to be scholars' overemphasis on the cultural politics of the Labor Museum's evolutionary framework obscures the true centrality of immigrant history in salvaging the American present. By the time Addams formulated the museum's origin myth in detail, she had written about the dangers of the city street, lamenting modern mass culture's effects on young people. In *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (1909), she decried "the flippant street music, the highly colored theater posters, the trashy love stories, the feathered hats, the cheap heroics of the revolvers displayed in the pawn-shop windows." At "the 'Wild West Show'... the onlooking boy imagine[d] himself an active participant" to the extent that "The scouts, the Indians, the bucking ponies, [were] his real intimate companions and occup[ied] his entire mind." Worst was the cinema, that "veritable house of dreams" that provided young people with their "actual moral guide."⁴¹² But if the city street held out deleterious temptations, it also retained what it had shown Addams during her fabled walk down Polk Street: the possibility for a deeper, fuller understanding of life and a revised moral code. Beneath the "flippant," "trashy," and "cheap" consumer culture that was so luminously advertised, there still lay a multiverse of traditions, practices, and fables. "The many foreign colonies which are found in all American cities afford an enormous reserve of material for public

⁴⁰⁸ Abbot, "Greeks in Chicago," *American Journal of Sociology*, 381; Kata Hollady Claghorn, "Our Immigrants and Ourselves," *The Atlantic Monthly* 86:516 (October, 1900), 540. Claghorn, interestingly enough, also applied a Turnerian language to immigration, arguing that rupture from the past could be achieved as easily on "the crowded as on the wide plains," for she believed that "[n]owhere can one be more easily alone than among strangers." *Ibid.* Preceding "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" by three years, Claghorn's idea both presages and complicates Turner's.

⁴⁰⁹ Shenton and Kenny, "Ethnicity and Immigration," *New American History*, 361.

⁴¹⁰ "The Labor Museum," *Chicago Tribune*, 23 July, 1900; Elia W. Peattie, "Women of the Hour: No. 1: Miss Jane Addams," *Harper's Bazaar* 38:62 (October, 1904), 103.

⁴¹¹ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 14.

⁴¹² Addams, *Spirit of Youth*, 76, 94, 82-83.

recreation and street festival,” she declared. Such celebrations provided a necessary bridge between the foreign and the native, and thus the revision and reinvigoration of history: They merged “the feasts and holidays of the fatherland” with “the observance of American anniversaries.” To do so created a new American narrative that could provide a depth unavailable in the normal course of American “progress”:

To insist that young people shall forecast their rose-colored future only in a house of dreams, is to deprive the real world of that warmth and reassurance which it so sorely needs and to which it is justly entitled; furthermore, we are left outside with a sense of dreariness, in company with that shadow which already lurks only around the corner for most of us—a skepticism of life’s value.⁴¹³

“Life’s value,” that is, could *also* be encountered in the street—so long as one knew where to look for it. In all of Addams’s writings about the Labor Museum, Southern Italian women provided the inspiration, but between the “First Outline” (1900), a blueprint of the Labor Museum, and *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910), these women acquired an increasing agency, depth, and color, as though they became ever more potent antidotes to Addams’s sense of modernity’s corrosive influences.⁴¹⁴ For Addams, the women of southern Italy represented the deracinated peasant class *par excellence*, women whose lovely imaginations made them a unique repository of ethnic color and a vivid counterpoint to Chicago’s industrial capitalism. Southern Italians comprised one of the largest immigrant groups during this period. 25,000 Italian immigrants and their children resided in Chicago by the mid-1890s. Not just comprising a massive population influx, Italian migrants, the vast majority of whom were from the southern peasant class, were magnets for much of the moral hand-wringing that went along with nativist polemics: they were dirty, uneducated, superstitious, and prone, according to Lombrosian analysis, to criminality.⁴¹⁵ At Hull-House, what seemed to make these new arrivals so threatening also made them into romantic figures, emissaries from another time and place who had the capacity to impart life lessons to modern, urban Americans. Time and again, official publications and the writings of boosters aestheticized encounters with Southern Italians in Chicago, celebrating their exuberant “Latin imagination” and “deeper understanding of life.”⁴¹⁶

On its surface, the Labor Museum existed to maintain the “deeper understanding of life” that Addams and her colleagues saw exemplified in—but certainly not limited to—immigrants from Southern Italy, and to impart it to fellow Chicagoans. “The women

⁴¹³ Ibid., 100, 103.

⁴¹⁴ See “First Outline of a Labor Museum”; “Labor Museum at Hull House,” *The Commons*, 2; *Twenty Years*, 156.

⁴¹⁵ Shenton and Kenny, “Ethnicity and Immigration,” *New American History*, 359; Mastro-Valerio, “Remarks Upon the Italian Colony in Chicago,” *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, 117; Peter D’Agostino, “Craniums, Criminals, and the ‘Cursed Race’: Italian Anthropology in American Racial Thoughts, 1861-1924,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44:2 (April, 2002), 319-343.

⁴¹⁶ “Italian Masquerade,” *Dal Bolletino del Hull House de Marzo 1900*, Hull-House Records, University of Illinois, Chicago Library, box 53, folder 625; Irwin St. John Tucker, “Personal Recollections of Hull House,” September, 1969, 8, box 52, folder 579, HHC. See also, Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002 [1902]), 83-84; Jane Addams, “Labor Museum at Hull-House,” *The Commons* 47:1 (June, 1900), 2; Addams, *Twenty Years*, 86.

and few men, who come to the museum to utilize their European skill in pottery, metal, and wood,” Addams claimed, “demonstrate that immigrant colonies might yield to our American life something very valuable.” That valuable “something” would be realized only if “their resources were intelligently studied and developed,”⁴¹⁷ pointing up the importance of the Labor Museum as safe space for the enactment of cultural practices under siege by industrialism.

The Hull-House Labor Museum as Sanctum Sanctorum

Two years into its operation, Jessie Luther provided an update on the museum’s status. “The Labor Museum at Hull-House,” printed in the May 1902 edition of *The Commons*, the official journal of the settlement movement, devoted much of its space to recapitulating, often verbatim, Jane Addams’s organizational and operational aesthetic. But Luther was also interested in mapping the space’s material culture. In detail, she described the carefully arranged interior design, emphasizing the absolute care and precision with which Addams and her colleagues set up the space as rigorously didactic. Luther gloried in the site’s faith in scientific analysis, especially the cooking exhibition, with its “Cases on the wall [with] specimens of grains and cereals” in vitrines, its “modern cooking tables with their iron racks and bunson [*sic*] burners, and a gas range of the newest type.” Indeed, in this article, the Hull-House Labor Museum sounds like nothing so much as a laboratory, an impression reinforced by the accompanying photograph. In the foreground, a large iron kettle rests in a brick fireplace. Set off against this marker of quaint domesticity, in the background is a long table, a desk, and shelves crowded with vitrines.⁴¹⁸

At the same time, Luther belied the Labor Museum’s scientific qualities by emphasizing the ways in which it served as a spectatorial space. “The large windows on the street and alley were purposely planned for the convenience of spectators who might be attracted by the ‘show’ elements of the museum,”⁴¹⁹ she explained. But what was the nature of the “show”? The museum’s curation, with its attention to scientific analysis and order that marked so much Progressive thought, stood in contrast to the truly natural, spontaneous, and “authentic” expressions of folk culture that were enacted by the performers. Indeed, the Labor Museum’s true centerpiece was its emphasis not on instruction, but on contact with the affective qualities of an Old World vernacular. Indeed, in a delicate balance with its emphasis on cataloguing and studying, “The Labor Museum at Hull-House” is suffused with a language of naturalness and spontaneity. Luther emphasized the organic qualities that inspired the museum, sustained its operation, and deepened the performers’ engagement with their “roles”: Many of the performers “were *found* who, in their countries, had used the primitive methods of spinning”; the museum “would perhaps give to the older people a chance to *naturally assume* a position to which their previous lives and training entitled them”; women “of different nationalities... come on Saturday evenings and spin with the *inherited skill* of many generations.”⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 162.

⁴¹⁸ Luther, “Labor Museum.” *The Commons*, 10.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 1, 2, 6. Emphasis added in all.

Per the museum's narrative arc, the performers vivified an ambivalent evolutionary process. But in truth, they existed outside the destructive forces of the modern state. The Labor Museum instead served as a safe space of ancestral return, a counterpoint to the incursions of modern bureaucratic culture. Luther described the efforts of the Syrian spinner to procure an authentic spinning wheel from her relatives back home. Complying with her written request, the relatives had mailed it to Chicago. But upon arrival, "the contents of the box showed signs of having been tampered with, and one of the joints was missing." To Luther, the source of such destruction was evident: It was the fault of "the customs officials." They were "doubtless ignorant of the important functions of the mutton joints and neglect[ed] to give them proper consideration."⁴²¹ Luther's description of the "ignorant" operations of the customs officials towards the object's "important functions" inverts the calculus of knowledge. Modern American society, with its salaried bureaucrats, had no sense of the value that lay in objects one could not quickly appraise by sight. Nor, for that matter, could one even trust their ideas of value—isolated as it was from what was "important."

Marion Foster Washburne was also drawn to the Syrian loom as an example of the ways in which modern society existed by devaluing the premodern. Visiting the Labor Museum in 1904 under the auspices of *The Craftsman*, the seminal journal of the Arts and Crafts movement, she rehearsed the story of the machine's abuse at the hands of unknowing customs officials, which she overheard being discussed among two Irish weavers at the time of her visit. But Washburne's story offered an important corollary, emphasizing the cohesion of the performers against a hostile modern world:

The duties and cost of transportation amounts to forty-five dollars. "Ah!" [exclaimed one of the women] on hearing about it, "you paid that! And it is not worth ten cents!"

"Why, shure [*sic*] not!" heartily agreed an Irish neighbor: "I'd burn it up for kindling if I had it. Two bones it had for spindles, do ye see, two plain meat bones without a bit of carving and smoothing, except by hungry teeth, and one lost on the way. Instdid o' paying' charges, it's a suit we'd ought to bring against the express-company. The idea of thim sendin' it up here maimed and wounded, one of its bones clean gone!"⁴²²

The exchange initially seems to express the Irish women's bemusement at this most "primitive" of technologies, and the impoverished society, with its gnawing "hungry teeth," that produced it. Yet the exchange ends by revealing the women's anger at modern America's abuse of craftsmanship. Ultimately, they are moved to indignation that "the express-company... maimed and wounded" the machinery and that they lost "one of its bones." Washburne, that is, shines a light on a transnational community of proud workers imagining not their inclusion in historical narrative, but their exasperation over it.

Indeed, from its opening, Marion Washburne's "A Labor Museum" distinguishes between the inner world of Hull-House and the outer world of Chicago. The former is imaged as a *sanctum sanctorum*, its values measured precisely in contrast to the latter's harshness and depravity:

⁴²¹ Ibid., 6.

⁴²² Marion Foster Washburne, "A Labor Museum," *The Craftsman*, 6:6 (September, 1904), 577.

Steadfast amidst the clash of industrial warfare, true to the English tongue and the English better genius in the midst of a modern Babel, clean and wholesome on the edge of the Ghetto, serene among the sweat-shops and saloons, in the very center of the toiling Center, stands Hull-House. Originally, a fine old family mansion in the environs of the young city, it is now surrounded and well nigh buried out of site by a group—almost a clutter—of related buildings, springing out of it like wings and tail. In one of these—in the fan-tail—is the Labor Museum, which I am going to tell about.

We came upon it through a long tunnel-like passage leading under the main house.... The passage-way, with its walls stained red, opened at the far end upon an alley unlit except by reflections from the house. Across it, shone the lighted windows of the labor museum [*sic*], and there a half-dozen street urchins were looking in. Swearing, twisting, pushing each other, using each other's backs and shoulders to obtain vantage-ground, clad in nondescript clothes, rough in manner, and of many nations, they looked in longingly from the cold alley where they lived, upon these glorified workshops which promised pleasantness and peace.⁴²³

Washburne soon thereafter confuses this image, with its privileging of English's "better genius" and its valorization of "seren[ity]." In fact, in the ten pages that follow, her celebration of the Labor Museum hinges on its depiction as a warm sensorium, ringing with hammer blows, laughter, and foreign languages. But what is crucial in this opening portrait, and what will continue to imbue her account of first-hand experience at the Labor Museum, is its emphasis on contrast between inner and outer worlds.

It is useful to compare Washburne's depiction of movement through the city with that of Jacob Riis. A decade-and-a-half earlier, the latter had described for readers a horrific voyage to Manhattan's tenement slums:

Leaving the Elevated Railroad where it dives under the Brooklyn Bridge at Franklin Square, scarce a dozen steps will take you where we wish to go... with its rush and roar echoing in our ears we have turned the corner from prosperity to poverty. We stand upon the domain of the tenement... enough of them everywhere. Suppose we look into one?... Be a little careful, please! The hall is dark and you might stumble over the children pitching pennies there.... Here where the hall turns and dives into utter darkness is a step and another, another, a flight of stairs. You can feel your way, if you cannot see it.⁴²⁴

Washburne's account lacks Riis's you-are-there sensationalism. In fact, she positions herself less as guide than as emissary. Hers is a trip "which I am going to tell about." But she nevertheless employs a similar image of penetrating ever deeper into the inner core of the city. Ultimately, though, Washburne provides a redemptive counterpoint to Riis's depiction, with its evocation of a hellish descent from the "*Elevated* Railroad," right at the point where the train plunges even further, "div[ing] under the Brooklyn Bridge." The further he goes, the worse it gets. Washburne, by contrast, journeys into the heart of

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 570.

⁴²⁴ Riis, quoted in Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, 127.

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THE LABOR MUSEUM AT HULL HOUSE.

BY JESSIE LUTHER, CURATOR.

The present article on the Hull House Labor Museum, has been requested by THE COMMONS, but the subject as far as its origin, theory and object are concerned has been so fully treated in its columns that further comment on the theoretical side seems unnecessary. The present article therefore, while quoting from the first report, is confined chiefly to the increased facilities for

Greeks, Syrians, Russians, Poles, Bohemians and Germans, and among the older representatives of these nationalities many were found who, in their own countries, had used the primitive methods of spinning, with spindle or wheel, for the actual production of clothing for their families, and others who were familiar with the use of the loom, but who, under the changed conditions of life in a crowded American city, where machine-manufactured material can be obtained for so small a



THE TEXTILE ROOM.

work, the enlarged equipment and exhibition, and last winter's development, which, though in some departments is wholly experimental, still brings to its promoters an increasing confidence in its popularity and essential usefulness.

The prospectus recounts the fact that in the district immediately surrounding Hull House were people of many nationalities—Italians

cost, had found no practical use for their skill and no incentive for its continuance. Furthermore the younger generations, many of whom are American-born, were inclined to underestimate the older people of the colony, lacking, as they do, the power to adjust themselves to the standards of American life.

The idea presented itself that if a number of

Jessie Luther, "The Labor Museum at Hull House" *The Commons* 7:70 (May, 1901), 1.
Courtesy of the University of Illinois Library.

Chicago. And as she does so, she travels from chaos to peace, from pushing and shoving rabble to purposeful community. Riis warns his readers to “Be... careful” as they travel the dark tenement hallways with him. Washburne promises redemption in the pilgrimage from “unlit” alleyway to shining, “lighted windows.” What Washburne finds, that is, is an image of peace, light, purpose, and community. The issue in both Riis’s and Washburne’s reportage is over what lies at the core of the modern American city. For the former, it is the dissolution of healthful society; for the latter, its reconstitution under proper guardianship. Immigrants here recall Americans to their originary national purpose, a shining “city on a hill”⁴²⁵ that will be a garrison of Providentialism and communal solidarity. And, as with this Puritan conception, they do so only insofar as they can avoid the depredations of their surroundings.

A man known only as “young Colorossi,” himself marked by his foreignness and his craftsmanship—he is described as a man “with a long, dark, Italian face” and “dressed in a workman’s blouse”—serves as an interlocutor for Washburne and her companions. He explains that the Labor Museum’s purpose is to ensure the perpetuation of Old World traditions over and against the allure of “clerkship,” that it is “a small attempt to stem the current steadily setting toward the cities and the work of the middlemen, and away from the industries and constructive hand-work.”⁴²⁶ Indeed, the entire museum space is initially framed as uniquely authentic. An impromptu lecture by the museum’s curator, Jessie Luther, emphasizes the Labor Museum’s distance from emergent Progressive pedagogy:

Miss Addams, the founder and Head Resident of Hull-House, in trying to give an idea of how the thought of such a museum originated, reminds us that, in the better type of progressive schools, representations of these activities are put before the children in more or less adequate forms, and that they are encouraged to do a little weaving, a little wood-working, a little cooking, a little sewing as a means of grasping in miniature the great industrial world. But here, among her own neighbors, she finds the skilled craftsmen of the old world, who do not need to be taught to do any of these things, but who have been thrown out of their environment and who are too often despised by their children because they cannot speak good English, or quickly adapt themselves to our alien civilizations.⁴²⁷

Here, then, were the crucial differences: the dilettantish progressive school (“a little weaving, a little wood-working,” etc.) *versus* the deep, focused workshop; the facsimile (“*representations* of these activities... in more or less adequate form”) *versus* traditions that still retained cultural and historical resonance; teachers *versus* elders.

Throughout her account, Washburne develops a simple calculus: Modern objects are ugly, older ones are beautiful; contemporary education is pedantic, ancestral knowledge is profound. She rejects the intrusions of whatever does not fit within the sanctified space. The museum’s scientific interventions, such as the kitchen’s “laboratory samples”—“Here are bottles hermetically sealed, showing the amount of water in a pound of butter, the proteid [*sic*] in cheese, the starch in wheat, the cellulose in

⁴²⁵ John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630), quoted in *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*, ed. Perry Miller (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1956), 83.

⁴²⁶ Washburne, “A Labor Museum,” *The Craftsman*, 571, 576.

⁴²⁷ Jessie Luther, quoted in Washburne, “Labor Museum,” *The Craftsman*, 573.

beans, and the mineral matter in eggs”—strike “an abrupt modern note” that forces Washburne out of her reverie for the scene’s domestic idyll, with its “big brick fireplace with old-fashioned andirons and crane,” the “copper tea-kettle,” the “old-fashioned copper fire-pot.” The presence of modern china on a sideboard is appraised as being “not half so pretty as the old kind.”⁴²⁸ The accompanying illustrations image a purified kitchen space, divested of such vitrine specimens. We see instead a stone hearth hung with kettles, and surrounded by inviting and thick rugs and pillows. This picture, like the others accompanying “A Labor Museum,” is rendered not in photographs, but in charcoal drawings that provide quaint warmth.

Indeed, for Washburne, the kitchen’s narrative qualities are superfluous. The space evokes yearning for what was lost in American tradition, not for where that tradition fits in a larger cultural trajectory. She notes “a low window-set to the right, and a big table before it, covered with a blue and white homespun cloth, make one wish that one could go back at once to the old colonial days, and make apple dowdy and mulled cider in this picture-bookly place.”⁴²⁹

In one sense, what has been lost to “clerkship” and “the work of middlemen” is the quaint domesticity of a former era. Both contemporaneous assessments and current scholarship have emphasized the importance of the Labor Museum as relying on a sentimentalized vision of feminine culture.⁴³⁰ But in another sense, the Labor Museum reinvigorated the muscular and purposeful work of the craftsman. His work is both personally and communally regenerative. And it is upon masculinity that Washburne lavishes much of her attention. The scene in the metalworking room celebrates a vigorous space given over to the music of labor—the “clamorous noise” of “the beating of copper, the gasping of blow-pipes, the pounding of hammers, the rough rasp of saw, the swish of planes, the calls of the workers”⁴³¹—as though presaging Horace Kallen’s 1915 metaphor of American pluralism as a “symphony” to which each group contributes its “specific *timbre* and *tonality*.”⁴³² In this Washburne revises the prevailing, conservative discourse surrounding the New Immigrant as emasculated, indolent, politically radical, and unmade by industrial accidents.⁴³³

In the wood- metalworking room, she encounters, and is taken with, a German potter. He becomes the occasion for a celebration of masculine self-communion through the subjectively and physically empowering effects of labor:

[H]ere in the alcove of the wood and metal working rooms is a big vat of clay. Standing at the table is a clean old German kneading clay, his squat, bowed legs far apart, his body leaning forward, his long and powerful arms beating upon the

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 575, 572, 575-576.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 575,

⁴³⁰ Holbo, “The Home-Making of Americans,” xviii; Boris, *Art and Labor*, ch. 7; Patterson, “Redecorating the Nation,” ch. 1. Briefer remarks on the Labor Museum in the national press placed similar emphasis on the space as marked by the feminine. See Peattie, “Women of the Hour,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, 103; “Foibles of the Fair Sex,” *New York Times*, 25 September, 1904; Buck, “Hull-House Labor Museum,” *The Craftsman*, 229.

⁴³¹ Washburne, “A Labor Museum,” *The Craftsman*, 571.

⁴³² Kallen, “Democracy versus the Melting-Pot,” *Culture and Democracy*, 124. See p. 1, fn. 1 of this chapter.

⁴³³ Schweik, *The Ugly Law*, ch. 6; Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 155-156.

clay like piston rods. He rolls it into a long cylinder and breaks it off with exactitude into a half dozen little lumps. As he carries it across the room, walking with a sidewise straddle, one sees that he is bent and twisted by his trade, conformed to his wheel. Upon this he slaps his clay, and thrusting out a short leg, sets it whirling. Above the rough lump he folds his hands, and, in a minute, from that prayerful seclusion, that clay, emerges rounded, smoothed, and slightly hollowed. His hands open, his thumbs work in; one almost sees him think through his skillful thumbs and forefingers; the other fingers lie close together and he moves the four as one. Like some mystery of organic nature, the clay rises, bends, becomes a vase. "Look at that thing grow!" an excited boy exclaims, forgetting the crowd of onlookers. "See it, see it!" The old potter rises, lifts the case in his mitten-like hands and, bending, straddling sidewise, his face unmoved, carries it tenderly to its place.⁴³⁴

This image initially seems to be a confused one. The potter is joined with his product: "the clay rises," "The old potter rises." Yet he is also shaped to, and acts as an extension of, the technology that makes it: He is "conformed to his wheel," his arms move "like piston rods," he separates the clay "with exactitude," he "slaps" and "thrust[s]." But upon more careful consideration, the German potter epitomizes Washburne's, and her Arts and Crafts colleagues', vision of craft as the distillation of everything life-affirming in culture. He is both the product being manufactured and the machine that makes it; he is shaped by the artisanal traditions of his homeland and uses them to further shape himself as a valuable member of that community. Indeed, undergirding Washburne's description is the imagery of a collectivity, the traditional matrix from which this German potter has emerged: "the other fingers lie close together and he moves the four as one," the pot has "its place."

