

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

CHILDREN OF DARKNESS, CHILDREN OF THE MASK:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE MORAL EFFECTS OF METAPHORS OF DARKNESS
ON THE REPRESENTATIONAL LIVES OF BLACK AMERICANS

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For My Family,
In Blood and Spirit

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Abbreviations

CoC

Increase Mather, *Cases of Conscience*

MCA

Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*

WIW

Cotton Mather, *Wonders of the Invisible World*

Chapter One

Among the many destructive forces at work against the life choices and chances of darker-skinned people in America is the way that their bodies themselves create meaning for the society around them. To be in “darkness” is to be morally in the wrong, defunct, and ignorant, and these understandings of this family of words are supported and generated again and again with startling reliability by our society and its antecedents.¹ However, the presumed separation between the use

¹ One of the main inspirations for this research, in addition to the killing of black people by civic authorities (and armed citizens acting as authorities), is a Christian hymn: the old favorite “Though Your Sins Be as Scarlet” by Frances J. Crosby. The lyrics of the song’s first verse are as follows:

“Though your sins be as scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though your sins be as scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow.
Though they be red like crimson,
They shall be as wool.
Though your sins be as scarlet,
though your sins be as scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow,
they shall be as white as snow.”

The repetition of the phrase “white as snow” is a telling sign of the necessity of whiteness to salvation, in this case whiteness of one’s own personal history. In this formulation of salvation, the goal is to remove a stain to reveal a pure, white, saved whole. The problem of the white=good/black=evil dichotomy is not, however, limited to explicitly theological representations. It suffuses our speech, manifesting as a recurrent trope in our speech. “Dark days,” “black humor,” “a dark time,” “The Dark Side,” are but a few examples of the kind of expressions manifesting the problem. These expressions are not seen as implicitly racist. Rather, they are considered to be “universal” in their scope, innocuous so far as racial inequalities are concerned. This is the problem I intend to tackle in these pages. A “universal,” and therefore non-racializing, application of the white=good/black=evil dichotomy is impossible given the dichotomy’s representational use over centuries of our nation’s history. To borrow Toni Morrison’s descriptor, there is an “Africanist presence” in every application of this dichotomy. (Fannie J. Crosby, “Though Your Sins Be as Scarlet” (No. 556) in *Trinity Hymnal*, Revised Edition (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications,

of darkness as a symbol of badness, and the use of darkness as an aesthetic descriptor is a false one, not borne out by representations of darkness, depravity, the demonic, and the black body.

Moreover, belief in the possibility of this semantic separation allows for discrimination, separation, invisibility, and death to take hold unabated, as our perception of dark bodies invokes a miasma of violence, fear, rejection, disgust, and any number of responses deemed only natural when one responds to moral darkness, unassociated with any particular body.²

In the moment of a naturally occurring phenomenon—i.e., the appearance of a deeply pigmented human skin, painted so by nature, and unable to change color (save through very painful, expensive and, to my mind, ethically questionable medical procedures)—a material

1990); accessed online at <https://hymnary.org/hymn/TH1990/556>; Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 5-6, 11-12.)

² For the purposes of this project, I will use the descriptor “darker-skinned” to refer to all Americans who can be socially coded (or mistaken and treated) as black Americans. One of the functions of the Dark Mask is to obscure the identity of the individual who wears it, and one of the symptoms of this obscurity is inaccurate grouping or grouping of individuals that is at odds with the way they name themselves and/or their personal or familial history. The example of Sureshbhai Patel, a darker-skinned Indian grandfather who was shot and paralyzed by police in Alabama after looking “suspicious” while out for a walk in the daytime, illustrates the problem of flattening categories. Patel’s skin roped him into the reality of harsh and unseeing treatment generally reserved in this country for black Americans (Peter Holley, Abby Phillip, and Abby Ohlheiser, “Alabama police officer arrested after Indian grandfather left partially paralyzed,” *The Washington Post*, Feb 12, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/02/11/alabama-cops-leave-a-grandfather-partially-paralyzed-after-frisk-goes-awry/?utm_term=.70d3d60d286f (Accessed 16 Feb 2018).

I will use “fair-skinned” to refer to all Americans who are socially coded (or mistaken and treated) as white Americans. The etymology of the word “fair” is not lost on us in this choice, and there is an acknowledged and intentional doubling of meaning, i.e., between who is called “fair” and the lighter pigmentation of the skin.

The descriptor “dark-skinned” will be reserved for those members of the black American population who possess a deeper pigmentation, in keeping with the Black English Vernacular’s designation. This adjective will show up most frequently in chapter three, which deals with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Topsy*, who is specifically marked as dark-skinned in the narrative.

Finally, I will use “native peoples” or “indigenous peoples” interchangeably to refer to populations present on the continent at the start of the European New World colonization project.

representation of that which is otherwise symbolic is forged. What might, in a better world than ours, be merely an example of natural diversity, is turned by the world into which it is born into a symbol of all that is benighted, rejected, lesser, undesirable, and, perhaps most insidiously, into something that has been intimately and permanently touched by evil.

This Dark Mask, as I have named it, is a product of the necessary formation of relationship, identity, and social life via interactions with others. It is that which lays itself over the "you" that we presume for those whom we address; it is what comes between, colors, and inhibits equality in the encounter with another. It is at the foundational level of social interaction that the Dark Mask can be found, and the trauma it causes to the one wearing it (and also, perhaps not surprisingly, to its viewers) is terrible. It is this dark mask that eventually breaks Pecola, of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. In her introduction, Morrison reflects,

In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous, all the while trying hard to avoid complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to. . . . One problem was centering the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing.³

Hidden underneath Pecola's dark mask is a whole, precious, unique, and loveable child; a child who is lost and alone, suffocating beneath the mask she wears, which in the world she inhabits can never be removed, and which does immeasurable harm to her spirit each day she wears it.

I am interested in the power of the encounter between seer and masked seen, an encounter which has the power to *create* that which is only represented by the Mask. It is a power to erase or to warp, as young Pecola's madness warps her, the human being hidden behind the mask. This is the problem of a masquerade ball that never ends and which was never announced, whose guests

³ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage International, 2007), xii.

are both unaware and coerced. They do not know that they are guests, neither do they know that masks are being worn, or that there is even a party going on.

The complaint over the perpetual and perennial association of darkness with that which is harmful, undesirable, evil, ignorant, or generally lesser is far from being new. Among the many canonical examples of the lament and challenge is Frantz Fanon's explication of the problem in *Black Skins, White Masks*, which follows his comparison of the moral identification of Jews and Negroes by the general (ergo white and "white") society:

In Europe, the black man is the symbol of Evil. . . . The torturer is the black man, Satan is black, one talks of shadows, when one is dirty one is black--whether one is thinking of physical dirtiness or of moral dirtiness. It would be astonishing . . . to see the vast number of expressions that make the black man the equivalent of sin. . . . Blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, the labyrinths of the earth, abysmal depths, blacken someone's reputation; and, on the other side, the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical, heavenly light. A magnificent blond child--how much peace there is in that phrase, how much joy, and above all how much hope! There is no comparison with a magnificent black child: literally, such a thing is unwonted. (188-89)

Fanon speaks of the trouble with a black man whose destiny is white, whose moves toward respectability, achievement, and a positive contribution to the world is, and must be, a move toward whiteness.⁴ In his analysis, the mask such a man wears is white, while his incongruously hidden and highly visible black skin endures. However, I wish to explore the problem of a skin that functions, not only, as Fanon's titular phrase suggests, as a black *skin* one ironically seeks to cover, but also as *a mask in its own right*—a Dark Mask that can never be removed.

Fanon writes of the "scission, a fracture of consciousness into a bright part and an opposing black part," which characterizes moral consciousness and produces an internal conflict in the

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Charles Lam Markman, trans. (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 228.

consciousness of the Negro, who is “forever in combat with his own image.”⁵ I venture that this image is the Dark Mask, and it is with this image (black as evil, lesser, other to be removed) that African descended darker skinned peoples must contend. Beyond the internal conflicts and (self-)erasure created by the weight of the Dark Mask, the generation of stereotypes that populate the Mask with content and add to its social power serve to reinforce white identity through the denigration of black identity.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison speaks of the abiding Africanist presence in American literature, and counsels that closer attention to this presence—how and for what purpose black Americans appear in white author’s narratives—may make it “possible to discover, through a close look at literary ‘blackness,’ the nature—even the cause—of literary ‘whiteness.’”⁶ The Africanist presence is a kind of a balance for whiteness, an asset necessary for its creation, maintenance, and (self-)understanding. In speaking about the work of Edgar Allen Poe, the author perhaps most “important to the concept of American Africanism,” Morrison analyzes his and other authors’ use of “impenetrable whiteness,” which appears at defining moments of identity creation and maintenance in opposition to darkness:

These images of impenetrable whiteness need contextualizing to explain their extraordinary power, pattern, and consistency. Because they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness--a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing.⁷

⁵ Fanon, 194.

⁶ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 9.

⁷ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 33.

Blackness, as the “companion to this whiteness” as manufactured by white authors, particularly romance authors, is quite powerful, particularly “in a country in which there was a resident population, already black, upon which the imagination could play; through which historical, moral, metaphysical, and social fears, problems, and dichotomies could be articulated.”⁸ The material component to representation is crucial here; it matters that there are sufficient black-bodied people within the nation to sustain the ongoing creation of counter-types through which to identify, place, and reify whiteness. In my framework, this laying of culturally and artistically manufactured characteristics onto material bodies in real time is the application of the Dark Mask.