Place, of course, was central to the Labor Museum's conceptual framing: both an artisan's location in its narrative *and* the community from which specific practices emerged. A focus on the dual meaning of "place" might also help us to imagine what Washburne meant by calling the potter "clean." It is a curious adjective in the characterization of a dirty task. But an emphasis on cleanliness provides an alternative to the era's prevailing denigration of immigrants as shiftless and destabilizing. Carl Smith has demonstrated that, in the war of words following the Haymarket bombing, prosecutors frequently described the foreign defendants, and political radicals more generally, as "dirty." In a trope that emerged in political cartoons, novels, and op-ed pieces, the "fixation on dirt was critical to the imaginative attempts to cast the radicals and their cause as foreign and inimical to a sane and stable social order." As Mary Douglas explains, "ideas of dirt also express symbolic systems," since dirt is "matter out of place."⁴³⁵ Conceptually, then, cleanliness in "A Labor Museum" works as a recuperative act, countering the perception of immigrants as inherently threatening to the social order. Rather than destroying, immigrants were creating, ordering, stabilizing.

Though "clean," the German potter is overwritten with industrial deformations. Washburne notes his "bowed legs," "sidewise straddle," and body "bent and twisted." Progressive reformers were preoccupied with the ways bodies could be made, or unmade, by industry. Their preoccupations ranged from barring machine-mangled beggars from

⁴³⁴ Washburne, "A Labor Museum," *The Craftsman*, 573-574.

⁴³⁵ Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 151; Mary Douglas, quoted in *ibid*.

public spaces to a more academic fixation on modern industry's deleterious effects. Yet unlike the "dwarfed and ill-fed" sweatshop tailors described by Agnes Sinclair Holbrook in *Hull House Maps and Papers*, or the "army of... [laboring] children, undersized, rachitic, deformed, predisposed to consumption, if not already tubercles [*sic*]" depicted by Florence Kelley and Alzina P. Stevens in the same text,⁴³⁶ The German potter's deformity is the mark of a time-honored craftsmanship. Indeed, though deformed, he is not enervated—a fact emphasized in his vigorous laboring. It becomes a mark of belonging much as, six years later in *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, a crushed "miller's thumb" would symbolize the acme of belonging to community and tradition for a young Jane Addams in Cedarville.⁴³⁷

And just as Addams would never get her "miller's thumb," Washburne's efforts at communal rapprochement fall short. The potter literally exists in a secluded space, in an "alcove" of the larger room. His work, while tracked with precision by Washburne, ultimately hinges on elusive factors occurring within the "prayerful seclusion" that his hands create for the clay and taking shape by "some mystery of organic nature." And, perhaps most flagrantly in relation to the Museum's avowed purpose, the potter does not react to his audience: His face remains ever "unmoved." Washburne's farewell to her productive hero emphasizes that disconnection, rooting him in a timeless present, trapped by his own atavism. "The old potter has clapped another lump of clay upon the wheel," she concludes the scene, "but we pass him, and go into the next little room."⁴³⁸

Washburne moves through time and space, but the Labor Museum's performers do not. In fact, an Old World vernacular represents the core of an identity that is threatened by the processes of immigration and resettlement in a harsh new environment. Only once in her report does Washburne speak with one of the performers of this living history, an Irish weaver tasked with supporting her alcoholic husband and large brood of children, one of whom is mentally retarded. Washburne listens to the weaver's woeful tale of deracination: "There in the old country we had our comforts, our own bit of land, my man making a dollar and a quarter the day, Irish money; a blissid [*sic*] union of ten children and never a shoe wanting to the foot of one of them. O, wirra the day that we left!" Soon, her interlocutor breaks it off to begin speaking Gaelic with her countrywoman, Mrs. Sweeney. Washburne leaves the two "laughing like two children."

⁴³⁶ Agnes Sinclair Holbrook, "Map Notes and Comments," *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, 55; Florence Kelley and Alzina P. Stevens, "Wage-Earning Children," *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, 88.

⁴³⁷ Addams, *Twenty Years*, 7. My interpretations of Marion Washburne's visit significantly differ from that of Shannon Jackson. For Jackson, the Labor Museum maintains its progressive narrative of technological development, and thus American superiority, through and through. As she writes, "The impression of unmediated encounter reified a narrative of performance mediated by ethnocentric interpretations of history and progress, reinscribing the superiority of the practice that concluded the story. Although positing various labor practices as anticipating 'modern' machinery gave those practices a significance they did not often enjoy, it still offered a somewhat prejudiced representation of the quotidian, a historical montage in which the Progressive American present repeatedly positioned itself as another culture's future." Jackson, "Performance at Hull-House," *Exceptional Spaces*, 272. I am not convinced that visitors ultimately affirmed the triumph of modernity. Nor do I believe that the evolutionary narrative held up in the experience of visiting the Labor Museum.

⁴³⁸ Washburne, "A Labor Museum," *The Craftsman*, 574.

The use of Gaelic in this context does not preclude the romance of the immigrant so much as imagine her rich inner life as necessarily separate from her outer one. For at the Labor Museum, Marion Washburne triumphantly announces, the Irish weaver is “not measured by petty, momentary standards, but by the law which underlies human evolution.”⁴³⁹

Situating the Irish weaver within an evolutionary narrative, Washburne is “thrilled with new sympathy.” That “sympathy” we might read as of a piece with William Morris’s definition of “craftsmanship”: “that form of work which involves the pleasurable exercise of our own energies, and sympathy with the capacities and aspirations of our neighbors.”⁴⁴⁰ Washburne, to be sure, pays continual lip service to the museum as overriding its borders, as infusing her own life with a “new sympathy.” The German potter, for instance, inspires her to look anew at the objects cluttering her own life. “My flower-pots at home made by such as he,” Washburne asserts, “gain a new significance. They are no longer mere receptacles for holding earth and guarding the roots of my plants. The rough, red surface of them is written all over with the records of human patience, human cooperation with nature, human hopes and fears.”⁴⁴¹ Her claims at once vocalize her Arts and Crafts ideology and the “object-based epistemology” that promised an entire culture borne up in an artifact. Indeed, they rehearse a common trope ringing throughout *The Craftsman* during its fifteen-year run (1901-1916), by casting a self-assured eye on vibrant traditions that seemed to emerge organically from the experiences of rural folk, and that might go unnoticed if a traveler only paid attention to “modern... buildings and many of the modern paintings.” Time and again, the journal defined culture as quotidian, local, essentially static, and autochthonous. Venice’s glassblowing traditions, for instance, “recall[ed] the brilliant tints of sky and sea.” In the crafts traditions and products of folk cultures from around the globe—from Japanese pottery to Swiss woodcarving—*The Craftsman* sought not only the picturesque landscapes nurturing craftsmanship, but also windows into entire societies.⁴⁴²

Yet Washburne’s veneration of the ability of craft to forge human connections breaks down outside of the protected space of the Labor Museum. She exits with a shudder at what lies beyond:

Stirred we are ourselves, as we squeeze slowly down the iron-stairs, elbowed by Hebrew, Greek, Finn, and Scot, feel the rush of the outside air upon our faces, and are thrust forth into the riotous city night. The crowded cable-cars clang their insistent way through the obstructing mass of vehicles; the dingy throng ebbs in and out of saloons and pawn-shops; a 10-20-30 theatre hangs a glittering reminder of “The Span of Life” down the broken vista of the street, and we turn for a last

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 579.

⁴⁴⁰ William Morris, quoted in Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor*, 11.

⁴⁴¹ Washburne, “A Labor Museum,” *The Craftsman*, 574.

⁴⁴² Mary Harned, “The Art-Handicrafts of Italy,” *The Craftsman* 2:1 (April, 1902), 45. See, for instance, Irene Sargent, “German and Netherlander: Their Gilds and Art,” *The Craftsman* 3:4 (January, 1903), 201-214; Mabel Thornton Whitmore, “Some Cornish Craftsmen,” *The Craftsmen* 2:2 (May, 1902), 91-95; E.A. Reed, “The Craftsmen of Persia,” *The Craftsman* 6:2 (May, 1904), 186-188; Clarence M. Weed, “Japanese Flower Jars,” *The Craftsman* 8:2 (May, 1905), 211-216; Robert C. Auld, “The Wood Carving of Switzerland: Where the Life of the People is Reproduced in the Art of the Nation,” *The Craftsman* 16:2 (May, 1909), 189-195.

look through the broad windows of the Museum. We, too, wistful children of a half civilized state, look back through these windows into a warmed and lighted world of happy industry; and even while we shove and push for the best places, wish in our hearts that we were working within. The light and heat, even the joy of doing good work under right conditions, may be artificial and evanescent, but without, around us, all is struggle and clamor.⁴⁴³

In the most obvious sense, her exit represents a triumphant conclusion to her visit, as she celebrates the simple pleasures and heroisms of handicraft work, sees them within their cultural contexts, and imagines a global community of workers. The Labor Museum functions as an antidote to its “riotous” surroundings of tawdry consumer pleasures and disconnected, pushy street life that, in her assessment, is real and permanent (the museum’s workshops are “artificial and evanescent”). One should expect no less from an article written up for the day’s leading Arts and Crafts journal.

Glorifying the craftspeople on display sparks a new awareness of the artistry that goes into making a flowerpot; it allows for struggling immigrants to transcend their immediate, “superficial” environment; and it imagines an alternative to modern American society in the celebration of time-honored forms of communal participation. They inhabit a “warmed and lighted world of happy industry.” But it is “artificial and evanescent.” Washburne and all those outside the museum inhabit a mere “half civilized state,” but one that has become, lamentably, permanent.

By contrast, Jane Addams’s experiences at the Museum bespeak less an attempt at preservation than at retrieval, at providing the fundamental terms of reconnection to a more “natural” state for her immigrant neighbors than that to which they were subjected in modern Chicago. There is no reason to doubt that Addams truly believed in the regeneration and solace that came from the “patient performance of painful duty.” Yet in *Twenty Years at Hull House*, her experiences at the Labor Museum are described as dramatic episodes of revelation. The power of revelation was, in fact, crucial to muckraking texts. Progressive reformers believed that a disturbing photograph or a litany of shocking industrial accidents could, in one fell swoop, strip away society’s gilded veneer. Scholars have described a more general “unmasking trend” that emerged with the modernization of American cities, with its neighborhoods of social strivers and immigrants. The “unmasking trend,” Mary Balkun writes, was a “reflect[ion of] the modern world’s sense that deception—whether of oneself or others (or both)—was the dominant mode of existence.”⁴⁴⁴ If “unmasking” could reveal a confidence man for what he truly was, it might also reveal an artist hidden beneath the threadbare skirts of a sweatshop sewer.

Addams writes of Russian women from a nearby “sewing room” mistakenly believing that the settlement house was throwing a Christmas party. Arriving to find nothing of the kind, the residents attempted to “entertain them with impromptu music and refreshments.” Their efforts failed utterly. Addams and her colleagues eventually led

⁴⁴³ Washburne, “A Labor Museum,” *The Craftsman*, 580.

⁴⁴⁴ Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 85; Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in American, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); David M. Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Balkun, *The American Counterfeit*, 13.

their guests to the Labor Museum. There, “the thirty sodden, tired women were transformed. They knew how to use the spindle and were delighted to find the Russian spinning frame.” Their nostalgic joy leads to the signal act of interpersonal connection: “They turned up their dresses to show their homespun petticoats.” These Russian women remain a nameless, thirty-person mass. Their true selves, metaphorized in the “homespun petticoats” they choose to reveal to their spectators, lie just below the surface and can be invoked within the matrix of “authentic” culture. But who were they without that matrix? Addams’s summation is crucial: “Because of a direct appeal to former experiences, the immigrant visitors were able for the moment to instruct their American hostesses in an old and honored craft, *as was indeed becoming of their age and experience.*”⁴⁴⁵ It was in their performance that Hull-House’s neighbors were thought to reveal their true selves, an “authentic” inner world that was at once self-affirming and negated their very individuality.

Nearly one hundred pages later, Addams describes a young neighborhood man. Also from Russia, he manifests the kind of aspirational élan Addams saw as artificial and counterproductive to her mythistorical vision of the human community. Apparently part of the “current” which the Labor Museum hoped to “stem,”⁴⁴⁶ he is a man “who, like too many of his countrymen, had made a desperate effort to fit himself for a learned profession, and who had almost finished his course in a night law school.” Despite his own avowed ambitions, Addams sees in him signs that what he really aspires to is connection with tradition. He “used to watch constantly the work being done in the metal shop at Hull-House.” One evening, “in a moment of sudden resolve,” he “took off his coat, sat down at one of the niches, and began to work, obviously as a very clever silversmith.”⁴⁴⁷ Again, the disrobing of the outer layer becomes the moment for a reconnection with one’s ethnic past.

Addams sets up the young man’s dilemma as the conflict between upward mobility and cultural “authenticity.” Ultimately, she locates its resolution in “the restorative power in the exercise of a genuine craft”:

He had long concealed his craft because he thought it would hurt his efforts as a lawyer and because he imagined an office more honorable and “more American” than a shop. As he worked on during his two leisure evenings each week, his entire bearing and conversation registered the relief of one who abandons the effort he is not fitted for and becomes a man on his own feet, expressing himself through a familiar and delicate technique.⁴⁴⁸

The young man’s silverwork is the antidote to his legal studies, the necessary expression of selfhood against modern artificiality. The inverted commas around Addams’s use of the term “more American” raise the question: Of what, exactly, does America consist? Is it located in the platitudes of upward mobility or the ability to resist those platitudes?

Obviously, Addams’s positive descriptions of the young man’s silver-smithing—his “relief,” his self-expression through “familiar and delicate technique,” the recourse towards “genuine craft”—as against the pejorative values of upward mobility humanize him. Yet undergirding these longings is a series of ethnic taxonomies that were enacted at

⁴⁴⁵ Addams, *Twenty Years*, 158-159. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴⁶ Washburne, “A Labor Museum,” *The Craftsman*, 576.

⁴⁴⁷ Addams, *Twenty Years*, 245.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 245-246.

the Labor Museum. The young man is neither “Chicagoan” nor “student” nor “future lawyer.” He is “Russian,” and, in fact, otherwise nameless. He may attend law school, but “he is not fitted for [it].” This fact secures him a proper place in ancestral community, but it forecloses his own immediate potential, as exemplified in his concerted effort to transcend poverty.⁴⁴⁹

The story of this young man, trying to chart his way in the modern city, makes the Labor Museum the site where a young person could truly shape his identity as an American. Indeed, while this chapter has thus far been predominantly concerned with the personal and interpersonal experience of theorizing, visiting, or performing in the Hull-House Labor Museum, any discussion of this venue has to contend with its original ambition, what Addams described in 1910 as the “overmastering desire to reveal the humbler immigrant parents to their own children.”⁴⁵⁰ What the Labor Museum could, or couldn’t, provide to first-generation Americans is a barometer for youths’ identity politics as “Americans” in the modernizing city.

The booster histories are rife with triumphant moments, pointing up the ways that children’s sudden recognition of their parents’ hitherto concealed expertise infused them with pride, redirecting their energies from the flippant temptations of “Americanization” and towards a more profound sense of belonging. Hilda Satt Polaheck describes two such moments of intergenerational reunion. In one, a friend, the daughter of an immigrant tailor, learns the value of her father’s work from “some classes at the Labor Museum.” In another, she recalls “an argument with a girl whose mother could speak German, French, Russian, and Polish but had not yet learned English. The girl did not realize that her mother was a linguist. To her, the mother was just a greenhorn.” No doubt, this mother was unique among her neighbors in her grasp of languages. But what she represented as the Labor Museum was the ideal: “For such children the Labor Museum was an eye-opener. When they saw crowds of well-dressed Americans standing around admiring what Italian, Irish, German, and Scandinavia mothers could do, their disdain for their mothers vanished.”⁴⁵¹

Addams told a similar story of Angelina, the American-born daughter of an Italian immigrant who insisted on wearing a “kerchief over her head, uncouth boots, and short petticoats.” Angelina, who took a cooking class Saturday evenings at Hull-House,

⁴⁴⁹ In the case of the Nineteenth Ward’s Jewish population, Addams’s guardianship was perhaps unnecessary, for there were already “able leaders” overseeing a community with “established welfare and cultural institutions.” Rivka Lissak, “Myth and Reality: The Patterns of Relationship between the Hull House Circle and the ‘New Immigrants’ on Chicago’s West Side, 1890-1919,” *Journal of Ethnic History* 2:2 (Spring, 1983), 29. Morris Gutstein, a luminary of Chicago’s Jewish community and former rabbi of the city’s Temple Shaare Tikva, explained the decreasing number of Jews at Hull-House, which he’d gleaned from “conversations with older people,” as the result of four factors: “1) early in the 20th century the Jews began to move west of Halsted...; 2) the objection of the Orthodox parents—and no doubt Zionist groups also to the children attending Hull House; 3) the establishment of the Chicago Hebrew Institute, which eventually became the Jewish People Institute; 4) the conflict of the Jewish boys with the Italian, Greek and Irish elements that gradually were attracted to Hull House. There was absolutely no discrimination against Jews.” Morris Gustein to Rivka Lissak, 22 August, 1977, Morris Aaron Gutstein Collection, Chicago Historical Society, box 161, n.f.

⁴⁵⁰ Adams, *Twenty Years*, 155.

⁴⁵¹ Polacheck, *I Came a Stranger*, 65-66.

refused to enter by the same door as her mother, who performed as the Italian spinner at the Labor Museum. Angelina's embarrassment stemmed from her concern with other's appraisals: "she did not want to be too closely identified in the eye of [her peers] with an Italian woman who wore a kerchief over her head, uncouth boots, and short petticoats." So did her eventual pride: "One evening, ... Angelina saw her mother surrounded by a groups of visitors from the School of Education who much admired the spinning, and she concluded from their conversation that her mother was 'the best stick-spindle spinner in America.'" But, it was to Jane Addams, and not the expert "stick-spindle spinner," that Angelina turned in order to verify "the truth of this deduction." The story resolved happily, with Addams recounting something of "the freedom and beauty" of life in her mother's ancestral village—omitting any mention of rural poverty, hunger, and social control—and Angelina finally "allow[ing] her mother to pull out of the big box under the bed the beautiful homespun garments which had been previously hidden away as uncouth."⁴⁵² Again, the immigrant's hidden past life is dramatically revealed.

Tellingly, Addams portrays herself as unable to convey fully the picturesque qualities of Angelina's (nameless) mother's Italian life:

That which I could not convey to the child, but upon which my mind persistently dwelt, was that her mother's whole life had been spent in a secluded spot under the rule of traditional and narrowly localized observances, until her very religion clung to local sanctities—to the shrine before which she had always prayed, to the pavement and walls of the low vaulted church—and then suddenly she was torn from it all and literally put out to sea, straight away from the solid habits of her religious and domestic life, and she now walked timidly but with poignant sensibility upon a new and strange shore.⁴⁵³

Village life is here idealized and self-contained in its "secluded spot," its attention to "local sanctities." In fact, one might even wonder why Angelina's mother left in the first place. For her daughter, Addams spins a carefully crafted story that registers the ambivalence at the museum's core: No matter how much one might appreciate the indigenous expertise and patriotic contributions of the New Immigrant, true understanding would be elusive, rooted in an epistemology a Chicago-born child could never know and which Addams herself can only render as a romantic abstraction.

Two decades later, Jane Addams alluded to handicrafts' ability to connect children with their ethnic backgrounds. In *The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1930), she noted, "Because Hull-House is in an immigrant district, we have the great advantage that children in the art school are of many races and nationalities and to a surprising degree they are familiar with the backgrounds of culture which their parents represent." As "the Scandinavian boy made a Viking bowl, the Mexican an Indian hut, the Greek the capital of a Corinthian column, the Italian the dome of St. Peter's," she could see "a new joy, ... as each child finds a chance to make his own contribution."⁴⁵⁴ Yet among the dozens of interviews conducted in the 1980s and 1990s for the Hull-House Oral History Collection, memories of the Labor Museum registered a wide spectrum of response, from simple acknowledgement to bemusement to exasperation—but never the intergenerational connection at the project's core. Rather, they echo the

⁴⁵² Addams, *Twenty Years*, 160-161.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁵⁴ Addams, *Second Twenty Years*. 345-346.

vision of the misguided do-gooder that has been described in novels as diverse as Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886) and Anzia Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements* (1923).⁴⁵⁵ Alex Elson recognized that "Jane Addams believed very much in the idea of maintaining and keeping up the crafts which were carried on in the old country," which explained why there was "a place at Hull-House for people to come who could weave and do pottery, things of that kind." William Donahue simply recalled it as the place where "The women used to gather..., the elderly women. And they had these looms for knitting, making carpets, making blankets." Eleanor Farwell noted of the pottery and weaving, "we never were involved in any of that. That was sort of by itself." She remained mystified as to its purpose, surmising, "Maybe [they were] doing it as a pastime or maybe they were foreigners trying to learn different trades." James Greco recalled in 1984, "The big ting [*sic*] that I really remember about Hull-House was that the immigrants had deep regrets because they could not get an education. They couldn't learn a trade, *only arts and crafts*."⁴⁵⁶

Retention, Declension, and the Making of an American Self

Although clearly a Hull-House booster, Hilda Satt Polacheck's account of her own experiences at the Labor Museum provides a window into its affective pedagogy, though perhaps not its deep personal resonances. The Polish-born Jew would soon perform as the Russian Spinner, but it was a task that needed to be taught to her. In *I Came a Stranger*, she describes herself as a "student in that endeavor." Indeed, for the unmarried Satt, the Labor Museum does not provide for a reinvigorated sense of tradition, but an opportunity to imagine a life transcending her immediate experience with work, making cloth flowers in a sweatshop:

Miss Hill [the lady in charge of the Museum] started out by taking me on a tour of the museum. Our first stop was in front of four cases that had been set up against a wall. These cases showed the evolution of cotton, wool, silk, and linen. I recall how surprised I was when I discovered that cotton grew out of the ground. I had never thought just how the cotton cloth that I worked with every day was made.

Satt describes this moment with the élan of the convert, at once proving that the Labor Museum could be an effective—and affective—pedagogical venue and exposing the lie at the heart of the museum's claims to simply provide the space for a "performance of painful duty," as innate as it was "patient." "I could not tear myself away from the case," she continues,

The case on wool fairly made my eyes pop out of my head. I had seen sheep many times, but it never occurred to me that wool came from sheep. So here were photographs of the sheep being sheared. Then how the wool was carded by hand, before combing machines had been invented. There were several methods of spinning the wool, from the most primitive to the most modern. The flax exhibit was a real surprise. I had seen fine linen such as tablecloths and napkins. I had

⁴⁵⁵ Henry James, *The Bostonians* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1886); Anzia Yeziarska, *Salome of the Tenements* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995 [1923]).

⁴⁵⁶ Elson interview; Walter Donahue, interviewed by Beth Bailey (9/11/1984), OH-037, box 2, folder 25, HHOHC; Eleanor Carroll Farwell, interviewed by Mary Ann Johnson (7/14/1981), OH-052, box 3, folder 28, HHOHC; James Greco, interviewed by Mary Ann Johnson (9/6/1984), OH-044, box 3, folder 25, HHOHC. Emphasis added.

even worn linen dresses. But I did not know that linen was made also of a plant....⁴⁵⁷

That she was inspired and moved by what she saw, rather than reawakened, is a crucial distinction.

Indeed, Hull-House existed for Hilda Satt as a safe space within which she could challenge her old assumptions—not “recover” them. Growing up in Poland, it would have been dangerous for a Jew to be out on the streets during Christmas. Invited to a Christmas party at Hull-House in 1896, she overcame her fears, although not without trepidation:

People called to each other across the room. Then I noticed that I could not understand what they were saying. It dawned on me that the people in this room had come from other countries. Yet there was no tension. Everybody seemed to be having a good time. There were children and parents at this party from Russian, Poland, Italy, Germany, Ireland, England, and many other lands, but no one seemed to care where they had come from, or what religion they professed, or what clothes they wore, or what they thought. As I sat there, I am sure I felt myself being freed from a variety of century-old superstitions and inhibitions.

There seemed to be nothing to be afraid of.

She would mark *this* occasion as the moment when she “became a staunch American.” She knew that her mother would not approve of her attending a Christmas party, and “was glad that she did not ask me.”⁴⁵⁸ But her description does not register her decision as a denunciation of her religious traditions. (*I Came a Stranger* provides a humorous anecdote of Jane Addams’s attempts to fit in at Hilda’s Jewish wedding.⁴⁵⁹) Instead, she overcomes those “superstitions” and “inhibitions” derived from the fear of difference. Her mother may have been a “pioneer,” but Hilda was an “American.”

Later, herself a teacher of classes at Hull-House, Satt turned to the *Declaration of Independence* to provide English-language lessons. “It was a distinct success,” she recalled. “The students did not find the words difficult; so in addition to learning English, we all learned the principles of Americanism.” As for her own sense of personal solace, the “daily monotony of making cuffs was eased” by thinking about the books she was reading at the Hull-House literature classes: “Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, Louisa May Alcott, Victor Hugo, Alexander Dumas....”⁴⁶⁰ At the Labor Museum, costumed as a Russian peasant, Hilda Satt existed in the rarefied space of cultural abstraction. It was only one of many costumes she tried on during her young womanhood at Hull-House, all of which existed in harmony, in the nurturing Hull-House milieu, as means by which she

⁴⁵⁷ Polacheck, *I Came a Stranger*, 64.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

⁴⁵⁹ Hilda Satt Polacheck recalled Jane Addams’s efforts respect Jewish tradition as genuine and well-meaning, but also insufficient. She wrote of her wedding reception, held at Hull-House: “When I finally was led to a table and seated between Bill and my mother, Jane Addams whispered in my ear that I must tell my mother that the chickens in the chicken salad were kosher.” Nevertheless: “That was the tolerant, generous, understanding heart of Jane Addams. She had gone to all that trouble to please my mother. But what she did not know was that the dishes, the butter, the cream in the coffee, the ice cream, and the small cakes baked with butter made everything not kosher.” *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 91, 67.

could enact her own sense of self, registering belonging in another kind of community, but in a community nevertheless.

Chapter Four

Love in the Ruins: *The Birth of a Nation's* History Crusade

D. W. Griffith, from Retreat to Retrenchment

At least by her own telling, unmediated exposure to the modern cityscape had prompted Jane Addams towards a new conception of American history and community. Her paradigmatic New Immigrant Chicagoan, an Italian woman retaining the classical associations of her homeland, sutured interpersonal and intergenerational fissures through the simple performativity of home life. For Addams, such practices simultaneously furnished the inspiration for a mythicized American history rooted in the life and labor of the “common man.” Around the same time, David Wark Griffith, whose most famous work also dealt with the terms of national foundation, was equally taken with the increasing cosmopolitanism of the urban landscape; in his case, lower Manhattan. From his bed-bug-infested “flophouse” in the Bowery, the young actor often strolled among his neighbors. As he recalled of these rambles,

The Ghetto, Mulberry Road, the Bowery, and Chinatown were all well known to me, but Rivington Street was the lively one, eternally jammed with pushcart peddlers hawking their wares. They had every imaginable commodity from a needle to a wedding outfit; even fruits and vegetables of all kind in season. Rivington Street never appeared as a melting pot to me, but more like a boiling pot. Here were Italians, Greeks, Poles, Jews, Arabs, Egyptians, all hustling for a living. Emotional, tempestuous, harrowing Rivington Street was perpetually a steaming, bubbling pot of varied human flesh.⁴⁶¹

Just as Addams had preemptively rejected Israel Zangwill’s “melting-pot,” instead favoring the British author’s earlier celebrations of what would eventually come to be called ethnic pluralism,⁴⁶² Griffith bristled at the idea of assimilation: He sets apart and in opposition the varied ethnic groups he encounters. Yet his description lacks the optimistic, literally constructive qualities intrinsic to Addams’s account of the city street

⁴⁶¹ D. W. Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood* (Louisville: Touchstone Publishing Company, 1972), 58, 55-56.

⁴⁶² See Addams’s comments on Zangwill’s *Children of the Ghetto* in Jane Addams, “A Function of the Social Settlement,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 13 (May, 1899), 37. In Zangwill’s play, *The Melting Pot*, David Quixano, the Russian-Jewish immigrant, grandly declares, “...America is God’s Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming.... God is making the American.” Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot: Drama in Four Acts* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1917 [1908]), 33. *The Melting-Pot*, was not staged in the United States until 1908, eight years after the opening of the Hull-House Labor Museum. Addams’s attention to the harmony of ethnic difference may be more accurately seen as presaging Horace Kallen’s “symphony” metaphor. See Horace M. Kallen, “Democracy versus the Melting-Pot,” *The Nation* (18 and 25 February, 1915), reprinted in Horace Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States: Studies in the Group Psychology of the American Peoples* (Boni and Liveright, 1924). See previous chapter. For an in-depth discussion of Zangwill’s metaphor in the context of its time, in relation to other American narratives of belonging, and as part of a long lineage of similar metaphors, see Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. 3.

in *Twenty Years at Hull-House*.⁴⁶³ Quite the contrary, Rivington Street is imaged in language that is not warmly colorful, but carnivalesque. “Emotional, tempestuous, harrowing,” it is a “far cry from the peaceful fields of old Kentucky”⁴⁶⁴ where Griffith was born. In fact, even as he rejects the “melting-pot,” he emphasizes—and twice repeats—the image of a roiling “pot” of another kind: “boiling” and “steaming, bubbling.” In this version, it does not liquidate difference in order to remake immigrants into Americans. Rather, it is marked by an unresolved, uninviting, and foreboding tension at the core of modern America. Jane Addams was keenly attentive to her neighbors’ deracination; D. W. Griffith, to his own.

Never quite secure in his stage presence—“I don’t look much like a leading man or *much* like a man of any kind,”⁴⁶⁵ he wrote his mother while touring the Mid West—Griffith soon abandoned the acting career that kept him as financially oppressed as the New Immigrants on Rivington Street. (When not touring with a theater company, he frequently performed manual labor to support himself.⁴⁶⁶) Transitioning first to screenwriting and then to directing films, in works such as *Romance of a Jewess* (1908), *Ramona* (1910), and *Broken Blossoms* (1919),⁴⁶⁷ he explored, often sympathetically, the domestic lives and ancestral roots of that “bubbling pot of varied human flesh” epitomized by the Rivington Street throngs.⁴⁶⁸

But it did not lend itself to the narration of American history that Griffith felt himself compelled to tell as a child of the Confederacy. *That* impulse flowered in *The Birth of a Nation*. Premiering in 1915, the three-hour film simultaneously ushered the medium into a new era of respectability, spectacle, and realism; provided the dramatic framework for the solidification of national ideals and politics rooted in middle-class domestic virtues; and did so through the vilification of African Americans.⁴⁶⁹ Historians

⁴⁶³ See previous chapter.

⁴⁶⁴ Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 55.

⁴⁶⁵ D. W. Griffith to his mother (undated, but 1890s), *D. W. Griffith Papers, 1897-1965* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1982), accessed at Museum of Modern Art Library (hereafter, DWGP), series 4, reel #35: “Family Memorabilia, 1898-1946.” For her part, Gish paid tribute to the director’s profile, which “seemed to belong on a Roman coin, and... the heavy lower lip and jaw of the Bourbons.” Lillian Gish and Ann Pinchot, *Lillian Gish: Mr. Griffith, the Movies, and Me* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 36.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁶⁷ D. W. Griffith, *Romance of a Jewess* (Biograph, 1908); D. W. Griffith, *Ramona* (Biograph, 1910); D. W. Griffith, *Broken Blossoms* (United Artists, 1919).

⁴⁶⁸ For a discussion of Griffith’s films’ sympathetic depictions of ethnic minorities, see Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), 53.

⁴⁶⁹ Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Richard Schickel, *D. W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 233; Michael Rogin, “‘The Sword Became a Flashing Vision’: D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*,” *Representations* 9: Special Issue: American Culture Between the Civil War and World War I. Winter, 1985: 150-195; Stanley Corkin, *Realism and the Birth of the Modern United States: Cinema, Literature, and Culture* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 134-135. A detailed synopsis of the range and variety of scholarship on the film can be found in Melvyn Stokes, *D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation: A*

attuned to questions of nationalism and memorialization have figured *The Birth of a Nation*—which netted “an unprecedented... \$18,000,000 on its initial investment of \$110,000”⁴⁷⁰—as both the reflection and the reification of postbellum reunion narratives rooted in tropes of common Anglo American suffering and regeneration. With its utopian conclusion centered on the wedding of two young characters—one Northern, one Southern—historian Cecilia O’Leary sees a “metaphorical marriage” of former enemies. Indeed, it is almost a foregone conclusion among scholars that this epic of Civil War and Reconstruction provided the mythicized foundations for white reunion and power under the Wilson administration.⁴⁷¹

But the process by which the film articulates these concerns makes it as much a tale about *rethinking* those foundations of nationalism as it is about dramatizing them. In so doing, Griffith’s film also emphasized the latent sectionalism that refused to die with Reconstruction and that eventually overran American society, culture, and politics. On its surface, *The Birth of a Nation* tells a complex story with a simple message. Its scope comprises over two hundred and fifty years of American history—ostensibly from 1619, when a Dutch ship unloaded nineteen African slaves at Jamestown, Virginia, to 1877, the year that newly-elected President Rutherford Hayes pulled federal troops from occupied southern territories, ending Reconstruction and ushering in what W. E. B. Du Bois called “the revolution of 1876”⁴⁷²—in a sweeping arc of national history that accounts for, and vivifies, past events, marshalling them toward a utopian national future predicated on white supremacy. Of what, precisely, that utopian national future consists registered Griffith’s film as a work of opposition as much as conciliation. It remakes history to support white supremacy, to be sure. But it is white supremacy as justified by, and structured along, the rhetorical and conceptual traditions and rituals of the American South. Indebted to a raft of historical sources, but drawing much of its narrative from Thomas Dixon’s racist novel, *The Clansman* (1905), Griffith nevertheless forged his own path, rendering *The Birth of a Nation* more than a Civil War film. It became, instead, a graphic pastiche of Confederate rhetoric, symbolism, and values that shapes the film as a particular national narrative.

Griffith premised *The Birth of a Nation* on his belief in the power of history. Both in his own memoirs and in other writing, the director is figured, and figures himself, as the last echo of a noble Lost Cause, redeeming the truth from the clutches of a Radical Republican agenda. In counterpoint even to vaudeville, which looked toward a chaotic modern multiverse, and which still attracted crowds in 1915,⁴⁷³ *The Birth of a Nation*

History of “The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11-13.

⁴⁷⁰ Phebe Davidson, “‘History with Lightning’: The Legacy of D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*,” *Memory and Myth: The Civil War in Fiction and Film from Uncle Tom’s Cabin to Cold Mountain*, eds. Ray Morris, Jr., S. Kittrell Rushing, and David B. Sachsman (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007), 230.

⁴⁷¹ Cecilia Elizabeth O’Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 207. See David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 395-397.

⁴⁷² W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994 [1903]), 4.

⁴⁷³ Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), ch. 6.

looked backwards, towards a nostalgized southern past that could exist, in perpetuity, by the advent of a Confederate—and not a broadly Anglo American—sense of what formed the core of American history and experience.

Rather than providing a narrative account of Griffith's film, this chapter explores how *The Birth of a Nation* claims to tell a fundamentally American history through key themes: The depiction of war, the explanatory rhetoric of its many intertitles, the performance of personal acts of resistance, and the evocation of symbolism related to American origins. Each was underwritten by the peculiar logic of the Lost Cause (the South's self-mythicization of defeat as, paradoxically, the crucible of victory) and Confederate Nationalism (secession as the defense and maintenance of American values): personal valor *versus* General Grant's impersonal war machine; resistance even amidst certain defeat; vigilance against northern conspiracy. In this way, *The Birth of a Nation* structures white American racial reunion upon the visual and rhetorical scaffolding of a southern vernacular understanding of national history that remained in opposition to the country that emerged from the Union victory.

D. W. Griffith in History

Born in rural LaGrange, Kentucky, in 1875, D. W. Griffith, by his own account, entered into a world destroyed by the recent Civil War. The Griffiths epitomized their state's power base: a small slaveholding family of seven children that never reformed its staunchly Confederate impulses.⁴⁷⁴ Once a celebrated Confederate officer, Jacob "Roaring Jake" Griffith, the family patriarch, tempered alcoholism and business failure with bluster. "I look as nice and young, as when I first flashed my sword in the great lost cause," he once wrote one of David's sisters, underlining the seminal heroic endeavor of his life. At least through the rose-tinted lenses of childhood, this stance was convincing enough. Jacob, his son remembered, "always preserved an old soldier's reserve and dignity."⁴⁷⁵ Nor was Jacob the only unrepentant Confederate, unable or unwilling to forget the war, with whom young David interacted. In his memoirs, he treats his early childhood in Kentucky—in reality marked by economic deprivation brought on by Jacob's restlessness and alcoholism as much as the destruction of the family estate—as punctuated by the gregarious rhythms of a rural southern life that was self-consciously nostalgic. His discussions of LaGrange are imbued with a cracker-barrel nostalgia for "the country." There, "life consisted mostly of listening to whittling oldsters by the horse trough before the general store fight the Civil War all over again—with ever-increasing victories." Young Griffith and his friends absorbed Jim Crow's racial fantasies and violence in a game they called "Black Man." The strongest two or three children stood in a line opposite the rest of the group. An emissary from the first line would approach the others, asking "What will you do if you see the Black Man coming?" The response—"Run right through, like a white man"—was followed by an onslaught from the second line to pre-determined "bases," hoping not to get caught by the two or three strongest children. "Often he played alone in the ruins of the big house," Lillian Gish remembered

⁴⁷⁴ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 40-41.

⁴⁷⁵ Jacob Griffith to his daughter, undated, DWGP, series 4, reel #35: "Family Memorabilia, 1898-1946"; Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 27. Although undated, the letter was written some time before 1885, when Jacob Griffith passed away.

him having told her in private conversation.⁴⁷⁶ The image of young David, wandering and daydreaming in the “plantation” ruins, or of schoolyard games centered on racial animosity and violence, also points us towards Griffith’s image of the South as a place in decay, occupied and bullied by a northern aggressor. Not inner failings, but the interventions and meddling of a vindictive federal government, razed family homes and upended social order, epitomized in the myth of the black rapist that “Black Man” evoked and resolved.⁴⁷⁷

In his memoirs, Griffith looked backward, to a time before “Black Man” was a game children played. The family “plantation” was introduced in the full flush of the era’s elegiac Moonlight and Magnolias rhetoric: “Once there had been quite a pretentious place—more or less like the popular conceptions of Kentucky mansions—with poplar and osage orange groves leading up to its portals.” He refers to it as his “old Kentucky home,” likely an allusion to Stephen Foster’s “My Old Kentucky Home,” a minstrel song from 1852 that celebrated a southern plantation idyll and evoked the slaveocracy’s economic and political power. Griffith self-consciously emphasized his familial bona fides (“more or less like the popular conceptions of Kentucky mansion”) to present an unrepentant fantasy of a romantic society whose demise came from the intrusions of the northern enemy. “Guerillas, disguised as union raiders, burned the house in the first year of the war,” he recalled, of a scene from his childhood that would make its way into *The Birth of a Nation*.

In reality, the “plantation” was closer to a medium-sized farm and was burned down shortly *after* the war. Indeed, Griffith’s early schooling no doubt fostered his nostalgia, since, as Ruth Elson has shown of history textbooks, the “myth that the South from the seventeenth century to the Civil War was made up almost entirely of large plantations permeates all nineteenth-century schoolbooks, those published before as well as after the conflict.” Nevertheless, the image of decay that it furnishes would remain crucial to Griffith’s self-fashioning as a redeemer of history. The subsequent family home was “quite small.” David was born there, and there “also was whelped the wolf pup of want and hunger that was to shadow me all my life.” Griffith, his biographer Homer Croy wrote in 1959, “looked upon himself as an aristocrat.”⁴⁷⁸ But it seems equally apparent that he imagined himself as the last of his line.

Griffith’s sense of marginalization was exacerbated by the belief that his people were excluded from the official national history of the late nineteenth century. These were histories wherein “One could not find the sufferings of our family and our friends—the dreadful poverty and hardships during the war and for many years after—in the Yankee-written histories we read in school.” (Despite his resentment at “Yankee-written” history books, Griffith does not mention what, exactly, he learned. He prefers, instead, to describe his pitiful school lunches of bread and sour apple butter.) Reading his memoirs,

⁴⁷⁶ Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 23; Homer Croy, *Star Maker: The Story of D. W. Griffith* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Peace, 1959), 5; Gish and Pinchot, *Lillian Gish*, 44.

⁴⁷⁷ Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 174.

⁴⁷⁸ Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 19, 29; Gish and Pinchot, *Lillian Gish*, 41; Stokes, *D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation*, 58-59; Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 177-178; Griffith *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 19; Croy, *Star Maker*, 3.

one is left with the overwhelming image of the individual, buffeted by historical circumstance.⁴⁷⁹

When, upon Jacob's death, the Griffiths moved to Louisville, a bustling port city of 20,000,⁴⁸⁰ David continued to nurture an outsized interest in the local legend that the future king of France, Louis-Phillippe, fled there during the French Revolution. The destruction of social order was a recurring preoccupation throughout his life that made its way into his films. In his memoirs he registered the deprivation following Jacob's death—"After father's death came the deluge"—echoing Louis XV of France, to whom legend has attributed the famous quotation, "*Après moi, le déluge.*" The loss of a strong patriarch ushered in a disruption of social norms and order, and Griffith saw Jacob's death as setting in motion a life-long *lacking*. Indeed, throughout his life, the director described himself as being literally *hounded* by poverty, which he familiarly labeled "the old wolf."⁴⁸¹

Griffith was attuned to what he saw as the superficiality of modern life, especially its privileging of superficiality over depth. One acquaintance recalled long conversations touching on "preachment vs. practice of religion" and "the ineffectiveness of religion as a code of behavior in a world in which material values are paramount."⁴⁸² Not surprisingly, then, the director looked backward, remaining obsessed with his ancestral lineage throughout his life, both in stories he told friends and reporters and in his self-consciously genteel comportment, a self-conscious construction reaching back to his young adulthood in Louisville.⁴⁸³ In the ensuing decades, as Griffith's artistry was codified in popular culture, critics paid homage to a man who inherited "Scotch idealism" from his mother and "the picturesque gambling audacities of a Welsh-Irish cavalier" from his father—a strange mixture of European gallantry and rebelliousness which had long been recited by Southern romantics in reference to gallant, chivalric Confederate officers.⁴⁸⁴ When wealthy, he had a chauffeur drive him to "many spots where he had played as a child,"

⁴⁷⁹ Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 26, 34. Even while directing *Intolerance*, Griffith applied the same interpretation to more distant pasts. Responding to Lillian Gish's morbid fascination with Catherine de Medici, he admonished, "Don't judge. Just be thankful it isn't you committing some kind of black deed. Always remember this, Miss Lillian—circumstances make people what they are. Everyone is capable of the lowest and the highest. The same potentialities are in us all—only circumstances made the difference." Gish and Pinchot, *Lillian Gish*, 168.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid; Stokes, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*; Richard Schickel, *D. W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 39. Michael Rogin explores the psychological implications of D. W.'s idealization of his father in "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision.'"

⁴⁸¹ Schickel, *D. W. Griffith.*, 41; D. W. Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 32. The "old wolf" is a phrase repeated in *ibid.*, 32, 41, 73, 91.

⁴⁸² Jacob Kalich, to Barnet Braverman, July 10, 1944, DWGP, series 7, reel #36: "Barnet Braverman Research Collection, 1897-1954."

⁴⁸³ Schickel, *D. W. Griffith*, ch. 2.

⁴⁸⁴ Gerrit Lloyd, "What Will Griffith Do Now?," *Picture Play* (September, 1925), 28-29, D. W. Griffith Archives: "D. W. Griffith Material Dated 1920-1929," Film Study Center, MOMA; Rollin G. Osterweis, *The Myth of the Lost Cause, 1865-1900* (New York: Archon Books, 1973), 12.

reminiscing “about the old times” with Kentuckians he encountered. At Paris and London hotels he “registered as D. W. Griffith of LaGrange Kentucky [*sic*].”⁴⁸⁵

Griffith was obsessed with lineage, especially as it could provide the ballast for noble action even in humiliating poverty. As a boy, his mother and her neighbors besmirched the lives of the northern *nouveaux riches*. The family was “still poor as country church mice,” he remembered, but Mrs. Griffith’s contempt when the name “Astor” was brought up in conversation was strong. Although busy at her “mess of embryonic corn bread, our principal food then,” she paused long enough to say, “Oh, yes—those fur traders from up North.” In contrast, her son came from a lineage that “had raised blooded horses and other stock, and pedigrees were all important.” Later, the importance of “pedigree” would dog his thoughts. When a famous director, he “became acquainted with some members of the Astor and Vanderbilt clans and realized that they were the social leaders of America.” But, he continued, “the jibes I had heard from the old families in Kentucky kept recurring and made it difficult for me to give them whatever obeisance they deserved.”⁴⁸⁶

Lineage was crucial to the Griffith *myth*, as well. Lillian Gish reported in a piece she wrote for *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1940:

Having been born in La Grange [*sic*], Kentucky, of a mother who was an Oglesby, and whose mother before her was a Carter, and of a father who was descended from the former kings of Wales, he always claimed that any blue blood in America came from the South—jokingly qualifying this statement by adding that they must all be scalawags and black sheep or they wouldn’t have left a life of ease to come over here in the first place.⁴⁸⁷

Griffith’s japing qualifications betray his varied levels of self-mythologizing: An attempt to trace noble genealogies of European nobility and a southern rebellious streak undergirding that genealogy. It was oppositional and noble, and the font from which a

⁴⁸⁵ Richard Reynolds, interviewed by Walt Lowe (February, 1968), D. W. Griffith Archives: “D. W. Griffith material dated 1960-1969,” Media Research Center, MOMA (Reynolds was Griffith’s chauffeur from 1937-194); J. Ballard Clark, interviewed by Walt Lowe (July, 1967), D. W. Griffith Archives: “D. W. Griffith material dated 1960-1969,” Media Research Center, MOMA,

⁴⁸⁶ Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 38-39. Family pedigree remained all-important to the Griffiths: “When I announced to the family that, at long last, I was an actor, poor mother took me gently aside and informed me that great-grandfather had claimed direct descent from those Griffiths who were the reigning family of Wales from the seventh to the thirteen century; that during this period they had intermarried with most of the royal families of Europe; that after England conquered these same Griffiths in the thirteenth century, we have heard little from them in history, doubtless because they had in the interim committed variously assorted villainies... ‘but none is on record as having fallen so low as to have become an actor.’” *Ibid.*, 48-49.