There is a doubling here, a dissociation between the masked and the content of the Dark Mask, which can be linked to Du Bois’ double consciousness, as recounted in his classic *The Souls of Black Folk*:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields to him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁹

This experience of the veil, when combined with the concept of the Dark Mask, can be seen as an account of the experience from the perspective of the masked. The Dark Mask is that which surrounds and envelops the bearer, a result of his or her darker skin color, and which is receptacle for all the “disdain” of which Du Bois speaks. Whether it be for prominent black figures of

⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁹ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver, eds., A Norton Critical Edition (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 10-11.

revolution and disobedience like Toussaint de l'Overture, or prominent dark figures in the spiritual imagination like the devil, the bearer of the Dark Mask is heir to same breed of negative feeling, mistrust, and social rejection reserved for the darkest characters of our collective imagination.

I am indebted to Emilie Townes' *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* for its introduction of the fantastic hegemonic imagination, which provides a framework for the dynamic power of cultural imagination, which does not merely stereotype and name society's members, but "uses a politicized sense of history and memory to create and shape *its* worldview."¹⁰ Aesthetics and representation are never merely descriptive, rather they interact with their subjects in a creative and foundational manner:

The fantastic hegemonic imagination traffics in peoples' lives that are caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its own image. This imagination conjures up worlds and their social structures that are not based on supernatural events and phantasms, but on the ordinariness of evil. It is this imagination, I argue, that helps to hold systematic, structural evil in place. The fantastic hegemonic imagination uses a politicized sense of history and memory to create and shape *its* worldview. It sets in motion whirlwinds of images used in the cultural production of evil. These images have an enormous impact on how we understand the world, as well as others and ourselves in that world. Subjugation and consent sashay to deadly images that are largely unchecked until they lose their force and are replaced by more deadly and sinister images such as the movement from the Black Matriarch to the Welfare Queen. It is most important to note at this point that the fantastic hegemonic imagination is in all of us. . . . None of us naturally escape it, for it is found in the deep cultural codings we live with and through in U.S. society. . . .

[T]he challenge is to resist measuring Black realities by the ideological stereotypes, the denigrating myths, of the fantastic hegemonic imagination.¹¹

I am here concerned with the stereotypes and myths produced by the fantastic hegemonic imagination that have to do with the extremes of demonization and fearful response—that is, the Dark Mask deployed to create representations of dark evil and uncanny wickedness. This is a

¹⁰ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 21.

¹¹ Townes, 21-22.

playing in the dark, to borrow Morrison's turn of phrase, that exceeds the bounds of representation to infiltrate the living of millions of Americans, who are characterized apart from their deeds, their predilections, and their voices. These culturally regulated negative moral characterizations are the content of the Dark Mask, which produces the kind of alienation from self that Fanon rails against in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

However, alienation from self and deadly dissociation is not the only wage the Dark Mask pays; unlike Du Bois' double-consciousness, which resides in the subject, the Dark Mask is supremely movable – in fact, it is this mobility that makes possible its maintenance and evolution through the voices that create and sustain it. The Dark Mask's mobility is most readily seen in white/non-black actors' portrayals of black people (not limited to the work of authors and artists, as the use of black caricature is so common as to seem a national pastime), in blackface, in hackneyed attempts at black dialects, and, as Morrison points out repeatedly in her study, in the creation of unbelievable characters whose representation serves a purpose beyond (and often opposed to) an attempt at accuracy.

In recent years, we have seen increasing numbers of protestors, activists, and allies calling out the affirmation and challenge "Black Lives Matter!" in response to the killing of black children and adults by the police. That darker-skinned lives have been and continue to be undervalued, devalued, and / or reviled in this country is not news. A painfully slow social, civic, and bodily genocide of the darker population is well underway in America—this is, to my mind, an indisputable fact.¹² But the *why* of the consistency of that devaluation over so many centuries

¹² See, for instance, the viewpoint as recently articulated by Joy James in Joy James, "The Dead Zone: Stumbling at the Crossroads of Party Politics, Genocide, and Postracial Racism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108:3 (Summer 2009): 459-481.

remains obscured and elusive. I would like to suggest that there is a moral significance, even a moral requirement, of blackness and the bodies that bear (and perform) its aesthetic(s) to the white-coded society in which we live. To put it broadly, there is no light without darkness, no white without the black, no seemly without the unseemly, no saved without the damned. In short, black lives do matter. And it is their mattering so deeply *as* black to the sustenance of our moral consciousness as a nation that prevents them from mattering as they ought to, as *human* lives of infinite value. Black lives matter because they are the ones who wear the Dark Mask.