⁴⁸⁷ Lillian Gish, “D. W. Griffith—A Great American,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 27:43 (October, 1940), 108, D. W. Griffith Archives: “D. W. Griffith: Material Dated 1930-39,” Film and Research Center, MOMA. See also, Barnet G. Braverman, “D. W. Griffith, America’s Solely Great Contribution to Cinema,” *The Film Spectator* (12 July, 1929), 7-8, D. W. Griffith Archives: “D. W. Griffith: Material Dated 1920-29,” Film and Research Center, MOMA; Lloyd, “What Will Griffith Do Now?,” *Picture Play*; “D. W. Griffith Retrospective in Ky. Memorial Services at Grave Included—Native’s Awareness Broadened Beyond ‘Birth of a Nation,’” *Variety* (23 August, 1961), 13, D. W. Griffith Archives: “D. W. Griffith: Material Dated 1930-39” [*sic*] Film and Research Center, MOMA.

kind of pure American identity had sprung. Indeed, the director opens his memoirs in the biblical language of a descent inextricably woven with American triumphalism: He was the great-grandson of Salathiel Griffith, who had “served in the American revolution”; the grandson of “a captain in the American Army in the War of 1812”; the son of Jacob, who had “fought as a young man in the American Army against Mexico.”⁴⁸⁸

D. W. Griffith on History

By 1915, D. W. Griffith was a failed actor but a productive director. He was known among producers as a man with a romantic bent, with literary aspirations, and with innovative cinematic techniques that made the experience of film spectatorship both immersive and highly personalized. Between 1908 and 1915, he directed over three hundred films.⁴⁸⁹ Working with Billy Bitzer, a veteran cinematographer of newsreels and faux documentaries for the Spanish-American War, Griffith could direct a one-reel film in a single working day.⁴⁹⁰ His films frequently revolved around Manichean struggles between Good and Evil. Such conflict would not have been an unfamiliar concept to filmgoers at the time, accustomed as they were to the evolving standard of films as communicating “a moral lesson,” in film historian Lary May’s words, “which showed the ethical order lying at the core of the universe.” Yet Griffith’s utilization of special lighting and iris openings (which May sees as “a spiritual eye to penetrate the truth of life”) heightened the contrasts between the damned and the redeemed.⁴⁹¹ Even operating within the standard format of fifteen-minute story lines, he developed new filmic storytelling techniques such as the close-up, montage, and rhythmic editing. In rehearsals for *An Unseen Enemy* (1912),⁴⁹² a domestic drama in which adolescent sisters are terrorized by burglars before being rescued by their older brother, the director set the mood for one scene by “pull[ing] a real gun from his pocket and... chasing [the cast] around the room, shooting it off.” Although Griffith was, in fact, “aiming at the ceiling,” his histrionic method nevertheless evoked believable performances. This, Lillian Gish averred, was “the Griffith style of directing.”⁴⁹³

Orchestrating emotional response was crucial for the success of his most famous film. Inspiration for *The Birth of a Nation* came from Thomas Dixon’s racist novel, *The Clansman* (1905), a melodrama where romantic love between a Northerner and a Southerner after the war achieves its full flowering in the white racial utopia ushered in by the Ku Klux Klan’s “redemption” of the South from Reconstruction. The novel, and theatrical versions, had received a lackluster reception in the previous years. But for Griffith, reading its pages was an epiphany. He recalled “skip[ing] quickly through the book until I got to the part about the Klansmen, who, according to no less than Woodrow

⁴⁸⁸ Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 24.

⁴⁸⁹ May, *Screening Out the Past*, 66.

⁴⁹⁰ G. W. Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer: His Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 68.

⁴⁹¹ May, *Screening Out the Past*, 66, 74

⁴⁹² D. W. Griffith, *An Unseen Enemy* (Biograph, 1912).

⁴⁹³ Gish and Pinchot, *Lillian Gish*, 37, 39. See also Bitzer’s account of Griffith’s directorial style: “It was said that Griffith made puppets of his people. The answer is that, if need be, he would play one against the other to whip them into giving the best they had. He was a man whose job came first, and in his mind we were there for one reason only—making pictures.” Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer*, 75.

Wilson, ran to the rescue of the downtrodden South after the Civil War. I could just see these Klansmen in a movie with their robes flying.” That image, he claimed, allowed him to imagine transcending the run-of-the-mill “rides-to-the-rescue in pictures and horse operas.” Indeed, “Instead of saving one little Nell of the Plains, this ride would be to save a nation.”⁴⁹⁴

But the director’s mention of the “downtrodden South,” his citation of Wilson’s historical writing to underscore the veracity of Dixon’s story, emphasizes a more immediately personal concern. In his memoirs, the spark lit by *The Clansman* was “a burning determination to tell some day our side of the story to the world.” Cinematographer Billy Bitzer “could see and feel [Griffith’s] eagerness” on set. *The Birth of a Nation* would be an act of historical *reclamation*. In private, he told Roy and Harry Aitken, whose Triangle Company financed and distributed the film, ““The real story of the Reconstruction era has never been filmed... Tom [Dixon] is a Southerner. He knows how deeply the South was hurt and how long it took her to regain strength. I, too, am a Southerner. I know the hardships that Southerners endured in defeat.”” To Lillian Gish, he confided, “I’m going to tell the truth about the war between the States. It hasn’t been accurately told in textbooks.” And to a reporter for the *Baltimore American*, Griffith explained,

I saw a chance to tell how [the South] suffered through what I believe to be the most dramatic period in the history of the country—reconstruction. There was a chance to show that the negro of the South did not of his own volition degenerate into the human being who made the Ku Klux Klan necessary, but rather he was seduced by the unscrupulous adventurers, who exploited a situation for their own selfish ends.⁴⁹⁵

The ostensible objectivity—a mere “chance to tell”—behind this impulse is in fact undergirded by a value-laden vision of his history’s *dramatis personae*: the “necessary” Klan, opposing the “unscrupulous” and “selfish” carpetbaggers.” Finally, he had the opportunity to speak truth to power and transcend his conviction that the new nation marginalized him.

Such a cultural logic is peculiar, though not unique. For all its celebration of “the genius of the race of pioneer white freedmen [who]... made of the wilderness the home of Freedom,” *The Clansman* is in fact a story about a vision of pure American identity that could exist *only* in the American South and that was threatened by the larger nation state. In the novel, the northerner Phillip Stoneman declares to his beloved, the southerner Margaret Cameron, “I love the old-fashioned dream of the South” in a statement typical of northerners of the period, long accustomed to an ideal of the southern picturesque that grew after the war in everything from novels to resorts. He loves the South as an Eden, the Ur-landscape from which national identity emerged. “Maybe you have enchanted me, but I love these green hills and mountains, these rivers musical with cascade and fall, these solemn forests—but for the Black Curse [Reconstruction], the South would be to-

⁴⁹⁴ Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 88, 89.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid, 26; Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer*, 106; Roy Aitken, as told to Al P. Nelson, *The Birth of a Nation Story* (Middleburg, VT: William A. Denlinger, 1965), 25; Gish and Pinchot, *Lillian Gish*, 131; “Producing a Play On [missing],” *Baltimore American*, 2 April, 1916, p. 194, DWGP, microfiche series 4, reel #26: “Griffith Scrapbooks.”

day the garden of the world!”⁴⁹⁶ Stoneman here speaks for the reader, who has similarly been invited into plantation estates and fields, been made privy to the inner workings of a nefarious Republican regime, and had her ire roused by visions of “injustice.” Indeed, in contradistinction to the celebration of Arcadian beauty and leisure that, Nina Silber shows, marked the postbellum South against the incorporation, routinization, and anomie of the modern North, Dixon moves beyond touristic fondness and romance to channel genuine anger into a fight to reclaim his homeland.⁴⁹⁷

Indeed, *The Clansman* was part of a larger project of Southern indignation, manifested in pro-Confederate historiography and politics. Dixon—and later Griffith, with his incantation that he was finally telling the “real story”—was peddling the popular narrative with which he grew up—the belief in a “Yankee conspiracy to miseducate Southerners,” that was countered by what David Blight has termed a “history crusade.” Southerners, and especially veterans, vigilantly sniffed out perceived northern conspiracies in United States history textbooks. A reunited nation was deluged with literary and organizational activity emphasizing the valor of a beleaguered, premodern South, whose victory was celebrated in the breach. Indeed, as early as 1878, Ulysses S. Grant referred pejoratively to the “historians” who credited Union victory to sheer manpower, and to the devious work of “hirelings and Hessians.” Along with a raft of memoirs from Confederate veterans, pro-South journals such as the Louisville-based *Southern Bivouac* (1882-1887) and the Nashville-based *Confederate Veteran* (1893-1932) achieved nationwide readerships of fifteen- and twenty-thousand, respectively. Local southern histories, associations, and art works remained intransigent and virulent in their claims that national belonging and mythologizing took root and remained in southern soil.

The Lost Cause, a term popularized by Virginia journalist Edward Alfred Pollard, had its origins in the popular and melodramatic dramatizations of the “‘Lost Cause’ of Scottish independence, especially as portrayed in the novels of Sir Walter Scott.” It signaled the persistence of noble struggle amidst certain defeat and thus found easy currency in the postbellum South, especially after Pollard published *The Lost Cause: A Southern History of the War of the Confederates* in 1866. As Rollin Osterweis has written, “The importance of Pollard’s books lies in their exposition of a blueprint for the future.... The conclusion of *The Lost Cause*, published just one year after Appomattox, indicates the mythical terms into which the military struggle would be transferred.” Pollard wrote: “The people of the South have surrendered in the war what the war had conquered; but they cannot be expected to give up what was not involved in the war, and voluntarily abandon their political schools for the dogma of Consolidation.” Pollard insisted, “It would be immeasurably the worst consequence of defeat in this war that the South should lose its moral and intellectual distinctiveness as a people and cease to assert its well known superiority in civilization... over the people of the North.”⁴⁹⁸ Unrepentant in defeat, purified by struggle, ever oppositional—these were the fundamental tropes of the Lost Cause that would come to be peddled in novels, plays, and political oratory.

⁴⁹⁶ Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1970 [1905]), 291, 282.

⁴⁹⁷ Silber, *Romance of Reunion*, ch. 3.

⁴⁹⁸ Osterweis, *Myth of the Lost Cause*, 11; Edward Alfred Pollard, *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* (1866), quoted in *ibid.*, 11-12.

Northern readers thrilled to, and reveled in, literature depicting the easy rhythms, happy social structures, and valor of the antebellum and Confederate South. New York audiences, from the 1880s on, watched plays such as *Shenandoah*, *The Heart of Maryland*, and *Secret Service* that, in historian Rollin Osterweis's words, paid "enthusiastic tribute to all the romantic qualities of the glamorous Old South and of the noble knights and ladies who defended its banner."⁴⁹⁹

Even as, in the postbellum years, the "Old South" became a romantic counterpoint to northern industry, urban squalor, and social dislocation, the Lost Cause manifested an active, antagonistic impulse. The "gray-clad knights who rode for [Dixie's] glory" that so captivated northern schoolchildren and adults alike⁵⁰⁰ continued to fight for recognition and superiority in the minds of southerners. The image was neither idyllic nor anachronistic, but indeed became a guide for maintaining proper comportment, pride, and unflagging search for vindication. Southerners burnished their Lost Causism in memoirs, magazine articles, novels, parades, and public monuments. As a young man in Louisville, it was still possible for Griffith to attend lectures by George Pickett's widow.⁵⁰¹ In this milieu, history was also redemptive. As Blight notes, "Many ex-Confederates put enormous faith in history as their source of justification. While the history they had lived ruined them, the history they would help write might redeem them."⁵⁰²

Griffith never mentioned the specific histories he read, either in rural LaGrange or in urban Louisville. But if young David, in border-state Kentucky, was subjected to anti-southern textbooks, his case was unique. And in any event, by the 1880s, as Osterweis notes, "the white schoolchildren of the South studied the history of their particular state and the history of the Confederate States of America, along with a 'proper presentation' of American history."⁵⁰³ That "proper presentation," found in locally produced history textbooks in the South, denounced the severe austerity of Puritan New England and the hypocrisy of anti-slavery advocates who enjoyed the fruits of their fathers' slave trading, described "Yankee traders who adulterated meat, milk, and nutmegs," and, most importantly, lauded the South as the unique site of national formation. Joseph Moreau has traced the tortuous path of southern pedagogy. These ranged from the earliest antebellum boycotts, to postbellum vituperations against the perceived Radical Republican conspiracy to overthrow the white South, to the massively popular consensus histories of the 1890s, to the development, at the turn of the century, of a fragmented publishing industry catering to highly localized markets as "the power of text selection in public schools steadily passed to local, county, and in the South, state officials." Simultaneously, grassroots efforts, led by Confederate veterans, sniffed out perceived slights in any and all primary and secondary school pedagogy. Their vigilance was dogged, at one point even "condemn[ing] a math book that... ask[ed] students to determine General Ulysses S. Grant's age, in days, when he captured Vicksburg, Mississippi."⁵⁰⁴

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 102, 106.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁰¹ Schickel, *D. W. Griffith*, 41.

⁵⁰² Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 262.

⁵⁰³ Osterweis, *Myth of the Lost Cause*, 112.

⁵⁰⁴ Moreau also seized upon a signal irony here: "[I]t was Reconstruction, which Southern histories later depicted as the darkest chapter in American history, that helped to make their

The apex of this “history crusade” came in 1907, when Columbia University Professor of History William Dunning published *Reconstruction*, a text that would determine academic visions of the period for decades to come with its emphasis on meticulously relating the “facts and forces” at the core of the Reconstruction project. The New Jersey-born Dunning was not the disgruntled Confederate veteran ever vigilant against the ostensible conspiracy of Radical Republican historians and pedagogues. But his faith in the ability of facts to redeem the truth and his sentimental vision of the South render him both the epitome of the “history crusade” and its greatest mark of success: Faced with the truth, even a northerner would have to confess to Republican corruption. Aiming to prove the political and economic corruption of the Republicans—its dry subtitle was *Political and Economic, 1865-1877—Reconstruction* is nevertheless a work of high melodrama and sentimentality. Dunning describes the postbellum South as cluttered with “the wreckage of that which conquest had destroyed.” The Union’s occupation is an act of “scandalous prostitution... to merely partisan uses in the South.” The “ravaged territory of the confederacy” had been witness to the destruction of its “ancient social structure.” It is telling that, in his preface, Dunning could begin by evoking common cultural coin and, while not dismissing them, attempt to show their basis in more staid and research-based methodology: “Our narrative,... while it may seem to slight the picturesque details of the Ku-Klux operations and carpet-bag legislation and fraud, will be found, I trust, to present in something like their true relations the facts and forces which manifested chiefly in the politics of the North and West, transformed the nation from what it was in 1865 to what it was in 1877.” That transformation, Dunning asserted, proved the lie at the Union’s core: “If the northern point of view be taken, and the assumption be made that the Union had been preserved, the most casual survey of the country in April and May of 1865 reveals conditions, social, economic, and political, which are as different as the liveliest fancy could well imagine from those which characterized the Union of 1860.” In fact, “The initial steps in the readjustment after the termination of hostilities were guided by the wide-spread northern belief that the old Union had been maintained; the final steps in reconstruction revealed with unmistakable clearness the truth of the southern view that a new Union had

widespread use possible. Republican-led state governments firmly established public schools and the principle of direct taxation to support them, despite opposition from landowners and others who claimed such schools were luxuries and tools of Northern invaders.... Between 1871 and 1890 the percentage of the Southern population enrolled in public school nearly doubled, to roughly the national average. Progress was uneven, and the South still lagged behind the North by other measures, such as spending per pupil and length of the academic year. Despite these problems, however, the new schools and students enlarged the regional pool of bookbuyers and made it more feasible for publishers to target books to a specifically Southern audience.” Joseph Robert Moreau, “Schoolbook Nation: Imagining the American Community in United States History Texts for Grammar and Secondary Schools, 1865-1930” (Ph.D. dissertation, the University of Michigan, 1999), 8, 16, 65, 35, 69, 1, 11, 79; John McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979) 206. See also, Frances Fitzgerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 19; Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1988), 14.

been created.”⁵⁰⁵ Dunning was after the truth that could only be revealed by shining a light on the unimpeachable fact.⁵⁰⁶

If *The Clansman* provided the emotional inspiration, Woodrow Wilson’s *A History of the American People* provided the necessary stamp of professional rigor applied to Griffith’s project. Both in promotional interviews for the film and in intertitles used throughout *The Birth of a Nation*, Wilson’s *History* makes an appearance. The five-volume *History* was popular in its day, spinning a social, political, and economic narrative rooted in the importance of self-determination, or what Stephen Skowronek sees as the historian-president’s “Burkean case for preservation,” for “protecting traditional prerogatives and resisting the leveling tendencies of concentrated power.”⁵⁰⁷ In volume five, *Reunion and Nationalization* (1908), from which Griffith gleaned the information for his film, the Ku Klux Klan is devoted to the “protect[ion of] the southern country from some of the ugliest hazards of a time of revolutions.” Of Reconstruction *en toto*: “The course of carpet bag rule did not run smooth. Every election fixed the attention of the country upon some serious questions of fraud or violence in the States where northern adventurers and negro majorities were in control.”⁵⁰⁸

Paradoxically, even as Griffith railed against the ostensible Republican conspiracy contained in history textbooks, he emphasized the importance of historiography in giving credence to his vision. Inspired by Dixon’s novel, the director turned to texts that could provide an index for historically accurate recreation, especially those that shone with the light of unalloyed truth. *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War* and Mathew Brady’s *Civil War Photographs: Confederate and Union Veterans—Eyewitnesses on Location* seemed to promise an unmediated intimacy with people, places, and events in an era when photographic representation had acquired an exalted position as the reliable conveyor of battlefield experience.⁵⁰⁹ In other ways, photographic texts played on the public’s nostalgia, evoking childhood romance. Assistant cameraman Karl Brown recalled the importance of photographic documentation in assuring a sense of authenticity that could also resonate with fond memories of wartime valor:

The gun carriages and caissons were accurate to the finest detail because two years before, in 1912, a New York newspaper had published a very cheap reprint of the great *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, originally published by the

⁵⁰⁵ William Archibald Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907), xvi, 16, 272, 4, xvi, 4, 5.

⁵⁰⁶ Stanley Corkin has explored how this methodological principal found its dramatization in the cinematography and intertitles of *The Birth of a Nation*. My aim in this discussion is to locate Griffith’s film less within an emergent historiographical realism than within a sociocultural vision of history-as-redemption propagated by Lost Causists and their sympathizers. Corkin, *Realism*, part 3.

⁵⁰⁷ Stephen Skowronek, “The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes: Racism, Liberalism, and the American Political Tradition,” *The American Political Science Review* 100:3 (August, 2006), 391, 393-394.

⁵⁰⁸ Woodrow Wilson. *A History of the American People: Vol. V: Reunion and Nationalization* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1908), 61, 98.

⁵⁰⁹ For the image as offering an intimate entrée into lived experience, especially that of the Civil War, see Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), xvi-xvii; Geoffrey Charles Klingsporn, “Consuming War, 1890-1920” (Ph.D. dissertation, the University of Chicago, 2000), 5, 9.

Century Company back in the eighties. I was very familiar with this publication, because that expensive, four-volume edition, printed on heavy coated stock, was the prize of my grandfather's library, and I had spent long winter evenings as a boy, sitting on the floor with these books open in my lap, searching the rosters of the many battles for my grandfather's name, and finding it, too, in every action of the Army of the Potomac from First Bull Run to the Wilderness, that bloodiest of campaigns, which ended the war.⁵¹⁰

Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, which "became the bible of [the film's] construction crew,"⁵¹¹ thus toggled between hyper-reality and nostalgic affinity.

During eight months of research, Griffith consulted with history professors, interviewed veterans, and studied battlefield maps, especially Nicolay and Hay's ten-volume history, *Abraham Lincoln: History* (1914), a measured text given to long reproductions of epistolary exchanges. Highly sympathetic to the slain president, it provided the mythic foundations for cross-sectional reconciliation, as southerners read it and "observed how mighty Lincoln must have been to defeat the Southerners." Furthermore, it "reflected the growing view that Reconstruction in the South would not have been as bad if the forgiving Lincoln had lived and the power of the Radical Republican congressional leaders had been curbed."⁵¹² Throughout the shoot, according to Gish, Griffith's "pockets bulged with books, maps, and pamphlets, which he read during meals and the rare break in his busy schedule." While filming Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Griffith sought "an exact replica of an engraving [he] was holding in his hand."⁵¹³

Filming in southern California, Griffith applied the same zeal for historical accuracy to his set design and directing process. To be sure, he utilized special effects to recreate the massiveness of his story. Gish, for instance, recalled how, "By starting with a closeup [*sic*] and then moving the camera back and forth from the scene, which gave the illusions of depth and distance, and by having the same soldiers run around quickly to make a second entrance, Mr. Griffith created the impression of big armies." Indeed, battle scenes never employed "more than 500 actors."⁵¹⁴ But in other ways, Griffith sought to recreate scenes to the letter. Acquaintances of Abraham Lincoln examined the makeup of Joseph Henaberry, who portrayed him. Ford's Theater was reconstructed "following exactly the measurements of the original building," while "eyewitnesses [to Lincoln's assassination] told how the orchestra was arranged, and the general appearance of the audience was further described." In the resulting scene, actors onstage performed *Our American Cousin*, as they did at Ford's Theater the night Lincoln was shot.⁵¹⁵

⁵¹⁰ Karl Brown, *Adventures with D. W. Griffith* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 64.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵¹² John Hay and John G. Nicolay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (New York: The Century Co., 1914); Bruce Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War: Mythmaking in American Film* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 23.

⁵¹³ "Producing a Play On," *Baltimore American*, DWGP; Gish and Pinchot, *Lillian Gish*, 132, 136; Brown, *Adventures with D. W. Griffith*, 75.

⁵¹⁴ Gish and Pinchot, *Lillian Gish*, 145,

⁵¹⁵ Milton MacKaye, "The Birth of a Nation," *Scribner's* 102:5 (November, 1937), 45, Film Study Center: Microfiche 077, MOMA; James Shelley Hamilton, "Putting a New Move in the Movies," *Everybody's Magazine* 190 (June, 1915), 678, *The Birth of a Nation Archives*, folder 2,

Karl Brown, who worked on the film as an assistant cameraman, remembered a well-informed director who not only oversaw the recreation of an antebellum southern town on a vacant lot near Sunset Boulevard (using artificial flowers, plaster cast “stone walls,” and “lawns” made out of woven mats) but accuracy at its most granular: “One glance at a Brady picture proved that the real uniforms had been turned out in quantity far from the field of action and that nothing fit anybody. So the soldiers were outfitted with uniforms that were too loose or too tight, too long or too short, and therefore technically accurate as army issue.”

But Brown also remembered how Griffith framed this historical narrative. Priming his crew for a scene depicting the Battle of Petersburg, he declared that he wanted the portrayal of mutual suffering under “a hellish rain of fire.” But beyond that familiar trope, he referred to the role of the Confederacy in that engagement as “gallant heroes,” with the Yankees issuing “murderous fire.” Of scenes of Klan activity, Brown “had never seen so much delight in any man’s face as [Griffith’s] showed.” Indeed, Griffith gave himself over to latent fantasies to represent Gus, the rapacious African American who sets off an important chain of events in the film’s narration. Griffith “had the idea of foaming at the mouth to indicate bestial passion” and he made sure “that the prop box always contained dozens of small boxes of hydrogen peroxide.” It was neither a lark nor an innovation. Rather, the vision of the foaming black racist was “firmly fixed in Griffith’s mind.” In fact, along with a keen attention to historical detail, Brown recalled the director as driven by an internal, intuitive vision. Crewmembers “had to be at their most alert to capture every slightest word or gesture from Griffith” as he “surveyed the scene and voiced his vision of what was in his mind or more or less obscure poetic terms.” Brown’s superior, Billy Bitzer, recalled a man transformed as “Griffith changed his directorial personality entirely. Where heretofore he was wont to refer to films as sausages, he now seemed to say, ‘We have something worthwhile and valuable in this drama of the Civil War.’”⁵¹⁶

Brown situated Griffith’s directorial process as one of workers bringing a kind of inborn, pre-verbal vision to life, as crewmembers endeavored “to find out... *what* he wanted, or more accurately, what he wanted it to look like on screen” and “it was up to them to find or contrive the materials and methods to bring this into being.” The root of that vision was a familial legacy as the director reached into the Griffith wheelhouse:

Griffith knew from his father, who had fought for the Confederacy, that nobody had ever directed any battle, real or staged, all by himself. The commanding general can indeed direct the disposition and state the objectives of his forces, but after that it is up to his subordinates to carry out their assignments if victory is to be gained. As a respected military authority has said, wars are won or lost by sergeants. And with this in mind, Griffith had supplied himself with as many sergeants as he could muster, each to perform an assigned function...I didn’t realize it at the moment, but what I was witnessing was a Griffith rehearsal of a battle. True, there was no action to be run through, but by the time we had finished, everyone in any capacity knew his purpose in the general scheme and Griffith had nothing to do with the preparations from then on. He knew, because

Film Study Center, MOMA; Gish and Pinchot, *Lillian Gish*, 137; Brown, *Adventures with D. W. Griffith*, 74.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 64, 65, 56, 71, 56; Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer*, 105-106.



D. W. Griffith directing The Birth of a Nation (1915). G. W. Bitzer at the camera, Lillian Gish and Wallace Reid seated. (CULVER SERVICE)

"D. W. Griffith directing The Birth of a Nation (1915)," from the D. W. Griffith files, University of California, Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archives.

he knew his men, that when he appeared on the field ready to shoot, every trench, every gun emplacement, every costume, every detail would be set and read, and all he would have to say was “Fade in” and the battle would be under way.⁵¹⁷ “This was not just another picture for Griffith,” Bitzer remembered, “He was fighting the old war all over again and, like a true Southerner, trying to win it or at least to justify losing it. The director’s “passion consumed him. He *lived* every minute of it.... You’d think we were back in 1864-5. Of course, in Griffith’s mind we were.”⁵¹⁸ Seen within the context of the southern quest for historical verity—indeed, the *reclamation* of the national historical narrative—the performance of directing *The Birth of a Nation* was itself a recovery of vernacular experience. The oppositional origins, the vigilance to emphasize the film’s historical verity, the very logic that makes the story go could only have been the product of a child of the Lost Cause.

The Birth of a Nation as Confederate Consent

Running to three hours, *The Birth of a Nation*’s themes would have been immediately recognizable to anyone who had seen the hundreds of Civil War films of the previous decade: Intersectional romance tested by war and resolved afterwards, chivalric southerners fighting against the odds, African Americans who transition from dutiful factotums to threatening mobs.⁵¹⁹ As would the film’s ultimate redemption, premised upon the advent of the Ku Klux Klan and the restoration of antebellum order and cross-section racial reunion. Indeed, *The Birth of a Nation* has frequently been described as a film that deployed these themes in the interest of solidifying cross-sectional white Anglo Saxon Protestantism amidst the destabilizing influences of mass culture. Robert Sklar describes it as a “vision of national unity through white racial solidarity” that provided the mythic foundations for the Wilsonian era. (Wilson, as Stephen Skowronek points out, “purged the federal civil service of blacks who held responsible executive positions and made the federal government, for the first time since the Civil War an active agent of racial discrimination.”) Lary May similarly sees the film as emerging from Griffith’s larger sense of “Anglo-Saxon culture... as eternal truth,” a “classless, blessed order” under threat from both nonwhites and corrupt industrialists.⁵²⁰ With its carefully structured reunions and resolutions—familial, romantic, and ultimately sectional—Griffith’s film cannot escape the “romance of reunion” endemic to the period.

But to view *The Birth of a Nation* as a dramatization and mythicization of national reunion ignores its origins, production, and, indeed, much of its visual and rhetorical grammar. It is a militantly divisive film. Although its Christian-utopian ending, predicated on white inter-sectional marriage, represents a consolidation, it is as much a film about who determines the particular logic of that consolidation. In this way, *The Birth of a Nation* is also a film still in rebellion, preserving the Lost Cause doctrine and imagining its triumph as the realization of uniquely American motifs.

The Birth of a Nation is a film indebted to historiography, especially in the quarter of “historical facsimiles” that punctuate the film:

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 56, 57, 59.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 107, 109.

⁵¹⁹ Chadwick, *Reel Civil War*, 112.

⁵²⁰ Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 63; Skowronek, “The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes.” *The American Political Science Review*, 389; May, *Screening Out the Past*, 80.

The first call for 75,000 Volunteers. President Lincoln signing the proclamation. An historical facsimile of the President's Executive Order on the occasion, after Nicolay and Hay in "Lincoln, a History."

Appomattox Courthouse, on the afternoon on [sic] April 19, 1865, the surrender of Gen. Robert E. Lee, C.S.A., to Gen. U.S. Grant, U.S.A.

An historical facsimile of the Wilmer McLean home as on that occasion, and the principals and their staffs, after Col. Horace Porter in "Campaigning with Grant."

A gala performance to celebrate the surrender of Lee, attended by the President and staff. The young Stoneman present.

An historical facsimile of Ford's Theatre as on that night, exact in size and detail, with the recorded incidents, after Nicolay and Hay in "Lincoln, a History."

The riot in the Master's Hall. The negro party in control in the State House of Representatives, 101 blacks against 23 whites, sessions of 1871.

An historical facsimile of the State House of Representatives of South Carolina as it was in 1870. After photograph by "The Columbia State."⁵²¹

In this last, we encounter a *grand guignol* where African American congressmen swill liquor, eat chicken legs as they make political arguments, "read" legislation upside down, put their bare feet on their desks, and pass a law making interracial marriage obligatory. But if the scene owes much to the depths of southern white paranoia and sexual fantasy, it was rooted in the kind of historical pedagogy Griffith may have encountered as a young student. The image of illiterate and irreverent black politicians was rehearsed in textbooks catering to southern schools, as well as monographs such as James Pike's well-known, *The Prostrate State: South Carolina Under Negro Rule* (1874).⁵²² Stoking the fears of over-sexualized "black brutes," the scene thus functions as a threat to middle-class family values. Indeed, while scholars have frequently turned to the ways in which the film posits an irruption into the *sanctum sanctorum* of domestic space,⁵²³ this scene posits an equally powerful invasion—here, of state power. When Lynch and a troop of African American "occupying" soldiers jostle Ben and Elsie off a Piedmont sidewalk, Lynch's justification hinges on a rejection of the honorifics of an honor-bound South, "This sidewalk," he jeeringly explains to an angry Ben, "belongs to us as much as it does to you, 'Colonel' Cameron." The gesture towards military rank, with its ironic inverted commas, imagines the foundations of Lynch's pretensions towards racial equality: all markers of civilization and glory are a joke.

In *The Birth of a Nation*, historical sources provide the ostensibly objective bedrock from which the narrative emerges, with scenes taking their inspiration from the

⁵²¹ D. W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation* (Biograph, 1915).

⁵²² Moreau, "Schoolbook Nation," 79, 80, 89-90; Stokes, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, 197, 206; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 609. The scene in the House is also narrated in *The Clansman*. See Dixon, *The Clansman*, 267.

⁵²³ J. Hoberman, "Our Troubling *Birth* Rite: The Library of Congress Moves to Suppress American Movie History," *Village Voice: Voice Film Supplemental* (30 November, 1993), 3-4; May, *Screening Out the Past*, 61; Merritt, "Dixon, Griffith, and the Southern Legend," *Cinema Journal* 12:1 (Autumn, 1972), 26-45.

historical record, or modeled after well-known photographs. Filmed to imitate the “period” look of a Mathew Brady photograph,⁵²⁴ *The Birth of a Nation* bled into the visual grammar of documentation. Certain scenes either allude to well-known images (such as “A Harvest of Death,” see below) or directly invoke them, as with the image from the South Carolina House of Representatives, modeled after “The Columbia State.”

Indeed, Griffith’s (often explicit) reliance upon primary and secondary sources functions to transform a pro-Southern interpretation of Reconstruction into supposedly objective historical facts. In the film as in his memories, Griffith distinguishes between the “objective” realities of impartial historical work, modeled on the Rankean model of marshalling exact evidence to present “objective” scholarship,⁵²⁵ and the works of partisans like the Radical Republican Albion Tourgée, and other “Yankee written” histories. Only once does the historical record emerge as a point of contention, in an intertitle reading, “The Ku Klux Klan, the organization that saved the South from the anarchy of black rule, but not without the shedding of more blood than at Gettysburg, according to Judge Tourgee of the Carpetbaggers.”

But by subtler means, this is a film about *bending* the historical record. We open on an intertitle announcing, “The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion.” We watch as slaves are unloaded at port and appraised. We are, ostensibly, in 1619, when a Dutch trading ship unloaded a cargo of twenty African slaves at Jamestown, Virginia, the English settlement established in 1607. The scene, though, seems to confound its historical moment and geographical milieu, as a preacher, unmistakably in Puritan costume of long black cape and buckled hat, blesses the slaves as they make their way down the gangplank. North is implicated in this divisive practice as much as South, as the mythical Ur-Northerner (the severe, black-frocked Puritan) sanctions the rise of the regime of African slavery in British North America. The scene announces the film as rooted in a “people”—white Americans who will suffer for their

⁵²⁴ Billy Bitzer, quoted in Stokes, *D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation*, 96. Nor was this an accurate record of historical events. As Bruce Chadwick writes, “Blacks did not control the Republican legislatures of any of the eleven southern states in Reconstruction.... Blacks usually represented no more than 25 percent of any legislative house, although they managed to get sixteen congressmen and one governor elected and were also represented by three lieutenant governors and several state cabinet members. South Carolina was the only state in which black convention delegates outnumbered whites, seventy-six to forty-eight, but the South Carolina convention was one of the fairest and most visionary. It called for integrated schools; restored political power to interior regions that had long suffered at the hands of legislators from big cities; enlarged women’s rights; voted for manhood suffrage for all men, black and white; called for the direct election of the governor; adopted the state’s first divorce law; strengthened the state’s fiscal power; reformed county governments; and revised the tax system.... Although all of the Reconstruction legislatures called for equal voting and social rights for blacks and whites, not one of them ever passed or debated a bill for intermarriage.” Further, “Although all of the Reconstruction legislatures called for equal voting and social rights for blacks and whites, ... black legislators, aware of how important their every move was, were remarkably restrained.” Chadwick, *Reel Civil War*, 114-115.

⁵²⁵ Griffith’s reliance on the tropes of historiography that emerged at the time under the Dunning School, and were influenced in methodology by the German model, is the subject of chapter six in Corkin, *Realism*. Corkin reads the search for objectivity and order into the film’s content, shaped around the resolution of disorder and chaos.

sins and be redeemed by mutual struggle.⁵²⁶ But this very argument had its roots in a conciliatory historiographical trend that had long been concerned with undercutting the Union's ostensible self-righteousness by implicating them in slavery. Charles Goodrich's *A History of the United States of America* (1867), a text published by Boston-based Brewer and Tileston and taught in Chicago schools, described the advent of slavery in British North America "not less by the cupidity of the north which found its profits in the slave trade, than by the cupidity of the south, which found its profits in slave labor."⁵²⁷

While the implication of northerners in the African slave trade was nothing new,⁵²⁸ much of what followed narrated a particularly southern vision of national history. Indeed, even as Griffith's film sets up the parallel stories of the Stoneman family from Pennsylvania and the Cameron family from South Carolina—families drawn together by romantic and friendly relationships and eventually against the divisiveness of war—its true focus is on the southern milieu. Skipping ahead nearly two-and-a-half centuries, the story opens with an elegy not to race but to space. We are "In the Southland. Piedmont, South Carolina, the home of the Camerons, where life runs in a quaintly way that is to be no more." We watch, through the eyes of Ben Cameron, as life unfolds along the main thoroughfare, on pillared front porches and in the quiet street. Characters are introduced as stamped by historical legacy. Ben's sister, Margaret, is "a daughter of the South, trained in the manners of the old school." Later, when the brothers Phil and Tod Stoneman visit the Cameron plantation, Ben Cameron guides the Pennsylvanians—like the film audience for whom they serve as surrogates—through cotton fields and slave cabins.

In these scenes, slaves work purposefully in the fields, and dance happily for their white audience—a myth of African American childishness that infected Griffith's own memories of our "innumerable darkies around our old Kentucky home" who, "as a rule," brought with them "music and laughter."⁵²⁹ Bitzer's camera lingers on the rituals of labor and leisure as though it were documenting daily events that are "to be no more," as intertitles provide an index for understanding what we have just watched: "The two-hour interval given for dinner, out of their working day from six till six." Uncharacteristically, the film does not attribute the information to a source, but it speaks in the factual language of scholarship to redeem historical narrative. In this instance, "facts" mitigate any sense of slavery's brutality: a twelve-hour workday reduced to ten, and not so brutal that it precludes the energy for, or inclination towards, happy dancing. As the slaves

⁵²⁶ While I have not found detailed analyses of this opening shot, my reading here is informed by the general reading offered in Rogin, "The Sword Became a Flashing Vision," 150-195.

⁵²⁷ Charles Goodrich, *A History of the United States of America* (1867), quoted in Elson, *Guardians of Tradition*, 93. See also, Moreau, "Schoolbook Nation," 65; Lawrence D. Reddick, "Racial Attitudes in American History Textbooks of the South," *The Journal of Negro History* 19:3 (July, 1934), 228.

⁵²⁸ This was, for instance, Abraham Lincoln's point in his second inaugural address (March 4, 1865), when he asserted that God had brought war to North and South "as the woe due to those by whom the offence came." Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," in *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Michael P. Johnson (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011), 200.

⁵²⁹ Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood*, 29.

perform, every so often they look directly into the camera as if to include the film's audience among the white spectators in the scene.

Indeed, the underlying sense is of unmediated contact with historically documented events and people. Even as the handful of slaves dance on command—itsself envisioned as a kind of spontaneous gesture, an “authentic” physicality set loose for avid eyes—extras mill about in the background. The sense is nothing so much as the pure recording of history. The slaves' contentment and jubilation are markers of the region's stability. It is the incursions of Union soldiers that upset the balance.

The slave owners also have their own careful rituals. Throughout the film, Bitzer's camera focuses in on the details of material culture: cotton bolls, state flags, food, parlor décor. Nor are these valueless images. The South Carolina state flag, seen in close-up as Ben points it out to Flora before his departure for the front, is the direct counterpoint to the unjustness of Lincoln's declaration of war. Set against a dark banner is a light ring in which the film's viewers can clearly make out the state motto, etched in dark letters, “Conquer we must for our cause is just.” Inside the ring, in light letters against a dark background, the *cri de Coeur* of the Lost Cause, which is justified by the rightness of the “cause”: “Victory or death.”

No idle documentation, though, this message will be dramatized time and again throughout the film. The scene depicting the Battle of Petersburg is a case in point. Running over eleven minutes, this set piece within the film it offers up the nine-month engagement (which lasted from June, 1864 to March, 1865) in all of its chaos. Obfuscating white smoke and the sheer number of bodies meeting in combat makes the enemies indistinguishable from one another. Central to this carefully structured scene is a message about which side has the better right to tell the history of the war and its aftermath.

An intertitle introduces us to a scene of deprivation. “The last grey days of the Confederacy,” we read. “On the battle lines before Petersburg, parched corn their only rations.” The pathos of the ensuing shots—the misc-en-scène of ill-clad and hungry soldiers gulping down their food and a close-up of parched corn—is exacerbated by the subsequent sequence, promising further deprivation, as an intertitle reads, “A sorely needed food train of the Confederates is misled on the wrong road and cut off on the other side of the Union lines.” As with the scene of Sherman's March to the Sea, events are humanized from the perspective of the South alone, both in the representation of action (we do not see Union troops doing their damage) and in assessing the action's meaning. The rations were “sorely needed” for Confederate troops, but its sabotage may have been just as “sorely needed” for the Union cause. As Confederate troops engage their foes in an attempt to “rescue” the train—as though they were gallant knights—the screen transitions to a nighttime battle, shot from a considerable distance to establish the sweep of action. Viewers see only a confusion of gunfire and smoke.

Amidst the confusion, and in counterpoint to the dehumanized spectacle of nighttime battle, Ben Cameron is singled out, “receiv[ing] his orders to charge at an appointed moment.” From the smoke-clogged trenches he was photographed head-on, at full-length, raising his sword and dashing off through the no man's land that lays between the trenches. The viewer returns to the smoky welter of war, its chaos intercut with shots of Union cannoners utilizing their materiel: “The masked batteries,” “the field artillery,” the “mortars.” Ben charges through the chaos, as Griffith tacks between panoramic

battlescape and intimate portrait of the “little Colonel” in action, as an intertitle tells the audiences: “‘The little Colonel’ leads the final desperate assault against the Union command of Capt. Phil Stoneman.” Indeed, even as the intertitle foreshadows the reunion of these school “chums,” it privileges Cameron’s experience. Ben’s is the “final desperate assault”; Phil’s position evokes no pathos—it is mechanistic “command.” The larger implications of the conflict are underscored only for Ben, whose charge is twice intercut with shots of his parents and sisters at home praying by candlelight over the family bible.

Union and Confederate soldiers engage one another in graphic, chaotic struggle punctuated with a detailed bayoneting. An intertitle focuses on Cameron as the scene’s protagonist: “Two lines of entrenchments taken, but only a remnant of his regiment remains to continue the advance.” Ben’s refusal to submit, even against what would seem to be certain death, is not dumb, mechanical obedience to orders but an indicator of his valor. The scene stresses his nobility when he slakes the thirst of “a fallen foe” from his canteen and “The Unionists cheer the deed.” In the scene’s most dramatic moment, Ben resumes his charge through no man’s land, retrieves a Confederate flag from a dead comrade, and rams it into the mouth of a Union cannon. With this last, seemingly suicidal performance, Ben collapses in front of the Union lines. Phil commands with desperate waving that his soldiers cease fire, and he is able to succor his friend before sending him to a makeshift hospital in Washington, DC.

An intertitle ironically announces, “War’s peace,” and the action freezes in a mis-*en-scène* of dead soldiers strewn about on the blighted trenches. With its emphasis on the common experience of death—the soldiers lack the jackets and hats that would identify their side—and in its formal composition of prostrate corpses scattered from foreground to background, the shot references “A Harvest of Death,” a photograph taken by Alexander Gardner and Timothy O’Sullivan on July 5, 1863, at the aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg. As Geoffrey Klingsporn has shown, this photograph quickly took hold of the national public imagination from the moment it was published, in Gardner’s *Sketch Book of War* (1866), and in its reproduction in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (1886), the text which Karl Brown said became the “bible” for the crew as it strode toward historical verisimilitude. Its unique visual grammar provided viewers an intimate (albeit vicarious) experience of war in subsequent battlefield reportage and in other Civil War films, through World War I.⁵³⁰ Griffith’s reconstruction of battle deaths provided the preceding scenes with Cameron with an allusion of also presenting real events. That effect is mixed-up with an idea of war’s meaninglessness: valor culminates in rotting, unidentified corpses. As Stanley Corkin asserts,

[T]he manner in which Griffith photographs his battle scenes defines their irrational status. These scenes offer action in the larger sense, uncontrolled by any rational impulse. We see the representation of battle in all its disorder, often shot by a camera situated high above the action. In addition, there are rarely figures in this scene who are recognizable to a viewer.... In following the film’s portrayal of this war as an act of irrationality based on [what Griffith believed an] unnatural idea [racial equality], we can see the ultimate acts of heroism within the film as possessing elements of futility. Ben Cameron, in one battle scene, first succors a fallen enemy and then, after being wounded himself, picks up the flag of the Confederacy and carries it into Union trenches where he rams it down a cannon

⁵³⁰ Klingsporn, “Consuming War,” 18, 2, and ch. 1 more generally.

before he falls. A conflict where such heroism fails to accomplish victory must be wrong.⁵³¹

In directing, though, Griffith was keen to differentiate the sides. “In most war films it is difficult to distinguish between the enemies unless the film is in color and the two sides are wearing different-colored uniforms,” Lillian Gish noted in her memoirs. “But not in a Griffith movie. Mr. Griffith had the rare technical skill to keep each side distinct and clear cut. In *The Birth*, the Confederate army always entered from the left of the camera, the Union army from the right.”⁵³² Perhaps more to the point, the Battle of Petersburg reenactment punctuated chaos with individual action that communicates the continuing justice of the Lost Cause. While the scene condemns modern warfare, Griffith found absolutism in the heroism of southern soldiers.

Lost Cause orators had long twisted the Confederacy’s ultimate military defeat into celebrations of personal valor. As early as 1873, southerners like John B. Hood juxtaposed the North’s military victory (the result of more men, supplies, and guns) with the South’s personal and philosophical victory (dauntless combat in the face of stacked odds). At Robert E. Lee’s funeral, General Wade Hampton emphasized gallant devotion to cause in the face of the North’s “brute force.” In 1893, John Kershaw described the Confederate soldiers’ “dauntless devotion to duty, their heroic self-sacrifice, their grand unselfishness in laying down their life so freely and willingly upon the altars of their country’s need.”⁵³³ Indeed, although the Union army entered Petersburg much depleted by the previous, extremely bloody Battle of the Wilderness—65,000 northerners had been killed or wounded, or were missing in action⁵³⁴—Griffith impresses on his audience the sheer size of northern numbers: It is the Confederate forces to whom he attaches deprivation, with Ben Cameron “continu[ing] the advance” of “only a remnant of his regiment.”

The figure of Ben Cameron, cutting through the total destruction of war, running to his capture, paradoxically situates war as a site of both self-destruction and self-making. In the logic of the Lost Cause, these oppositional values were mutually reinforcing. When Phil Stoneman and his soldiers cheer Ben’s act of compassion as he succors his “fallen foe,” they are acknowledging the greater valor of the southern self, maintaining proper behavior in the face of the chaos that northern “batteries,” “field artillery,” and “mortars” have caused. The message was central to how Griffith planned the scene, according to Karl Brown’s memories of Griffith’s directions for the filming of the scene: the Confederacy in that engagement were to be introduced as “gallant heroes” amidst a Yankees machine issuing “murderous fire.”⁵³⁵

Visually, as well, Griffith privileges a southern perspective, as in the scene recreating Sherman’s March to the Sea. An intertitle announces “While the women and children weep, a great conqueror marches to the sea,” and the scene opens onto a mother

⁵³¹ Rogin, “The Sword Became a Flashing Vision,” *Representations*; Corkin, *Realism*, 150.