Darkness and Light

Darkness and light are iconic and powerful metaphors, which appear in the Christian Bible with regularity of respective negative and positive connotations and ethical force. Among some popular favorites are the following New Testament verses:

And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mat 8:11-12 KJV)

For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light: (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;) Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret. But all things that are reprov'd are made manifest by the light; for whatsoever doth make manifest is light. Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light. (Eph 5:8-14 KJV)

Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. (1Th 5:5-8 KJV)

Darkness is a thing to be escaped, rescued from, rejected, reprov'd, and dis-identified with. The application of the aesthetic imagery is not static, rather, it is flexible to express the contours of the

identity of those chosen for salvation and those not chosen. Darkness can represent perdition (“cast out into outer darkness”); a starting point for humanity, pre-salvation (“ye were sometime darkness”); immoral behavior (“works of darkness”); hiddenness and secret wrongdoing (“all things are reprov’d and made manifest by the light”); the time/location for sleep or ignorance (“they that sleep sleep in the night”) or inebriation (“they that be drunken are drunken in the night”); something to be fought against (“putting on the breastplate of faith and love”); and death (“arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light”). These meanings are not unrelated. For instance, the sleep and drunkenness of darkness leads to divine rejection and being cast out into a supernaturally complete darkness.

Darkness has a representative expansiveness as a terrifying location, a closed frame of mind, a benighted spiritual/ontological condition (as in, to be “in darkness”), immoral behavior, etc. Moreover, its application is not limited to the realm of the purely conceptual. In the above verses from Ephesians, we see that “night” is referenced alongside “light” and “day,” as their antonym. Read with a knowledge of the trope of darkness vs. light that appears throughout the New Testament, the use of “night” instead of simply “darkness,” calls us to an experiential understanding of the imagery and its import. The material darkness of night, which all have experienced, is made to share the negative attributes of a symbolic darkness, employed as the attribute of the villains, the crimes, and the punishments of those whom God rejects. By the same representative mechanism, light and the day are used to represent salvation, truth, and the identity of those whom God has claimed for God’s own.

There is, in the passages from Ephesians and 1 Thessalonians, a connection between the symbolism of light/darkness and humans that expands the reach of the imagery beyond the purely intellectual or even non-human natural. The use of the phrase “the children of” is critical in the application of the symbol and allows the reader to think of humans not only as being capable of

dark or light actions, but also as embodying light or darkness by inheritance. Juxtapositions between the “children of God,” or the “children of the light” against the “children of the Devil,” or the “children of the darkness” are recurring in the New Testament and make significant appearances in the Hebrew Bible and apocrypha (and notably in the Qumranic texts, in particular the Community Rule/1QS). The symbol is not limited in its reach. Markus Barth’s Anchor Bible commentary on Ephesians features an exploration of the danger of attempting to compartmentalize the victory of light over darkness to one category of meaning-making:

One or another aspect of the essence, power, experience, and consequence of light or darkness may receive special emphasis, but just as Wisdom is manifold and yet one so is the meaning of light and of darkness. Common to all the various accentuations found in the Bible is the radical and total mutual exclusion of light and darkness. Either light rules or darkness does.¹³

Thus, the “intellectual, ontic, ethical, existential, and cultic dimensions and functions” of light and darkness are present at each invocation. When one becomes a “child of God”/“child of the light,” one leaves darkness and everything that is of darkness behind: this is the victory of the faith, a fulfillment of the *imago dei*, and an embrace of what the human is supposed to be.

The symbolic application of “light” or “dark” to the human being, who comes in all colors, is a natural reading of the biblical witness, but it also represents a collapse of linguistic meanings — how is one to effectively distinguish between that which is “dark” in color, as in a dog with dark-colored fur, and that which is “dark” in biblical terms, as in a being displaying the antithesis of Godly behavior? One solution, cause or side effect, is an understanding of the realm beyond and the earthly realm as deeply intertwined, such that the substance of the world is mutable, noticeably to the human eye, according to the spiritual reality behind it. The trope of the devil as a “black man” is

¹³ Markus Barth, *Ephesians* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 601.

an ancient one,¹⁴ as is the surprise at finding a black man to become “white at heart.” In a retelling of the story of Saint Moses the Black, his ordination to the diaconate was followed by a revealing conversation with the bishop:

After many years of monastic exploits, St Moses was ordained deacon. The bishop clothed him in white vestments and said, “Now Abba Moses is entirely white!” The saint replied, “Only outwardly, for God knows that I am still dark within.”¹⁵

The existence of biodiversity in human (and animal) complexions is more than an invitation for punning and ironies; it is an invitation to a broader application of the nature-based metaphor. If the neutral darkness of the night can be used to represent evil, ignorance, damnation, and the undesired past, the naturally appearing dark-skinned human body can be (and even begs to be) used in the same way.

We can see the application of this representational next step in the cultural productions of Europe from the Middle Ages onward; it is particularly noticeable in Medieval and Renaissance era paintings of biblical, cosmological, and historical scenes. Luther Link summarizes the trend of the use of black bodies to depict the demonic and Satan thusly:

Why is the Devil black? His blackness contrasted with the beautiful white of the angels. The blackness represents evil and pollution. Satan seated on his throne in Hell is always black. When he falls from the sky, he is usually black. Perhaps the Devil’s blackness is connected with Egyptian and Nubian gods. . . . The Devil is described as a black Ethiopian in Apocrypha, probably of Egyptian origin, from the second to the fifth centuries. . . . The Devil as a black seductress was not uncommon. . . .