⁵³² Gish and Pinchot, *Lillian Gish*, 140.

⁵³³ W. Stuart Towns, *Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2012), 69; Wade Hampton quoted in *ibid.*, 90, 70.

⁵³⁴ This was a figure exceeding that suffered “during the *previous three years*.” James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 742.

⁵³⁵ Brown, *Adventures with D. W. Griffith*, 65.

and her three young children. Bitzer's camera switches over to as a birds-eye view of tiny soldiers wending a destructive path through the landscape, including a stately home on fire. The camera intercuts tiny, anonymous soldiers who contrast with the young family, whose faces we now clearly see. Bitzer recalled the filming of this scene as though it were a covert operation:

Griffith noticed a family grouped on the hill nearby. At his direction, I inched the camera unobtrusively up to them, all the while pretending we were after shots of the valley below. Later, the combined scenes, edited by Jimmy and Rose Smith, would vary the long panorama shot with this little intimate picture of a mother and her children caught in the grip of war.⁵³⁶

Serendipitous though it was, the effect reproduces a common theme of Lost Cause orators, who invoked horrified women and children in their demonization of General Sherman.⁵³⁷ Griffith puts us in these victims' minds. Watching the scene unfold as the beleaguered southern family would, it is *their* experiences and *their* emotions that should dominate an "accurate" historical rendering of the war's end.

In another scene, in the film's second act, Ben recounts the "Outrages" committed by occupying Union forces and an African American-controlled judiciary. Speaking to four older men in a staid parlor, Ben reads from a newspaper, relating to his audience a sequence of troubling stories, which the film then dramatizes. First, a court case that "was tried before a negro magistrate and the verdict rendered against the whites by the negro jury." Next, without the benefit of an explanatory intertitle, we watch a slow procession of morose whites, trundling their possessions through a gamut of African American soldiers. These scenes of injustice and deracination are bracketed by extended shots of Ben, melodramatically recounting them to his listeners. The film's audience becomes privy to the past as it unfolded and was only conveyed to southerners. Griffith brought the southern perspective into history—by making it the only one that unfolds on a human scale. In Griffith's telling, for instance, the KKK is born when Ben Cameron witnesses a childhood prank. Wandering hopelessly on a cliff overlooking the ocean, humiliated by the degradations he and his family have suffered as a result of African American rule, he watches as a group of white children, hidden under a white sheet, scare a group of African American children.

In the intertitles, the film's audience learned that Confederates understood the Civil War itself as both a reasonable and necessary act of patriotism, as secessionists "decided that only in a separate Southern nation could they preserve their constitutional rights." Confederate veterans and sympathizers remained unrelenting in claiming the southern cause as a paradigmatically *American* cause, an effort to preserve national ideals. Speaking to the Confederate Survivors' Association in Augusta, Georgia, in 1881, former Confederate colonel Charles C. Jones, Jr., declared his audience "survivors of one of the most gigantic defensive ways ever conducted in maintenance of national independence and vested rights." That same year, South Carolinian William Boggs cited James Madison in *The Federalist* when he assured his audience that each state was "a sovereign body, independent of all others." In 1904, minister Randolph McKim made the act of secession part of the Ur-national legacy, beginning with the secession of nine states

⁵³⁶ Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer*, 108.

⁵³⁷ Towns, *Enduring Legacy*, 93.

from the confederacy in 1788. “Thus,” he emphasized to a Nashville audience, “*the Union itself was the child of Secession!*”⁵³⁸

To be both uniquely American and perpetually marginal was thus the *cri de coeur* of unrepentant Southerners, and Griffith’s film spends its time developing the careful logic that makes the film’s denouement a particular form of this particular vernacularized patriotism. The perversion and disavowal of historical precedent become key indicators of nefariousness. In key scenes, explained in intertitles, *The Birth of a Nation* rhetorically frames this logic, first in emphasizing the Civil War as the struggle between southerners preserving the ideology and the nation and northerners violating its most sacred tenets. In the film, the declaration of war is rendered necessary by the machinations of a federal government that had perverted the foundation of its very existence. Scenes in Lincoln’s cabinet turn to memories of the American Revolution, in the intertitle, “The gathering storm. The power of the sovereign state, established when Lord Cornwallis surrendered to the individual colonies in 1781, is threatened by the new administration.” Soon after, Lincoln “uses the Presidential office for the first time in history to call for volunteers to enforce the rule of the coming nation over the individual states.” The film presents Lincoln’s turn to war as a rejection of constitutional precedent.

Intertitles provide cues for understanding the anti-American structures of power that underpin Reconstruction in *The Birth of a Nation*. The film’s second half traces the degradations of Reconstruction before its ultimate “redemption” at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan, and posits the action within a purely Confederate logic of American nationalism. Quoting liberally from Wilson’s history, it announces,

The policy of Congress wrought... a veritable overthrow of civilization in the South... in their determination to “put the white South under the heel of the black South.”...

The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation... until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country.

The repeated invocation of “the South,” or its cognates, places region above race while asserting that southerners went to war in 1861 and for the Ku Klux Klan in 1865 solely out of the “instinct of self-preservation,” in a defensive reflex to “protect the Southern country.”⁵³⁹

In the second act, with Reconstruction in full swing, the “mulatto,” Silas Lynch, flush with power as lieutenant governor, expresses his desire to marry Elsie Stoneman, an

⁵³⁸ Charles C. Jones, Jr., William Boggs, and Randolph McKim cited in Towns, *Enduring Legacy*, 41, 42, 43.

⁵³⁹ Stankely Corkin views this as a reaction to the destabilization of historically determined structures of social and biological order. As he writes, “The coupling of black rule and the overthrow of civilization again defines the historical/biological view of the film. Similarly, the Ku Klux Klan is typified as a spasm of reaction to an unnatural imposition. In Griffith’s view, the KKK embodies the rationality of history righting itself.” Corkin, *Realism*, 151. Viewing *The Birth of a Nation* as positivistic history places Griffith within emergent trends in the professionalization of historiography in the United States—a professionalization in which Dunning played a crucial role—but divests the film and its director as part of a vernacular legacy to which Griffith claimed allegiance and which, indeed, became part and parcel of American political discourse at the time.

ambition which scholars traditionally interpret as the threat of destabilized social roles—the racially “confused” Lynch seeks to degrade the racially “pure” Elsie, upsetting her destiny as a white woman.⁵⁴⁰ His sexual proclivities are also an assault on the nation’s democratic traditions. Lynch, another intertitle tells us, is “a *traitor* to his white patron and a greater *traitor* to his own people” who “plans... to build himself “a *throne* of vaunting power.” He informs Elsie that she will sit by his side “as a *Queen*.” Following the president’s assassination, Austin Stoneman installs himself as an “uncrowned *king*.”⁵⁴¹ The language is not incidental, exposing as it does subversive sentiments underlying Reconstruction. With Wilson’s election as president in 1912, Lost Cause themes took center stage in national politics. Wilson, speaking as a native southerner, announced to a Virginia crowd, “[We are] a people preserved apart to recall the nation to its ideals and to its common purpose for the future.”⁵⁴² In this view, the South’s ostensible marginality made it *central* to an American historical narrative that valorize vigilance, that refuses to relinquish struggle. In *The Birth of a Nation*, following the surrender of the Confederate army at Appomattox, southern civilians refuse to compromise with the Union victors. Mrs. Cameron, barred from visiting Ben, recuperating from his battlefield wounds, declares to the guard at the door, “I am going into that room to my boy. You may shoot if you want to.” Margaret Cameron, for her part, perpetually relives the (imagined) scene of her brother Wade’s battlefield death: It becomes her trauma that she is unable to transcend. “Bitter memories,” an intertitle declares, “will not allow the poor bruised heart of the South to forget.”

Flora Cameron’s steadfastness ultimately serves as her consecration. The fair-complexioned, frenetic Mae Marsh, twenty years old at the time of filming, channels youthful enthusiasm, energy, and admiration of her elder siblings. Her undaunted spirit exemplifies the Lost Cause vigor in vigilance. Her innocence and enthusiasm are acts of rebellion, epitomized in Flora’s sartorial practices. It is Flora who puts on her “last good dress” when reading Ben’s letter from the front, maintaining a shred of ritualistic dignity. And in celebrating Ben’s return home from war, she drapes herself in garlands of raw cotton, the “southern ermine.” The pitiful substitute for animal fur becomes, in this context, a statement of allegiance to her homeland. Postwar poverty conflicts with conventions for proper dress, as Flora’s honor is bundled with the South’s refusal to give in.

Ultimately, Flora sanctifies resistance not just as a value but also as an act. In a crucial scene two-thirds through the film, the youngest Cameron daughter, bucket in

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 136.

⁵⁴¹ Emphases added in both.

⁵⁴² Skowronek, “The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes,” *American Political Science Review*. 394. In this way, Griffith’s film dovetails considerably with its political moment. As Stephen Skowronek has written of Woodrow Wilson, he “had not thrust himself into the vanguard of those advancing either a more assertive nationalist or a more thoroughgoing democratization of politics in the postwar era. What he had done was to advance alternative versions of nationalism and democracy, version that studiously avoided a commitment to equality and studiously protected the incongruous practices of localities,” the “commitment” to a segmented nation giving “reign to different ways of life so long as they did not interfere with one another,” and “acknowledg[ing] disparate social elements while excluding from national discourse their more disparate demands and interests.” Ibid., 395.

hand, ventures alone into the woods to fetch water from a spring. Dawdling through the woods, stopping at a log to revel in the simple pleasure of watching a squirrel enjoy an acorn, Flora's sylvan idyll is soon interrupted by the Union soldier Gus, introduced in the opening credits as "A renegade negro," who has been following Flora. A close-up of a rapt Gus, unmistakably in uniform, establishes the stakes of the scene. As Gus approaches Flora, he announces, "You see, I'm a captain now, and I want to marry," a declaration that sets off his love interest in a desperate escape. "Wait, missie, I won't hurt ye," Gus calls out, but his heavy, muscular, and clumsy movements belie any potential for delicacy. Flora soon ascends a cliff. As Gus nears her, she announces, "Stay away or I'll jump!" A close-up of each of these two is juxtaposed with an establishing shot of the cliff, fatally tall, before Flora jumps off and we watch her body plummet to the ground.

Flora's suicide, depicted in graphic detail,⁵⁴³ dramatizes the logic of the Lost Cause: the twin philosophies of "never surrender" and redemption through sacrifice. As the intertitle following this scene reads, "For her who had learned the stern lesson of honor we should not grieve that she found sweeter the *opal gates of death*." The "gates of death" are a classic allusion to Heaven. She sacrificed herself to maintain her personal purity, vindicating resistance as sublimely purifying. Later, finding her crumpled body on the rocks below, Ben will wipe the blood from her mouth with a Confederate flag. Once he and his fellow Klansmen have captured Gus, he will consecrate the flag with the assertions, "Brethren, this flag bears the red stain of the life of a Southern woman, a priceless sacrifice on the altar of an outraged civilization." Although, giving the film's concluding reunification of the north and south, "an outraged civilization" can be construed as Anglo America, the emphasis on a "Southern woman," the valorization of Flora's sacrifice, and the resistance that predicates it, situates firmly within a Lost Cause vernacular. Flora's loss leads to the South's preservation by catalyzing the Klan into organized resistance.

This is especially evident in the ensuing scene, featuring the Klan. Against a regime whose court rooms are now sites of *injustice*, and whose laws are the products of illiterate and drunken congressmen, the Klan's nighttime "trial" of Gus in a secluded glen signals the restoration of justice. It is only within "the dim halls of the Invisible Empire" that Gus will "be given a fair trial." Leon Litwack's comments on the turn-of-the-century South resonate with Griffith's dramatization of postbellum Piedmont:

The need to mete out extralegal justice reflected in the minds of many whites the failure of legal justice to inflict punishment with sufficient speed and severity. The law and the courts were deemed too slow, too cumbersome, and too unreliable. Lawyers and judges, in particular, sometimes found themselves cast as untrustworthy enforcers, susceptible to manipulation by white "patrons" of accused blacks and capable of using technical flaws in criminal judgments to reduce punishment or free the prisoner altogether. "We don't want to lynch

⁵⁴³ Brown recalls Griffith's striving towards verisimilitude in this scene: "Griffith felt that he simply had to have a shot of Mae Marsh actually making the jump from the pinnacle to the rocks below. So he sent Bitzer and me and a dummy representing Little Sister back up the mountain for that short scene.... This was not the usual straw-stuffed scarecrow type of dummy but a carefully weighted, correctly proportioned, and costumed replica of the girl herself, a sort of taxidermied [*sic*] Mae Marsh." Brown, *Adventures with D. W. Griffith*, 73.

anybody,” a Macon newspaper insisted, “but if the courts will not punish, society everywhere will protect itself, call it lynching, regulating, or what you will.”⁵⁴⁴

In fact, the Klan’s “Invisible Empire” is important precisely through what it, and it alone, illuminates: Justice. Gus watches in wide-eyed horror as the throng of clansman stands over him, silent and threatening. Historians have rightly seized on the ways in which this scene valorizes the racial politics of a postbellum South that was rooted in fear and sexual fantasy, and that fetishized black bodies into trophies celebrating white power.⁵⁴⁵ But Gus’s horror is met by a gesture vital to the film’s depiction of the performance of resistance: One Klansman dramatically lifts his hood, revealing himself to be Ben Cameron. Through this gesture, Ben reasserts his valor after having been pushed off sidewalks and otherwise humiliated for the better part of the film’s second act, and after arriving too late to save Flora. In contrast to Lynch’s ironic, denigrating wordplay, and his recourse to broader political ideals of equality to assert his power, Ben’s self-revelatory flourish rejects hiding behind any kind of disguise, rhetorical or literal, and reasserts power relations at their most primitive level. In the next scene, the Klan deposits Gus’s mangled corpse on Lynch’s front porch. To his tattered clothing is affixed a scrap of paper, bearing the image of a skull and crossbones and the letters “KKK.” “The answer to the blacks and carpetbaggers,” reads the intertitle.

The Klan’s “answer” is echoed in *The Birth of a Nation*’s denouement: The organization’s race-to-the-rescue of a motley crew, besieged by black troops in the log cabin home of two Union veterans. Along with the northerners, the group comprises the beleaguered Cameron family and their loyal house slaves, as well as Phil Stoneman. They have escaped there after being turned out of the Cameron estate by a sortie of African American Union soldiers and their white commander, evading capture only because of the house slaves remain loyal to their masters (and, implicitly, their proper racial roles), springing a surprise attack on the soldiers. “United again,” reads an intertitle, “in common defense of their Aryan birthright,” emphasizing the connection between race and nation that had been made popular by men like historian Herbert Baxter Adams at Johns Hopkins University (where he trained Woodrow Wilson) and political scientist John W. Burgess at Columbia (where he belonged to the “Dunning school”) in their advocating of the “Teutonic germ theory.” This, Philip Klinkner explains, was the belief that “American republican institutions were descended from ancient, freedom-loving Teutonic tribes via the Anglo-Saxons. Other peoples supposedly lacked the aptitude for self-governance displayed in this superior lineage.”⁵⁴⁶ And if we are still left with the curious problem of why Griffith’s intertitle stress an “Aryan” rather than an “Anglo-Saxon birthright,” the answer may be found in the historical writing of Woodrow Wilson. In *The State: Elements of Institutional History and Administration*, first published in 1889 and with many subsequent editions (1892, 1894, 1895, 1898, 1900, 1908, 1911, 1918), the newly-minted Ph.D. laid emphasis on an Aryan inheritance, which he viewed as more ancient than the Anglo-Saxon one. For Wilson, the “main stocks of modern European forms of government [from which American government emerged were]

⁵⁴⁴ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 298.

⁵⁴⁵ Michele Faith Wallace, “The Good Lynching and *The Birth of a Nation*: Discourses and Aesthetics of Jim Crow,” *Cinema Journal* 43:1 (Autumn, 2003): 85-104.

⁵⁴⁶ Philip A. Klinkner, with Rogers M. Smith, *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 95.

Aryan.” In *The Birth of a Nation*, the “Aryan birthright” does not just announce racial reunion, but celebrates a return to origins.⁵⁴⁷

Unlike an earlier scene, when Union troops invaded and pillaged the Cameron estate without opposition, in this turning-point scene, southerners hold the attackers at bay until the Klan, learning of the situation, saves them in the nick of time. The log cabin is transformed from a space of last resort and deracination into a site of yeoman identity reclaimed as the basis of racial reunion and the restoration of white supremacy. By the late nineteenth century, the log cabin had been invested with a series of overlapping meanings that all pointed towards a past, noble in its simplicity, as the fount from which greatness sprung. As an “icon of progressive history,” it was a metonym of “the humble origins of a great nation” that would be built upon and developed in the national rise to greatness. It could mean the same thing at the level of the individual, used to symbolize the rise to greatness and self-madness, as it was in William Henry Harrison’s and Abraham Lincoln’s presidential campaigns. In landscape paintings, the log cabin embodied the humble “domestic unity” of the family that epitomized sound familial and social relations. It was imaged in Midwestern “county atlases” and “county histories” from the 1880s that “featured illustrations of prosperous contemporary farms that included, either in the picture itself or in an inset, a log cabin.”⁵⁴⁸ In *The Birth of a Nation*’s denouement, the log cabin is the site of a millennial moment, when American history begins again, marked in subsequent shots of Klansman “disarming the blacks”; the happy faces of Piedmont’s white citizens as they realize they can open their locked doors; and Klansmen on horseback, preventing—at gunpoint—African Americans from voting.

Fundamentally, of course, *The Birth of a Nation* achieves its happy ending of peaceful order through racial conflict, emphasized by the reclamation of an “Aryan birthright.” But white reunion is justified and achieved in a narrative that stresses a localized vision of American history: racial ends are justified by regional means. Crucial to this film as both historical narration and political argument is the South as the bedrock for national redemption, because those ostensibly marginalized by politics and war refuse to surrender and are, ultimately, redeemed in their struggle.

The centrality of the South, both to the nation’s future and to its true realization, provides the film’s conclusion its full meaning. *The Birth of a Nation* closes with three fantastical, transcendent scenes filmed in double-exposure. An intertitle introduces the conclusion in sublime terms: “Dare we dream of a golden day when the bestial War shall

⁵⁴⁷ Woodrow Wilson, *The State: Elements of Institutional History and Administration* (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1889), 2. “Aryan” as an organizing principle for American government predated Wilson’s text. In the illustratively titled, *The Growth of the American Nation* (1895), Harry Judson, a professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, described the “restless Aryan” who found his “new home” in America. Harry Pratt Judson, *The Growth of the American Nation* (New York: Flood & Vincent, 1895), 15. Similarly, Joseph Pomeroy Widney, *Race Life of the Aryan Peoples* (New York: Funk & Wagnall’s Company, 1907), had equated “Aryan” inheritance with American growth and expansion. But neither was as popular as Wilson. Nor, for that matter, does Griffith mention these other historians in his writings and interviews.

⁵⁴⁸ Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., “‘The Ravages of the Axe’: The Meaning of the Tree Stump in Nineteenth-Century American Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 61:4 (December, 1979), 622; Louis S. Warren, *Buffalo Bill’s America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 589, 238.

rule no more. But instead—the gentle Prince in the Hall of Brotherly Love in the City of Peace.” Immediately following is an image of “War,” ironically represented by a giant, burly soldier on horseback, swinging his broadsword as he hacks away at a clamoring mob. “War” is positioned at the apex of a gruesome pyramid of corpses that resembles the earlier allusion to “A Harvest of Death” but takes the magnitude of suffering to its extremes, as the entire bottom half of the screen is filled with the anonymous dead and dying. This is immediately juxtaposed with the “Prince” in his “City of Peace”—or, in Hebrew, *Jerusalem*. A giant, diaphanous Christ figure, towers above, and is superimposed upon, a gentle throng of robed men and women who happily greet one another. Finally, we return to this world, and to Ben and Elsie, on their honeymoon. We find them, perched on a cliff, taking in a seaside vista familiar from earlier scenes as part of the Piedmont countryside. But the lovers’ idyll is pregnant with meaning. The scene evokes the site of the Klan’s origins: Ben, watching children at play, is struck with the epiphany that will result in the South’s return to glory. The happy couple stares out towards the water in what becomes a point-of-view shot, as Griffith quickly cuts to the numinous City of Peace.

Rhetorically, then, we are confronted with the sacred, from which we may draw our own typological assumptions. Visually, the sanctified city cues us in to deeply ingrained visual markers of American history and historiography. Returning to Ben and Elsie, the spiritual dimensions of their vision quickly yields to the mythistorical. Griffith overlays the tranquil waters that accompany the left half of the shot, with a distant vision of an ancient cityscape, its temple, obelisks, and ziggurats unmistakable, as is the city’s literal hilltop perch. Two different, though related, conclusions may be drawn from this image. We may be seeing the utopian site of redemption that had long formed the core of Anglo American self-conception—a predilection for the journey from City of Destruction to City of Zion described in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), a text which had massive purchase for the majority of middle- and upper-class readers during this time, was easily imagined to metaphorize the nation’s progress towards perfection, and had been replicated in major cultural projects such as the White City of the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. This would be the sense that America was both the inheritor of millennia of Western tradition and the site where those traditions could finally achieve their full realization through the particular social configurations and opportunities of the United States.⁵⁴⁹

But we have also returned to America’s sacred roots, the first self-conscious construction of national purpose; namely the City Upon a Hill, first evoked by Puritan John Winthrop in 1630. In his speech, “A Model of Christian Charity,” delivered to his fellow crew during the trans-Atlantic crossing of the *Arbella*, Winthrop had delivered a vision of a truly Christian community in the New World, one where “We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, suffer together.” New England would then become the cynosure for godly community:

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with out God in this work we have

⁵⁴⁹ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 101-103; Dorothy Ross, “Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty,” *The American Historical Review* 100:3 (June, 1995), 651-677.

undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world: we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God and all professors for God's sake; we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us, till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.

Winthrop's communal "model," Perry Miller explains, was built on the theological and parliamentary concept of "the covenant," which "held that a body politic could be constituted only out of the consent of the governed, yet also out of an agreement not to the terms of the people's own devising but only to the pre-stated terms of God's eternal law of justice and subordination." In Griffith's closing scene, the South, with its valorization of "states' rights," represents the inheritor of that sacred American compact that is beholden only to the divine charge to sacrifice self. *The Birth of a Nation* locates the community in the South, which a land apart remains true to the nation's first principles, first by implicating Puritans in the slave trader as mere appraisers rather than patriarchs, then by repeatedly intoning the North's disavowal of the covenant. "*Liberty and union, one and inseparable, now and forever!*" declares the final intertitle. But on whose terms?

A particular kind of struggle thus allows for a return to sacred origins—*The Birth of a Nation* is attuned to the importance of struggle as it is to the millennial moment when history can begin again. If this matrix of religious symbolism creates in the closing scene with a tangled sense of *what*, exactly, is being imparted, it is obvious *where* the sources of national perfection are located. Indeed, if Griffith cedes the mythistorical roots of national (white) identity to a famously Puritan symbol, he invests southerners with the responsibility of literally pointing the way. Crucially, as we look out over the cliffs, to a vision of a Christian humanity premised on honor, communal redemption, and justice, and ensured in the typological associations between Piedmont and Jerusalem/"City of Peace," it is Ben Cameron who, sweeping his arm in the city's direction, directs Elsie's gaze, along with our own.

Reception of *The Birth of a Nation*

Films served many purposes in the early twentieth century, especially after 1908, when the National Board of Review created standards that forced films to comply with national moral codes. From that moment on, they transcended their origins as working-class, sometimes racy entertainment. Indeed, the codes made films bulwarks against the erosion of middle-class Victorian values, or provided the normative social cues to working-class youth.⁵⁵⁰ For D. W. Griffith, film fantasy was edifying, and it rippled into every aspect of life. Instead of going to the saloon, a man could go to the movie theater: "He has been somewhere. He has seen something." The result would be a regenerative transformation: "He comes out and goes home in a different state than if he had gone to a saloon. The domestic unities are preserved."⁵⁵¹

⁵⁵⁰ May, *Screening Out the Past*, 64; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), ch. 6.

⁵⁵¹ "D. W. Griffith, Producer of the World's Biggest Picture," *New York American*, 28 February, 1915, p. 9, in *Focus on D. W. Griffith* ed. Harry M. Geduld (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 29.

It is significant that Griffith mentions the *act* of spectatorship, rather than focusing on the film's content. Filmgoing was ritual. Indeed, early film theorists imagined how the sheer fact of viewing provided the foundations for patriotic communion: the act and locus of spectatorship was gauged in mystical terms. In 1915, Vachel Lindsay imagined the movie theater as a *sanctum sanctorum*. "Here," he asserted, in language blending the Orientalist fantasy with Occidentalist piety, "the poorest can pay and enter from the glorious afternoon in the twilight of an Ali Baba's cave. The dime is the single open-sesame required. The half-light wherein the audience is seated, by which they can read in an emergency, is as bright and dark as that of some candle-lit churches." Within that space, he discerned the crucible of a truly democratic national identity. For the same experience would be had from the Plains to Broadway and thus, "certain national rituals will be born" from the stories to which a broad swathe of Americans were exposed. The following year, Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsterberg restated as much. "Everybody's purse allows him to see the greatest artists and in every village a stage can be set up and the joy of a true theater performance can be spread to the remotest corner of the land," he claimed in *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*. Films were not only affordable and transportable, they reproduced the experience "without end." Even Griffith believed that the "cinema camera [was] the agent of democracy," leveling "barriers between races and classes." Two decades before Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936),⁵⁵² Lindsay and Münsterberg (and later, Griffith) recognized that film initiated a watershed in democratic artistic experience—and indeed, in the formation of national identity and mythology.

But over what kind of experience would audiences commune? Münsterberg understood the hitherto brief trajectory of film history as effectively culminating in Griffith's work. Indeed, in positing a number of aesthetic interventions—the breaking, as Münsterberg writes, of "A new esthetic cocoon"—unique to cinema, his brief text, *The Film: A Psychological Study*, clearly alludes to *The Birth of a Nation*. Film critics have been critical of Münsterberg's comparison, seeing it, in Richard Griffith's words, as "a nineteenth-century hangover."⁵⁵³ But that is precisely why Münsterberg's analysis is so valuable: It captures critics at the interstice between two eras, orienting the present around, or in counterpoint to, the epistemological conventions of the past. The quick alteration of scenes, which so effectively echoed the process of imagination and memory, are imaged in "the soldier on the battlefield, and his beloved one at home, in such steady alternation that we are simultaneously here and there." The camera's ability to hide the

⁵⁵² Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York: Liveright, 1970 [1922, 1915]), 280, 287, 94; Hugo Münsterberg, *The Film: A Psychological Study* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970 [1916]), 12, 8, 92-93; D. W. Griffith, "Motion Pictures: The Miracle of Modern Photography," *The Mentor* 9:6 (1 July, 1921), in *Focus on D. W. Griffith*, 56; Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217-252. Bitzer remembers of his earliest time with Griffith, "On Saturday afternoons, he sometimes asked me to go to the nickelodeon with him to test the audience reaction to our pictures. At the nickelodeons on the Lower East Side of New York, we noticed that immigrants learned English by reading the titles aloud." Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer*, 68.

⁵⁵³ Richard Griffith, "Foreword," in Münsterberg, *The Film*, xi. See also Deren, "Cinematography," *Film Theory and Criticism*.

fact of special effects was imaged in the abovementioned scene of plummeting to one's death: "We see a man walking to the edge of a steep rock, leaving no doubt that it is a real person, and then by a slip he is hurled down into the abyss below. The film does not indicate that at the instant before the fall the camera has stopped and the actor is replaced by a stuffed dummy which begins to tumble when the movement of the film is started again." The close-up was epitomized in the description of Lincoln's assassination: "Suddenly we see not Booth himself as he seeks to assassinate the president, but only his hand holding the revolver and the play of his excited fingers filling the whole field of vision." Of film's potential to present epic moments in their full sweep: "We see thousands in Sherman's march to the sea. How hopeless would be any attempt to imitate on the stage!"⁵⁵⁴

Münsterberg's strongest allusion to *The Birth of a Nation* is perhaps unintentional: "In our mind past and future become intertwined with the present. The photoplay obeys the laws of the mind rather than those of the outer world."⁵⁵⁵ The quick shifting between scenes, the fluctuation of perspective, the zooming in and out, all externalized the psychological experience of existence itself. In this way, film was a natural extension of the subjective experience of attending a play, where one constantly chooses the focal point onstage, where "Every change which is needed must be secured by our own mind." The angle of the shot and the use of close-ups externalized the experience that remained merely internal and personal in the theatergoer: "It is as if the outer world itself became molded in accordance with our fleeting turns of attention or with our passing memory ideas."⁵⁵⁶ Alternately, audiences would merge with characters. "Just as we can follow the reminiscences of the hero, we may share the fancies of his imagination," Münsterberg averred. "... Here we are passive witnesses to the wonders which are unveiled through the imagination of the persons in the play."⁵⁵⁷

The Film speaks with the enthusiasm of a scholar describing a shift in dramatic paradigms and its collateral effects on human consciousness. Movies were made in the minds of their audiences, who were remade by movies: Acquiring new subjective senses of past, present, future, and community; made privy to the organic life of distant scenes and strange people. For Münsterberg, film represented the manifestation of subjectivity: "The mind develops memory ideas and imaginative ideas; in the moving pictures they become reality. The mind concentrates itself on a special detail in its act of attention; and in the close-up of the moving pictures this inner state is objectified. The mind is filled with emotions; and by means of the camera the whole scenery echoes them."⁵⁵⁸ The result was a metanarrative of the human condition, which the psychologist set off in italics: "*the photoplay tells us the human story by overcoming the forms of the outer world, namely, space, time, and causality, and by adjusting the events to the forms of the inner world, namely, attention, memory, imagination, and emotion.*"⁵⁵⁹ Film promised an entirely subjective experience, but it was premised on the director's specific vision. In writing that "we must accept those cues for our attention which the playwright and the

⁵⁵⁴ Münsterberg, *The Film*, 17, 2, 14, 15, 16, 92.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 37-38, 41.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

producers have prepared for us,”⁵⁶⁰ Münsterberg understood the cinematographic techniques that made *The Birth of a Nation* so evocative. Film, qua medium, was not simply about a new way to tell stories, but about *who was telling them*.

The *perspective* of the film’s story was crucial to Griffith’s film as an historical document. *The Birth of a Nation* impressed itself upon audiences as providing not just as a delicate artifact of the past, but as effectively recuperating historical experience. Roy Aitken recalled how a “standard speech was worked out by [the] road show manager for some agreeing minister to deliver at the theater before the first performance.” It concluded with a plea: “Be kind to this film. Treat it with tenderness and nostalgia. It will reward you by creating its own magic spell.”⁵⁶¹

With its reproduction of well-known historical events and familiar iconography, *The Birth of a Nation* quickly became appraised as an Ur-lesson in American history. It was “a patriotic entertainment” that “inclulcate[d] the lesson of national solidarity with hammer strokes.” It had “Patriotic Appeal,” according to a *New York World* headline. And it held didactic potential. “Every school child should see it for its historical significance,” declared one critic. “The film is an education in itself,” declared another.” Others saw implications beyond the schoolroom, to establish an “imagined community” rooted in a shared conception of American history. *Yonkers’ Daily News* declared it “The best chance for all people of this city—young and old, native and alien born—to acquire a vivid insight into a crucial period of American history and to be awakened to a more perfect comprehension of the ideals that should inspire American citizens.” Many papers reprinted still shots of the Appomattox courthouse scene, freezing the moment when Grant and Lee shook hands.⁵⁶²

If not in reality, then in spirit, the image of two noble adversaries ending hostilities to commence the long process of reconciliation was a common enough one in 1915. At the semi-centennial of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1913, Union and Confederate veterans met on the battlefield, shaking hands instead of reenacting the fight.⁵⁶³ In such rituals of reunion, the conflict became an ancient bloody rite, providing mythic foundations for a regenerated white nation. As O’Leary writes, the event epitomized the act of “reshaping historical memory in the service of national solidarity.... In the official speeches and choreography of Gettysburg, veterans were urged to forget their past animosities and emotional wounds.”⁵⁶⁴ With its simultaneous evocation of the City Upon

⁵⁶⁰ This also extended to the “leaders,” whose “words themselves prescribe the line in which the attention must move and force the interest of the spectator toward the new goal.” *Ibid.*, 33-34.

⁵⁶¹ Aitken, *The Birth of a Nation Story*, 62.

⁵⁶² “War Film at Ford’s,” *The Baltimore News*, 12 March, 1916, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #26: “Griffith Scrapbooks”; “‘Birth of a Nation’ Has Patriotic Appeal,” *New York World*, 22 May, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #24: “Griffith Scrapbooks”; “‘Birth of a Nation’ Has Patriotic Lesson for Loyal Americans,” *The Indianapolis Star*, 8 December, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #27: “Griffith Scrapbooks”; “A Real Work of Art,” *Evansville Journal News*, 25 November, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #27: “Griffith Scrapbooks”; “‘Birth of a Nation’ at Palace Theater is Patriotic Lesson,” *Yonkers Daily News*, 15 February, 1916, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #27: “Griffith Scrapbooks”; the image of Grant and Lee shaking hands recurs in a number of articles contained in the D. W. Griffith Archives, Film Study Center, MOMA, series 3, reel #2.

⁵⁶³ The scene is described in O’Leary, *To Die For*, 194; Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 383.

⁵⁶⁴ O’Leary, *To Die For*, 196-197.

a Hill and Christ's reign of peace, *The Birth of a Nation's* conclusion made national white reunion a mystical return to the nation's sacred origins. And it is clear that Griffith's film was understood as providing a conceptual and mythic framework for a sociopolitical process very much in full swing.

Indeed, if D. W. Griffith figured himself a rebel, retelling history, he was late even by cinematic terms. The postbellum memory industry developed in tandem with cinema. Although early Civil War films, written by northerners and produced in the North for northern audiences, skewed towards the Union, the Romance of the Lost Cause soon proved to be a nationally enticing vision. From 1911 onward, "films reflecting the southern point of view became twice as numerous as films with a Northern bias." Almost as soon as there were films, there were Civil War films—a natural enough extension of the war's preeminence in other venues, including politics, literature, and social organizations. 125 Civil War films were produced annually between 1910 and 1916.⁵⁶⁵ What set Griffith's magnum opus apart from its predecessors—along with his own asseverations about it being a uniquely personal endeavor—were its recuperative work and the ways in which its own region-specific logic carries the drama.

For Griffith's careful replication of domestic scenes, his use of photographic effect with the notoriously fragile Pathé camera,⁵⁶⁶ his near-anthropological emphasis upon a southern vernacular create a sense of objectivity, as though he had simply let the cameras roll on social relations unfolding. Critics confidently pointed to the essential re-creation of history—if one could not cling to the fantasy of unmediated contact, one might at least be assured that the formal qualities of authentic experience had been reassembled. Souvenir programs promised as much, as with a section on "Facts About the Picture" published in 1915:

Over eighteen authorities were consulted to get the proper atmosphere into the scenes in which President Abraham Lincoln appears. The great majority of these authorities agreed that as near as the time of the assassination could be set was 10:30. This calculation is based upon the most authentic reports of the hour that John Wilkes Booth entered Ford's Theatre on the fatal night.

It was a brilliant spring night in Washington, but historians record that just before the shooting the temperature fell quite a bit. This detail is covered in the picture when you note President Lincoln change his position in the box and slip a warm cape over his shoulders....

In the meeting of Generals Grant and Lee at Appomattox a historic incident is revealed. When General Robt. E. Lee wanted to make some marginal notes on the papers of the final surrender, he asked for a pencil, and to the surprise of the numerous generals assembled it was found that not a person in the company owned one. Finally an officer in General Lee's staff found a pocket inkstand in his kit and it was with ink from this that the historic document was written. It will

⁵⁶⁵ Stokes, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*, 181; Chadwick, *Reel Civil War*, 40-41.

⁵⁶⁶ Karl Brown's *Adventures with D. W. Griffith* devotes a number of scenes to his struggles with the machine, which he calls "a Pandora's box, for all the troubles it could loose upon a poor defenseless cameraman." Brown, *Adventures with D. W. Griffith*, 36. See also *Ibid.*, 37, 39, 41, 45, 50, 52, 66, 68, 110, 114, 138, 169, 194.

also be noted that General Grant and several of his staff were not expecting the surrender and were present in private uniforms.⁵⁶⁷

Tribute poured in, less to the kinds of artistic interventions enumerated by Münsterberg than to the faithfulness to experience that Griffith ostensibly provided. Faithfulness to history could produce revelations, from the most specific and mundane to the most profound. All, it seems, were fair game in relation to a film that sought to re-narrate historical events. Critics were quick to note that the film “contradicts the general impression that [John Wilkes Booth’s] fatal shot was fired from the stage.” Cannon, the *Baltimore Sun* noted, “were loaded not with pyrotechnic powder, but with actual shells.” Others turned to the way in which Griffith attended to verisimilitude at its most benign:

When General Robert E. Lee, at Appomattox, wished to make some marginal Notes on the papers of the final surrender, he asked the bystanders for a pencil. Strange to say, not one of the numerous authors and aides-de-camp was able to provide one. At last, an officer of Lee’s staff extracted a pocket inkstand and feather quill from his kit, and with the aid of these the historic document was written, and the names of Grant and Lee affixed to it. The above bit of history is illustrated by David W. Griffith.

Critics delighted in the portrayal of “details” and “facts,” which acquired a redemptive capacity, exposing truth to light. Reviews honed in on particularities of costume, mannerisms, and stage design. At issue was the image of an artistic genius vigilant to recuperate a lost world. “When he wanted to show the thrilling rides of the Ku Klux Klan he found that all the roads he could use were oiled macadam,” noted Missouri’s *Evansville Courier*. “He needed dirt roads so he went to the county supervisors and obtained the use of the roads in an area of ten square miles for one day, hired a force of laborers to lay ten inches of dirt on the roads and ran his rides.”⁵⁶⁸

For Southern audiences especially, the utilization of both historical “fact” and “detail” made the film an active force of redemption. Atlantan Ned McIntosh used the language of the history crusade when he wrote, “The picture is *vindicated* by historical facts, and does not attempt to misrepresent or warp these facts for the purpose of dragging from their graves prejudices that have been dead long since.” McIntosh’s is the stance of the ever-vigilant, confident that what he had just seen was the work of objective scholarship, and that any objection would have to reckon not with politics, but with posterity. But if *The Birth of a Nation* only vivified what many already believed to be truth, it might have the power to win hearts and minds. Birmingham’s *Age-Herald* gloried in the fact that “2,000,000 of northerners who have witnessed the spectacle in the

⁵⁶⁷ “D. W. Griffith Presents The Birth of a Nation. An Historical Drama in Two Acts,” ad for the Liberty Theatre (1915), *Strauss Magazine Theatre Program* (undated), *The Birth of a Nation* Archives, folder 1, Film Study Center, MOMA.

⁵⁶⁸ “A Reconstruction Story,” *New York Times*, 21 March, 1915; “18,000 People in Film of First \$2 ‘Movie,’” *Baltimore Sun*, 7 March, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #24: “Griffith Scrapbooks”; “The Birth of a Nation,” *Albany Knickerbocker Press*, 25 December, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #28: “Griffith Scrapbooks”; “Written on the Screen,” *New York Times*, 28 February, 1915; “How the Lincoln Tragedy Was Reproduced,” *Pittsburg Dispatch*, 29 August, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #24: “Griffith Scrapbooks”; “The Birth of a Nation,” *The Evansville Courier*, 3 December, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #26: “Griffith Scrapbooks.”

ten months that it has been before the public have learned or the first time just what the followers of the Stars and Bars endured at the close of the war, that a nation might be born”—a declaration of that region’s pivotal role in the formation of modern national identity. In Baltimore, a Union veteran and “Northern man of high culture” who had fought under General McClellan at Antietam, was quoted at length in what amounted to a conversion narrative. “I was moved to tears,” he confessed, “... and I now understand, as I never understood before, the viewpoint of the Southern people and the principles they were defending in this war, and in the reconstruction period eventually following it.” By his own admission, what this Union veteran had finally understood was not just historical events, but the Confederate epistemology: they were not the aggressors, not the revolutions; they were only “defending.” The conversion experience was noted in the *Baltimore Sun*, with a headline emphasizing the pathos and redemption at the core of Griffith’s film: “Made Old Soldier Weep. Seems To Be Clearing Away Misunderstandings In Northern Minds of Southern Life.”⁵⁶⁹

Emphasizing the film’s potential to uncover history became another means by which critics aligned themselves with an unrepentant Southern vision of the power of unadorned, glaring history to right wrongs. The ways in which the Rev. Dr. Charles Parkhurst of Decatur, Georgia, pointed up the persistence of a conspiratorial vision of history:

The intimate familiarity which David W. Griffith has shown with the events of the reconstruction period along with the detailed scholarly study which he has made of the wider territory of events which the play covers renders the production one of surprising educational value to those who were either young children till or even unborn in the stirring years of 1860-1870. A boy can learn more true history and get more of the atmosphere of the period by sitting down for three hours before the film which Mr. Griffith has produced with such artistic skill than by weeks and months of study in the classroom.

For Parkhurst, the film’s true merit lay in its ability to reconnect one with “the real thing.”⁵⁷⁰

If *The Birth of a Nation* followed the precepts of the history crusade, it also shored up latent sectionalism. It was in the South exclusively, remembered Lillian Gish, that “the movie ran continuously for twelve years.”⁵⁷¹ Baltimore’s *Evening Sun* noted how, at one showing, “The crowd, responding to ‘Dixie’ [which an orchestra had played during the screening] and applauding and yelling, as only a Southern audience can when the air is played, forms an element of the entertainment.” Spectatorship was rendered a

⁵⁶⁹ Ned McIntosh, *The Atlanta Constitution*, 7 December, 1915, in *The Birth of a Nation*, ed. Robert Lang (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 185 (emphasis added); “Age-Herald is to Entertain Visitors of the County at Great Civil War Photo Play,” *Birmingham Age-Herald*, 29 December, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #28: “Griffith Scrapbooks”; “Made Old Soldier Weep,” *The Sun*, 28 March, 1916, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #26: “Griffith Scrapbooks.”

⁵⁷⁰ Charles H. Parkhurst, “Dr. Parkhurst on ‘The Birth of a Nation,’” *Decatur Herald*, 2 January, 1915, D. W. Griffith Archives: Series 3, reel #28: “Publicity Scrapbook,” Film Student Center, MOMA.

⁵⁷¹ Gish and Pinchot, *Lillian Gish*, 156.

performance of allegiance. It “swept the audience at the Atlanta Theater... like a tidal wave,” noted Ward Greene.

A youth in the gallery leaped to his feet and yelled and yelled. A little boy downstairs pounded the man’s back in front of him and shrieked. The man did not know it. He was a middle-aged, hard-lipped citizen; but his face twitched and his throat gulped up and down. Here a young girl kept dabbing and dabbing at her eyes and there an old lady just sat and let the tears stream down her face unchecked. Loathing, disgust, hate envelop toy, hot blood cries for vengeance.

Salvation came in the form of vigilante horsemen, riding in from the margins as “out of the night blazes the fiery cross that once burned high above Old Scotland’s hills and the legions of the Invisible Empire roar down to the rescue.”⁵⁷²

Griffith, many were keen to emphasize, directed with the fire of one long silenced. Southern papers recognized this with regional fervor. “The son of a confederate warrior, D. W. Griffith undertook to *correct* certain wrongs of history and to depict the *actual* sufferings of his native southland during the reconstruction period,” the *Atlanta Constitution* declared. But that correction, the same critic implied, would only be achieved through reviving sectionalism. *The Birth of a Nation* was an attack on northern grandstanding and self-satisfaction. Indeed, the film existed not so much as revelation to the Atlanta audience as it did a reassurance of ideals: “There was no discussion and analysis of the picture. There was no wonderment at art. This audience LIVED the picture! This audience KNEW!”⁵⁷³

Indeed, it was in the realm of emotions that *The Birth of a Nation* recuperated a particular *kind* of historical experience. At the film’s Los Angeles premier, the audience was “tense... as they suffered with the hordes of war weary people without homes.” As Ben Cameron charged, in a suicidal last-ditch assault on Union cannon, it seemed as though “every man in that packed audience was on his feet cheering... this man’s courage—defiant in defeat, and all alone with only the heavens for his witness.” The language with which assistant cameraman Karl Brown framed this scene, culled from his own memories, is illuminating, emphasizing as it does a refusal to cede the battle, an honor so personal that “only the heavens” would see it: the values inherent in the film’s heroism are those of the Confederate South and its Lost Cause. Shortly after its East Coast premier, the New York *Evening Post* quoted a man as he exited the theater, “That show certainly does make you hate those blacks. And if it gets that effect on men, when I don’t care anything about it, imagine what it would be in the South, with a man whose family was mixed up in it. It makes you feel as if you’d do the same thing.” But Southerners seemed especially awakened to communing with their brand of national myth. Atlantan Ned McIntosh described a welter of sensations and feelings: “It makes you laugh and moves you to hot tears unashamed. It makes you love and hate. It makes you forget decorum and forces a cry into your throat. It thrills you with horrors and

⁵⁷² “Film Delights Crowd at Ford’s,” *The Evening Sun*, 14 March, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #26: “Griffith Scrapbooks”; Ward Greene, *The Atlanta Journal*, 7 December, 1915, in *The Birth of a Nation*, 179.