If the Devil is naked because classical pagan gods were naked, then perhaps one reason he is black is because some Egyptian gods [e.g., Anubis] were black. But the main reason is probably the most obvious one: the Devil is shown black as a sign of polluted filth, in contrast to the white, pure angels. The Devil is naked, and so were Adam and Eve in Paradise. Clothing is society. Michael and his angels are always dressed in robes or armour as they hurl the rebel angels down from Heaven. . . . So strong was this convention that even

¹⁴ The trope appears in Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*, with which Mather was familiar and used in his attempts at describing the powers of darkness and their dark lord.

¹⁵ “Venerable Moses the Ethiopian of Scete,” Orthodox Church in America
<https://oca.org/saints/lives/1999/08/28/102414-venerable-moses-the-ethiopian-of-scete>

in the transformation of the Devil from a repulsive demon to a proto-Romantic tragic hero, one of the agents of this change, William Blake, shows Satan in Hell as naked.¹⁶

Here we have nudity and darkness of the skin to signify a doubled removal from the social, and therefore divine, ideal. Which condition came first, a polluted black skin, or the attendant uncivilized nudity, would be hard for an audience to determine. Which gives arguments about the possibility of civilizing or converting the Negro slave a new bite — perhaps the internal pollution that caused the skin to appear dark is also the reason for the uncivilized, and now uncivilizable, nature of the African (or Native American, or other indigenous, non-European combatant/colonized).

In his opening chapter in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, Jean Devisse also attempts to unpack the use of notably racialized depictions in representations of the demonic:

Lucifer, the fallen angel of light, occupies a complex position in our inquiry. As the Devil he is almost never represented with the physical traits of a Negro, and we rarely find him colored black. It is true that purely technical considerations may explain this peculiarity. In fact it seems to us that the painters were reluctant to represent Satan, that angelic creature, in the form of a man, even an Aethiops, because they were afraid of erring on the side of anthropomorphism. Hence, perhaps, the adoption of 'exceptional' characteristics—the solar hair arrangement, suitable to an 'angel of light,' and the horns, which with the passage of time, came to distinguish the Devil more and more clearly from the Negro. Conversely, when the Evil One crossed into the created order to tempt men, artists seem to have been no more hesitant than writers about introducing Negroid characteristics.¹⁷

As European artists moved between attempts at representing the unseen world and representing the visualizable, human world, their choices morphed to suit the context, i.e., the invisible or the material. Devisse notes a move to the use of "Negroid characteristics" at moments when an artist

¹⁶ Luther Link, *The Devil : The Archfiend in Art from the Sixth to the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 52, 53-54.

¹⁷ Jean Devisse, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, eds. Bindman, David and Henry Louis Gates (Cambridge; London: Belknap Press and the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Research and the Menil Collection, 2010), 63-64.

seeks to show the invisible world breaking in on the visible world. It is of particular interest that this aesthetic choice is frequently found in depictions of demonic possession. One particularly arresting example is an image of Christ casting out demons from the Gadarene demoniac taken from the *Canterbury Psalter* (**Fig 1**). The image recreates the moment of exorcism, with Christ on the left, and the pigs who later become hosts for the exiting demons on the right. In the center is the demoniac, doubled, as though through possession he has become two men fused together. He is possessed of African features, kinky hair, dark skin, and is wearing a loin cloth (in contrast to the robes of Christ and the onlookers). The fleeing demons, though eerily chalk white of skin and depicted with wings, also bear African features and kinky hair.

The application of the features of a recognizable and mistrusted ethnic group—in this case those of Moorish descent—to representations of demonic *activity* is significant for our purposes, because it shows the malleability of racial associations that mirrors the malleability of the application of “black” as a conceptual descriptor. There is a unity of signifier (“black”), in spite of the potential diversity of signifieds (“African” / “devil” / “sin” / etc.) There is a presumed match between dark skin and a darkness within, in this case, a pair of demons that must be cast out and destroyed.¹⁸

¹⁸ The fact that the demons, begging to be sent into another living earthly host, are sent into pigs, biblically speaking, among the most “unclean” of animals (Lev 11:7, Deu 14:8, Isa 66:3) is also significant. We will later see that animals are chosen forms taken by assaulting demons in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The European anxieties about the boundaries between the human and the animal, the human and the savage beast are deeply at play in episodes like these. The demonic choice of the “lesser,” darker and/or non-human dovetails with associations of racialized others with non-human animals, and as in the case of American indigenous peoples, with the wildness of untamed (by Europeans) lands.

But there is also a mutability to blackness that allows it to crop up at moments of demonic activity, and potentially retreat thereafter, at least for those who do not bear naturally dark skin. Contemporary beliefs about the sensitivity of the human body to unseen spiritual forces are one example of this possibility; in the case of the witch, the trappings of darkness become visible, though the person in question bears fair skin. In Mather's writing, we will see this problem in connection with the witch, who, though fair of skin and of British descent, is corrupted by her connection with the devil to become something other than human—monstrous, dirty, lascivious, and firmly other.

The Devil in Civilization

In *A History of the Devil*, Robert Muchembled links the evolution of the image of the devil to the “civilization process in the West,” during the last four centuries of the Middle Ages. He tracks the expansion of the devil's domain in Western European society beyond the realm of religion and religious expression, but as part of a “germination of powerful symbols that created a new collective identity, though it retained major contradictions.”¹⁹ Muchembled traces the development of the image of the devil as one of a number of “common cultural symbols” that served to “strengthen the social cement.”²⁰ The increased presence and power of the devil depicted in literature and art is, in Muchembled's analysis, tied to the transition from feudal systems of social organization to “new theories of centralized political sovereignty”; as such, discussions about hell and the devil were also “statements about the law and about government”; the punishment of the

¹⁹ Robert Muchembled, *A History of the Devil : From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 21.

²⁰ Muchembled, 22.

state was increasingly linked to the will of God, and therefore the fit punishment for sinners.²¹ There is a collapse of sin against heaven and crime against the state, which undergirds the power of the earthly state. What is additionally significant for our purposes here is the connection Muchembled draws between the drive to unite dispersed and socially and religiously diverse peoples under a central political power; specifically the application of “the power of individual guilt . . . mak[ing] it a weapon of collective development.”²² This turns the attention to individual actions and to the body, where a “vivid realism [was] making everyone believe that it was in their own body that good confronted evil. . . .

The devil had ceased to be a disgraced or perverted man and become both the foul beast lurking in the entrails of the sinner and the terrible infernal sovereign reigning over an immense army of henchmen. It remained to connect the two notions, by the shocking discovery of a sect of unnatural humans who deliberately practised the most horrible bestiality, that is, who refused the master their animal side, for the greater glory of a Prince of Darkness set on destroying God’s work.²³

W. Scott Poole notes a similar dynamic of the synchronization of heavenly and earthly powers/actions in his discussion of Puritan rhetoric about native peoples:

In the Pequot War, Satan’s supposed alliance with the Indians provided legitimacy for the worst atrocities. In 1637, Puritan forces set ablaze a native palisade on the Mystic River, burning to death many of the defenders. They then killed, drowned, or enslaved the survivors. Mather actually referred to ‘the bodies of so many natives barbequed’ as a ‘sweet sacrifice to God.’ Those who survived to be taken captive ‘were the pictures of so many devils in desperation.’²⁴

Beyond working to strengthen the social cement within European states, Muchembled describes the devil’s increased presence as part of the work of “prepar[ing] for the projection of the West

²¹ Muchembled, 23, 24.

²² Muchembled, 26.

²³ Muchembled, 33, 34.

²⁴ W. Scott Poole, *Satan in America : The Devil We Know* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 16.

beyond itself, of crusades to discover the Americas.”²⁵ Read in conversation with Poole’s analysis of the role of the image of the devil in early American settlements, which depicts diabolical imagery and rhetoric as a means of delineating and sanctioning the destruction of those who oppose or threaten the civilization process, the increased (and increasingly material) presence of the devil and the demonic is a preparation for and reaction to an embodied “other,” with whom one must interact on earth.

In *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, Jonathan Butler spotlights the institutional and communal identity building work of (imported) church powers in early America. I have found Butler’s work helpful in thinking through the trajectory of Muchembled’s arguments about empire and the consolidation of the Devil and his demons into a unified vision of (personal) evil. Butler’s churches, which dot the early American landscape as beacons of orthodoxy and right religious practice, are engaged in a social battle against the natural “religious eclecticism” of the populace early American churches sought to mold and represent. In this vision there is an acute awareness of the need for a consolidation of identity in the face of the “wildness” of the New World and the “spiritual pluralism” of European immigrants to that world.

Butler’s project is seeking to complicate and even overturn interpretations of Puritanism as the source par excellence of American religious identity, a reading which “slights America’s rich religious complexity” and is unable to explain Christianity’s expansion and flavor in America in the periods that follow. His analysis, perhaps as a result of this choice to read the whole and unseat Puritanism as the usual suspect, provides an overarching picture in more inclusive terms, which gives us an opportunity to read the challenges faced by leading thinkers like Mather as issues of

²⁵ Muchembled, 22.

balancing state-craft with (in this case explicitly religious) identity consolidation. The disconnect between the rhetoric and prescriptions of Christian religious institutions in the New World and the actual religious practice, thought, and ritual adherence of the general populace is center stage in Butler's analysis of the period. One might imagine this disconnect as a conversation between two sets of disparately amplified voices; on one side is the speech of institutions and governments, whose speech seeks to be heard even without words, as in the case of shows of prominent church buildings, and on the other are the many perspectives of the laity, all of whom hear, but who we cannot assume were all really listening. I think of the institutionally amplified voices—be they buildings, courts, laws, sermons, etc.—as creating the water that all participants in the community swim in together. That is to say they are a powerful source for the collective imagination.