⁵⁷³ “Rebel Yell Adds Realism to ‘The Birth of a Nation,’” *The Constitution*, 14 December, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #27: “Griffith Scrapbooks”; Emphasis added.

moves you to marvel at vast spectacles.” In sum, “It makes you actually live through the greatest period of suffering and trial that this country has ever known.”⁵⁷⁴

The Present in the Past

The Birth of a Nation was also a flashpoint for expressions of discontent, ranging from eggs thrown at the screen to impromptu speeches in the theaters against “a play that libels 10,000,000 loyal American negroes” to pamphlets excoriating the depictions of African Americans and the valorization of the Ku Klux Klan, and announcing, “this is not a picture for Americans to see—it is a picture for all Americans to protest against.” Letters to the editors of papers recuperated “the truth of history” and folded the film into modern American life. “We are unknowingly supplied with an abundance of contorted history through the moving picture plays,” declared Ross Brown to the editor of *The Muncie Morning Star*. “The one fond hope of capitalism is to keep the white man and the negro hating each other, for as long as they delight in brutalizing each other they will not find time to study the perplexing social problems of their time.” Baltimore’s *The Afro-American* pointed to the film’s imminent damage by quoting one white theatergoer who announced, “I should like to kill all of the damn niggers in the United States.”⁵⁷⁵ Indeed, while scholars have traditionally emphasized President Wilson’s fondness for the film, in late-April, 1915, he was prompted to “repudiat[e] the claim that he had endorsed the photoplay,” a “denial procured from J.P. Tumulty, the President’s secretary.”⁵⁷⁶

Unimpressed critics contradicted the film’s history at every turn.⁵⁷⁷ William Walker, an African American actor best remembered as Reverend Sykes in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), recalled seeing the film in a segregated theater in 1916: “Some people were crying. You could hear people saying, ‘Oh, God.’ And some said ‘Damn,’... You had the worst feeling in the world. You just felt like you were not counted. You were out of existence.... I just felt like killing all the white people in the world.”⁵⁷⁸ On March 29, 1915, Col. James Howard spoke to the Newark branch of the NAACP, twinning the film with politics, where “the colored people are fighting against heavy

⁵⁷⁴ Aitken, *Birth of a Nation Story*, 53; Brown, *Adventures*, 32; “Birth of a Nation,” *The Evening Post*, 4 March, 1915, Film Student Center: Microfiche 076, MOMA; Ned McIntosh, *The Atlanta Constitution*, 7 December, 1915, in *The Birth of a Nation*, 182.

⁵⁷⁵ “Egg Negro Scenes in Liberty Film Play. Police Quell Disturbers at ‘Birth of a Nation,’ and Arrest Indignant Southerner,” *New York Times*, 15 April, 1915; Young Progressives of Illinois, “Protest,” *Birth of a Nation Archives*, folder 1, University of California, Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archives; John Edward Bruce, letter to the editor, “Commercializing Race Prejudice,” *New York World*, 12 March, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #24: Griffith Scrapbooks”; Ross D. Brown, letter to the editor, “The Birth of a Nation,” *The Muncie Morning Star*, 18 January, 1916, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #24: Griffith Scrapbooks”; “Hate of a Nation,” *The Afro-American*, 18 March, 1916, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #26: Griffith Scrapbooks.”

⁵⁷⁶ “Says He Didn’t O.K. Movie. Wilson Repudiates Endorsement of New Photo Play,” *Toledo Blade*, 30 April, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #24: Griffith Scrapbooks.”

⁵⁷⁷ William Day Simonds, “Truth about ‘The Clansman,’” letter to the editor, *Oakland Tribune*, 25 May, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #24: Griffith Scrapbooks.”

⁵⁷⁸ William Walker, quoted in Stokes, *D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation*, 223.

odds, with the Democratic party in power in Washington.”⁵⁷⁹ In a series of impassioned essays for the *New York Age*, James Weldon Johnson denounced the film by situating it within the contemporary world. A single article, for instance, might juxtapose remarks on *The Birth of a Nation* with a detailed account of a recent lynching in Valdosta, Georgia. The result, as Lawrence Oliver and Terry Walker have noted, was to force readers “to realize that the fate of Gus... is inextricably linked to the fate of the meat-stealer in Valdosta and of the hundreds of other lynching victims whose mutilated bodies were the texts upon which ‘professional Anglo-Saxons’ practice their brutal forms of free expression.”⁵⁸⁰ Johnson was not proposing a cause-and-effect relation between art and life so much as emphasizing the cultural matrix that produced both the film and the murder, positing an ahistorical vision of the American South that was romanticized—and that triumphs—in Griffith’s film.

The Crisis, the official organ of the NAACP, printed a two-part article, providing “The Chronological Record of the Fight Against the ‘Clansman’ in Moving Pictures.” The organization’s actions included an “appeal to the National Board of Censorship in New York,” “criminal proceedings” brought against Griffith for inciting riot, and a vigorous public debate over the merits and accuracy of one particularly glowing review in the *New Republic*.⁵⁸¹ By June, the NAACP pointed up its fruitless protests—the film was being shown in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, and was booked for a summer run in Chicago—from getting “no results” in Los Angeles to “a few objectionable scenes [being] eliminated” in San Francisco.⁵⁸² Even so, *The Crisis* emphasized the ways in which *The Birth of a Nation* could push at and overrun the borders of the theater to create a biracial community opposed to the offensive material onscreen. The second part of the article reprinted a *Boston Post* photograph of a thong of protestors—black and white, male and female—assembled on the Boston Common.

But perhaps the organization’s biggest coup came in its commission of Jane Addams to watch and review the film. The settlement house worker, so keen to capture the pageantry of the city street, had previously denigrated film’s corrosive effects on youth, as it became a substitute for true social cohesion and the ballast of inherited traditions. In *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (1909), she derided the cinema as a “veritable house of dreams” and films as giving the poor city youth her “actual moral guide.”⁵⁸³ Reported upon in the *New York Evening Post* on March 13, 1915, Addams’s negative review explored the dangers inherent in film as a subjectively exploitative medium, along the lines of Münsterberg’s discussion. Addams focused much of her ire on Griffith’s valorization of the Klan, which, “At every turn... is made to appeal to the enthusiasm of the spectator as the heroic defender of a victimized people.” Addams, then, clearly

⁵⁷⁹ “Howard to Fight the Film for Negroes. Colonel Promises Local Associations He Will Prevent Exhibition of Offensive Picture. Blames Wilson for Segregation,” *Newark Evening News*, 30 March, 1915, DWGP: Microfiche series 4, reel #24: Griffith Scrapbooks.”

⁵⁸⁰ Lawrence J. Oliver and Terry Walker, “James Weldon Johnson’s ‘New York Age’ Essays on ‘The Birth of a Nation’ and the ‘Southern Oligarchy,’” *South Central Review* 10:4 (Winter, 1993), 13.

⁵⁸¹ C. E. Bentley, “Fighting Race Calumny,” *The Crisis* 10:1 (May, 1915), 40-41.

⁵⁸² C. E. Bentley, “Fighting Race Calumny: Part II,” *The Crisis* 10:2 (June, 1915), 87.

⁵⁸³ Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1930 [1909]), 76, 82-83.

understood the logical and generic structures that transformed terrorists into “defenders.” Nor was she blind to the cherry-picking historiography evinced in Griffith’s many intertitles: “None of the outrageous, vicious, misguided outrages, which it certainly committed, are shown... Of course the spectators applaud the Klan. It is not shown to them except to stir their sympathy,” she asserted.⁵⁸⁴ *The Birth of a Nation*, then, was dangerous because it so insidiously manipulated the audience, powerless to question what they witnessed onscreen. The glaring light of truth was actually, Addams seemed to be saying, bent for sensational purposes.

Yet Addams’s review ceded a particular kind of historical authority to the “history crusade,” keen as it was to emphasize northern hypocrisy and corruption:

Nobody denies that in the haste and confusion of the period after the Civil War the men in control of politics did very tyrannical and shortsighted things; and made a great many mistakes. The carpet-baggers from the North, who went in and influenced the negroes against the interests of the whites unquestionably did a great deal of harm; but to present the tendency they represented as the only one is as unfair to the North as the claim that all Southerners wanted to oppress the negroes would be to the South.

Addam’s agnostic vision illuminates the purchase that histories like Wilson’s had on a large swathe of Americans. She does not *valorize* the Klan, but she *does* recapitulate the vision of Reconstruction as chaos: “I am not interest in loading blame for these outrages on the men who made up the Klan. It was natural that in the heat of the times they made mistakes, just as did the men of the North.”⁵⁸⁵

Crucially, too, Addams objected to the film’s insistently anachronistic glance, asserting, “One of the most unfortunate things about this film is that it appeals to race prejudice upon the basis of conditions of half a century ago, which have nothing to do with the facts we have to consider today.”⁵⁸⁶ That Addams accepted as historical those “conditions” points to the persuasive power of Griffith’s film as an argument about who gets to tell American history. But, also, as James Weldon Johnson knew full well, the “conditions of half a century ago” bore very much on the present, as the particular logic that fueled *The Birth of a Nation* operated in tandem with an American South where, by Leon Litwack’s “conservative” estimate, between 1890 and 1917, “to enforce deference and submission to white, some two to three black Southerners were hanged, burned at the stake, or quietly murdered every week.” Those victims, he reminds us, “tended to be sons or daughters of former slaves, those said by whites to have been born into the false teachings of Reconstruction, who had not yet learned the rituals of deference and submission.” Their murders, generally preceded by torture, acted as public warnings. Griffith’s film existed within the matrix of regional behavior that made lynchings into rituals of communal solidarity and warning that, through tabloid journalism, “spread biased accounts that fostered national support for the white mobs’ reign of terror on black communities.” Sometimes, lynchings were broadcast, live, over the radio, reaching

⁵⁸⁴ “Jane Addams Condemns Race Prejudice Film. Calls It ‘Pernicious Caricature of Negro Race,’” *New York Evening Post*, 13 March, 1915.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

beyond local sites of terror to become popular culture spectacles for the entire nation.⁵⁸⁷ Although the line was clearly drawn between white and black, the logic emerged from a particular vernacular experience and perspective on history. Jane Addams, that is, failed to recognize the ways in which a search for authentic national history presupposes its own cultural politics.

⁵⁸⁷ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 284, 285, 287; Jacqueline Goldsby, “A Red Record,” in *A New Literary History of America*, eds. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 421. For an horrific account of listening to a lynching on the radio, see Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 92. Goldsby ties the lynching of African Americans, and the sadistically carnivalesque culture that emerged around it, to the formation of modern national identity while also exploring how modernist writing emerged as a distinct response to lynching’s horrors in *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006). Gail Bederman shows how anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells explored how lynching upended common discourses of “civilization” to render the mob into barbarians in *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), ch. 2. *The Birth of a Nation* would also inspire the formation of the second generation of the Ku Klux Klan. Highly visible and truly national in scope, its members typically abjured violence for harassment aimed at the figurations of American modernity: Jews, Catholics, and flapper youth in particular. Klansmen envisioned themselves as the bedrock and guardians of “100% Americanism.” Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967),

Conclusion

Ludwig Lewisohn gave no real indication of what his, or anyone else's, particular brand of "national genius" would look like. His memoirs evinced no real attempt to reconstruct a national narrative from the vantage of the New Immigrant, or from any other group that might serve as a counterpoint to "neo-Puritan barbarism."⁵⁸⁸ Nor was that quite Lewisohn's purpose, as he was after a more elusive national triumphalism, one where differences would, at some Providential moment, fuse into a transcendent sense of national unity and purpose.⁵⁸⁹ Yet the question—"But suppose I am the national genius?"—which catalyzed Lewisohn's meditations, remains to my mind a compelling, and not necessarily rhetorical, one. Fleshing out the contours of that question—its content, its reception, and why it emerged as a question in the first place—offers the opportunity to reconsider the ways in which marginal concerns can shape national ones. Ultimately, Lewisohn's comments bracket two key, related themes addressed in this dissertation. First, in four cases studies of popular cultural performance, I have explored a similar inversion, as marginal populations imagined their unique traditions to be foundational to narratives of national greatness. Second, I have emphasized the ways in which this inversion provided for meaningful and productive engagement with the challenges and promises of modern America.

Accounting for an array of "national genius[es]," situating them within a unique moment of transition, comparing them to Anglo American nationalistic values, and putting them in conversation with each other all highlight the diverse and shifting ambitions and challenges of a modernizing nation. That challenge was paramount for artists and intellectuals of the period. By the first decades of the twentieth century, groups who considered the question of an American inclusivity was divided between two visions, the legacies of which continue to shape cultural studies. On one side was the image of the melting-pot, where difference would be liquidated and the values of white, Anglo Saxon Protestant America would supplant all others. Werner Sollors has shown how the melting-pot as metaphor for the creation of national identity had a centuries' long tradition in U.S. history. But it became especially potent with the increasing pluralism of the turn-of-the-century and the publication, in 1908, of Israel Zangwill's play of the same name. In the play, the protagonist, a Russian Jewish immigrant named David Quixano, trumpets the literally reformatory American experience: "America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races Europe are melting and reforming."⁵⁹⁰ The melting-pot was America investing its people with the ostensible promise and potential of assimilation.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ "The friend of the Republic, the lover of those values which alone make life endurable, must bid the German and the Jew, the Latin and the Slave preserve his cultural tradition and beware of the encroachments of Neo-Puritan barbarism—beware of becoming merely another dweller on an endless Main Street; he must plead with him to remain spiritually himself until he melts naturally and gradually into a richer life, a broader liberty, a more radiant artistic and intellectual culture than his own." Ibid.

⁵⁹⁰ Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot: A Drama in Four Acts* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1917 [1908]), 33.

On the other side lay Horace Kallen, the Progressive Era philosopher who proposed the alternative metaphor of the American “orchestra.” In this telling, American greatness was double. First, America was the benefactor of the array of contributions of its diverse citizenry: “As in an orchestra, every type of instrument has its specific *timbre* and *tonality*, founded in its substance and form.” Second, since America, above all other nations, privileged “‘inalienable’ liberty,” it was the one true place where the potential of self-hood could be realized. “There are human capacities which it is the function of the state to liberate and to protect in growth,” Kallen asserted.⁵⁹¹ The orchestra was America investing *itself* with the varied capacities and contributions of its people.

Both metaphors provide a capacious vision of American identity—whether through the melting-pot’s ability to re-form racial outsiders or the orchestra’s ability to invigorate and expand a dynamic American community. But neither seems to capture the contingent ways in which the question of national identity tacked with the period’s unique social changes. The performances examined in the preceding chapters suggest that the ways national mythologies are constructed are as often contingent and contradictory as they are fixed and assimilating. While cultural and intellectual histories have tended to stress the consolidation of difference into hierarchized stories of American evolutionary triumphalism,⁵⁹² or divest them of any real importance (“immigrant gifts”), one key intervention of this dissertation has been to underscore some of the unanticipated values that are put into play when vernacular forms of history and experience come to speak for the nation at large. Despite differences in method and in tone, despite wildly divergent beliefs in what “American history” was in the first place (from the story of the common man to a highly particularized understanding of the nation’s Revolutionary heritage), each performance privileged the sense of *return* to first principles. First principles, that is, which were safeguarded, nurtured, and perpetuated in the realm of local culture and performance. Paradoxically, resisting the incursions of the state allowed, in this telling, for the true perpetuation of national values.

⁵⁹¹ Horace Kallen, “Democracy *versus* the Melting-Pot,” *The Nation* (18 and 25 November, 1915), reprinted in *Culture and Democracy in the United States: Studies in the Group Psychology of the American Peoples* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), 123-125. I discuss both Kallen’s “orchestra” metaphor of America, and Israel Zangwell’s “melting-pot,” which both emerged in reaction to the unique challenges of integration during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, in ch. 3 of this dissertation. For general surveys of this conflict, see Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 234-236; Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Cecilia Elizabeth O’Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 238; Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. 3.

⁵⁹² See, for instance, Robert W. Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1919* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984); Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Steven Conn, *History’s Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); Dorothy Ross, “Grand Narratives in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty,” *The American Historical Review* 100:3 (June, 1995), 651.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers emerged from the challenges and promises of Reconstruction to make a larger point about the relationship between tradition and ambition in modern America. That point, I argue, was shaped by, and channeled through, the specific content and practice of the slave spiritual, which uniquely embodied ideals of self-making and piety, rooted in experience in the American soil. For Buffalo Bill and Jane Addams, the idea of ambition was itself a vexed prospect, as each infused progress with a celebration of the nurturing bedrock of local practices. At *The Drama of Civilization*, progress was always to be tempered by the soul-sustaining threat of danger. The unique imperatives of the frontier provided not the first step in an evolutionary narrative of national greatness, but a kind of Ur-American landscape, a space to be built upon but never fully transcended. Similarly, the Hull-House Labor Museum imagined American history as emerging from a transnational, transhistorical narrative of craft. Progress, as embodied in booming, industrial Chicago, only impinged upon the nation's birthright as the inheritor of the commonwealth. And in *The Birth of a Nation*, D. W. Griffith imagined a story of national redemption through return, from the forces of modernity to the stable social world of the nostalgized antebellum South. Importantly, it was not in the retreat from the modern world—as Addams had proposed with the Labor Museum—but in the struggle against it, that neo-Confederates emphasized their role as the true inheritors of an American legacy.

Indeed, a core argument that I make in this dissertation is that these performative re-narrations underscored the continued usefulness of vernacular in shaping modern life. Using the past as a framework for behavior in the present was central to the ways that reenacting the past can also enact the present. The Fisk Jubilee Singers—like their slave forebears—used the spiritual to achieve a level of autonomy, cohesion, and pride. These qualities were located not in the flight North or in the slave community, but in the construction and maintenance of Fisk University and the unique promises it held for African Americans in the Reconstruction South and through to the present day. Matthew Kennedy, the Fisk Jubilee Singers choirmaster for twenty-three years beginning in the mid-1950s, described the university in the 1940s as “an oasis for humanity.”⁵⁹³ The story of America performed at *The Drama of Civilization* turned the tables on progress, as critics imagined what they had lost with the consolations of settlement. The Hull-House Labor Museum similarly pointed up the contrasts between two different worlds. It was through craft's isolation from seething Chicago that its worth was proven and its potential to continue to shape self and community was realized. While not everyone was wholly taken with this sensibility, extant evidence from patrons seems to point to the reconstitution of communal solidarity, peace, joy, and pride that existed precisely in contrast to the outside world. D. W. Griffith's “history crusade” showed some audiences the “truth” behind the neo-Confederate perspective—the sense of revelation was not an artifact preserved in the movie, but an entire rhetorical construction that determined how the movie would be codified. And, as author James Weldon Johnson knew full well, a particular construction of the past impinged upon human relations in the present.

The attempt to speak as a “national genius” was one that was enacted in various public spaces, from concert hall to arena, from settlement house to cinema. In tracing the divergent orchestrations of different histories, I have avoided placing these performances

⁵⁹³ Interview of Matthew Kennedy by Victoria Hamilton, November 6 and 7, 2004, National Visionary Leadership Project, Library of Congress American Folklife Center.

on an equal level. Fleshing out the exact contexts of these histories' development and production is essential to understanding their intent. The particular allure of the Hull-House Labor Museum centered on a particular experience with, or expectation of, urban America. The Labor Museum, that is, was about providing a safe space for the nurturing foundation of community—it could only have come from, and could only exist within, the unique Hull-House milieu. *The Birth of a Nation*, by contrast, was a transportable product whose message was interwoven with its ability to travel to cinemas throughout the United States. D. W. Griffith's "history crusade" had to be able to irrupt into any social space, shocking comfortable Americans with the glaring light of truth.

Hence, another intervention of this dissertation has been to imagine the many purposes that culture can serve. While the reenactments I've considered provide an interesting window into the American historical imagination between Appomattox and the beginning of World War One, there were practical benefits for the people who put their cultures on display. Those vernacular practices that were conveyed as meaningful activities for shaping self, community, and nation continued to resonate as meaning making practices. At times, the benefit was in a shift in the broader public perspective, a shift that privileged a certain approach to history. At others, the benefit was practical and remunerative and rippled out into social practice in dangerous ways. Culture, that is, is presented in the preceding pages as both a distillation of experience into conveyable forms *and* a tool to further shape the world.

The extent to which audiences were receptive to these new histories evinces a more capacious consuming public than we are used to describing during this period. Clearly, what was offered in these performances by way of history and identity revealed a range of anxieties about what would be lost as America modernized. Gilded Age anxiety has furnished its own cottage industry among historians, most tend to emphasize the elite elements of escape from the "iron cage."⁵⁹⁴ Here, I have tried to show that the phenomenon was more diffuse, and the tenor of that anxiety more historically contingent, than has previously been explored. Although I had initially imagined this study to fit in with any number of other cultural histories about the ways in which popular culture became a space for managing diversity and divesting it of any real importance, I have been repeatedly surprised by how readily native-born, white, middle- and upper-middle-class audiences lamented the loss of ways of life they saw as threatened by modernity, but also as intrinsic to American history and identity. Not intrinsic, I would add, for how they would "spice"⁵⁹⁵ the national narrative, but for how they *made* it. This has allowed

⁵⁹⁴ Some of the more compelling texts include Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981); Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). Kasson's text goes a ways towards situating anxieties about masculinity in a popular cultural context.

⁵⁹⁵ Shannon Jackson, *Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 161. Jackson is here making a specific point about "immigrant gifts" (see ch. 3 of this dissertation), but the idea of premodern or non-white cultural traditions as the necessary, lively counterweights to WASP rigidity is a familiar

me to put stress on time-honored interpretations of popular cultural spectacles, offering an unexpected interpretation of why they emerged and how they were received. Thus, for example, *The Birth of a Nation*, which continues to be deployed as the example *par excellence* of white racial reunion, tells a very different story—and speaks to very different preoccupations—when seen as the codification of a vernacular perspective on history and selfhood. In essence, by tracing the relationship between expressive media and historical apprehension, we can see how reenactments proposed American histories that relied less on a group’s adjustments to the nation, than on the nation’s adjustment to a group. For these brief moments, then, all Americans could imagine that theirs was a nation of ex-slaves, frontierspeople, New Immigrants, and even disgruntled soldiers in the Lost Cause.

The success of *The Birth of a Nation* as popular entertainment, the ways in which it ostensibly spoke for a value-neutral history, seemed to prove the neo-Confederate belief that a mere “chance to tell,” to speak truth to power, would provide for the South’s vindication. Ending this dissertation with *The Birth of a Nation* thus provides a fresh take on the tenor of national identity—“Americanization”—as it emerged in the years surrounding the First World War. As Cecilia O’Leary notes, “After the United States declared war, a hardening of political lines quickly led to the conflation of ethnicity and patriotism. Assimilation became a battle cry, and the cultural homogeneity of the nation-state was now infused with issues of national security.”⁵⁹⁶ Indeed, *The Birth of a Nation* was part of a larger revolt against difference that furnished the rise of the second generation of the Ku Klux Klan, with its aspirations to white, Anglo Saxon Protestant middle-class respectability against the political participation of Catholics and Jews, and the racy culture of modern youth.⁵⁹⁷ Yet as I have demonstrated, Griffith’s film time and again demonstrates the persistence of a neo-Confederate language in shaping the contours of what, in fact, should count as “American.”

Both the melting-pot and the orchestra remain provocative metaphors for divergent understandings of a nation’s responsibilities to its citizens, and citizens’ responsibilities to their nation. Yet what I have attempted to show in this dissertation is that during the tectonic shifts of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, groups of Americans did not substitute their folkways for Anglo American virtues; nor did they think about their cultural practices and ideals as one among many, fostering a vibrant national song; nor, for that matter, did middle-class white audiences necessarily think about history in these ways. Instead, the particularities of vernacular culture continued to resonate as frameworks not only for self-making, but for nation making, as well. My ambition, then, has been to turn to Lewisohn’s provocation to propose another way in which culture, and especially performance culture, can not only vie for hearts and minds, but can also continue to shape experience.

one in cultural histories of the period, where “local color” never underpins larger national narratives.

⁵⁹⁶ Cecilia Elizabeth O’Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 236.

⁵⁹⁷ Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

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