Moreover, a choice away from what has been sanctioned by the institutions governing the settled New World was not a choice without consequences:

Whether the law and coercion could promote piety remained a matter of great controversy. But at the least the law demanded regularity, and out of regularity came attendance, listeners, and perhaps even piety.

Legal proscriptions established intellectual and social boundaries beyond which respectful men and women should not stray. . . . Indeed the threat was double, because by law, transgressions offended the state as fully as they offended the church. . . . The more expensive churches of major market towns and the cathedrals of cities reflected both the financial power of urban places and the importance of these buildings in demanding religious adherence from an often indifferent, recalcitrant people.²⁶

Communication and coercion are closely linked in this analysis—an unavoidable connection given the unequal force behind the sanctioned utterances of the state and church, still united in the period. The Salem witch scare had as its theatre both sanctuary and courtroom, common and

²⁶ Butler, 12-13.

communally identified places in which the dramas of the home, countryside, and warfronts were played for all to receive and replay.

Just because a law demanded piety—sexual morality, Sabbath attendance, etc.—did not mean that the attendant punishment promised would be delivered up by the court. Research on the period has gone against this assumption, as summarized by David Hall thusly:

Every trial that took place within this framework turned on the guilty party's confessing his misdeeds. Confession, not punishment, was the crucial moment in this drama, the one sure and certain means of purging a person and a society of the taint of sin—and every breach of the moral law contaminated the entire community.²⁷

It is important to note the public manner in which these confessions were obtained, i.e., in open court. One may imagine the way that frequent use of public confession contributed to the growing community's understanding of its own identity, by means of these opportunities to view non-normative and in fact spiritually dangerous behavior being spotlighted.

The civilization process is not only the process of civilizing (or removing) the “savage” elements of the New World wilderness. It is also a dynamic process of civilizing and recivilizing the chosen community in one of the most effective ways possible, i.e., over and against that which is “other” and threatening. As Muchembled's work suggests, and Mather's admonitions make clear, these threatening “others” in the form of demonic forces were not limited in their activities to people outside (or ejected from) the community. On the contrary, those within needed to be continually vigilant in avoiding the temptation to sin, and the invitation to the forces of darkness via transgressive personal behavior. As one of the earliest voices in America (he is the first to call himself an “American” writer), Cotton Mather is very clear about the necessity of faithfully retaining

²⁷ David Hall, *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 86.

and enriching the faith that the Puritans brought with them to the New World; this faithfulness that Mather seeks to protect and encourage is set in contrast to the “mischievous powers of darkness,” which are categorically other and dangerous.

Mapping the Dark Mask

In order to get a closer look at the trajectory of the Dark Mask in American cultural production, I have chosen representative primary cultural sources from three moments in US history: during the colonial period at the height of the Salem witch scare, in the abolitionism of the mid-nineteenth century, and at the turn of the century as the nation began moving from Reconstruction and Redemption to Jim Crow segregation. The texts I have chosen are meant to show the conceptual and moral work of the Dark Mask in prominent cultural production, which informs and builds upon the material deleterious effects of this wall of stereotypes on the darker-skinned.

I will begin in the 17th century with Cotton Mather's *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, which provides us with an account of the tribulations of New England at the time of the Salem witch trials. Mather laments of the trouble the devil and his servants have caused in a place that was "a true Utopia," and is yet unsurprised by this test of "a People of God settled in those, which were once the Devil's territories."²⁸ I have chosen the text for its disambiguation of darkness from the black skin of peoples of African descent. The usage of the word darkness in phrases such as "Powers of Darkness" or "Works of Darkness" plot deftly against biblical accounts of demonic forces, while its use in phrases like "as far as one of my *darkness*, can comprehend such a *Work of Darkness*,"

²⁸ *WIW*, 14.

illustrates its usage to mean ignorance or blindness, and as distinct from any physical features of the author. Mather's account gives us a diversity of usages for the metaphor of darkness, as well as a means of understanding the reasons why demonic forces have come upon the people:

Thro the wrath of the Lord of Hosts, the Land is Darkned. Our Land is Darkned indeed; since the Powers of Darkness are turned in upon us: tis a Dark Time, yea, a Black Night indeed, now the Ty-Dogs of the Pitt, are abroad among us: but, It is thro the wrath of the Lord of Hosts!²⁹

I will argue that the advent of dark, demonic forces not only reveals the people's guilt before God, but also presents an exemplary code of conduct, one to be eschewed and avoided, as it is itself demonic. Moreover, the physical attributes of the devil and demonic forces are readily anthropomorphized. When the devil is described in Mather's account, it is in a fashion echoing the ancient account of St. Antony's trials by Athanasius: "The Devil, exhibiting himself ordinarily as a small Black man . . ." is called "the Black man" by witches, "and they generally say he resembles an *Indian*."³⁰ (49, 100, *WIW*) The combination of these characteristics produce a devil (and demon) that is primed to be interchanged with darker-skinned racial others, in this account, native peoples who were the devil's alleged acolytes in the land.

In the third chapter, I will explore the application of early American conceptualizations of the devil and the demonic during the height of slavery, from their reminiscence to "Indian" bodies, as in Mather's account, to their use to color kinds of bodies displaying morally undesirable status or behavior, as well as naturally dark-skinned, enslaved bodies. For this exploration, I will look at *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. I chose Stowe's novel for its long and influential life as

²⁹ *WIW*, 54.

³⁰ *WIW*, 49, 100.

a seminal American text as well as for its uncanny encapsulation of the problem of the moral import of blackness in the child character Topsy, in particular.

I plan to take Stowe's Topsy as a foundational American representation of a dark-skinned child, whose story not only invoked pity and encouraged missionary efforts and abolitionist activism, but also sparked a proliferation of re-presentations of the character (pre-conversion) portrayed by grown white women actors in blackface. Topsy is a child in (profitable) relationship from the moment we meet her, first that of having been purchased by St. Clair, and after that of being ingrafted into the St. Clair household, loved and converted to Christianity by the angelic, fair Little Eva, taught, tolerated and ultimately adopted by Miss Ophelia, whose challenging relationship with Topsy helps her to be a better Christian. There are limits, however, to Topsy's transformation, which, I argue, only serves to reinforce the powerful manifestation of her blackness, which is perpetually associated in the text with the demonic and uncanny; accordingly, we can understand her as having become a Christian, but her dark mask inhibits our ability to envision her as an angel in heaven. In this case, the aesthetics of absolute contrast is of crucial importance, as we see in much of the Uncle Tom's Cabin merchandise boom that follows the novel's success, in which Little Eva and Topsy are paired to effect, or in the minstrel show performances of her character in which she is heavily featured pre-conversion, singing the hit, "I's so wicked."

I wish to draw on the figure of Topsy in Stowe and her performance in blackface in order to reveal the ways in which the relationship between the black child and those who encounter her is predetermined, closed to diversity, and frustrating to human equality. My intention is to expose the ways that representations of the role that black children (and adults cast representationally into those same child roles) have to play in the broader American social scene are comprised in such a way to perpetuate their existence as a social problem: a problem that by virtue of being perpetual and perpetually mined for narrative purposes has immense moral capital. The rise of modern-day

blackface (no face paint) and the ways in which it enables behaviors otherwise considered immoral, deviant, or déclassé by mainstream American society is one example of this profitability.

In the fourth chapter, I will move the metaphoric problem forward in time, as it shows itself in the character of and moral meaning-making through violence perpetrated against dark-skinned people during Jim Crow. The exemplary texts for this chapter are Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* and D.W. Griffith's infamous classic epic, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The central aim of this section is to show the ways in which the Dark Mask operates with and informs its equally imagined counterpart, the (starkly gendered) White Mask in Griffith's and Dixon's recapitulations of the social, political, and racial problems facing white America in the aftermath of Emancipation. The solution to the problem of racial difference is the introduction of the ritual of lynching and the attendant white terror perpetrated on black Americans; in Dixon and Griffith, lynching and the threat thereof are presented as a necessary measure to contain and control the population of freedpeople, characterized as a dangerous, malignant black horde. Both *The Clansman* and its filmic adaptation *The Birth of a Nation* feature representations of Americans facilitated by the dark=demonic, light/white=angelic dichotomy.

In his book *Begrimed and Black*, Dr. Robert Hood traces the problem of the negative associations attending blackness and black peoples found in texts seminal to, though not limited to, Western culture and Western Christianity. Hood is painfully aware of the power of mythical representations of blackness to inhibit all our best intentions at creating a fair and tolerant society. The foundational nature of what he calls the mythic and primal understanding of blackness as

connected to evil, sex, magic, and chaos prevents our being able to escape the power of such notions by a mere interposition of the high aims of a society, e.g., the American dream of equality.³¹

I would like to suggest, not only that moral interpretations of blackness are of central importance to understanding the unequal experiences and socially sanctioned/generated sufferings of darker-skinned peoples in America, but also that the exclusion and destructive treatment of America's darker populations has moral meaning. This is the ethical significance that is demanded by our society's self-understanding as striving toward becoming a collective of individuals that value purity, goodness, and fairness — in short, all the values tied to the symbolic "light," while yet being in danger of falling far from this goal, as it were, falling prey to the "darkness within."

³¹ Robert E. Hood, *Begrimed and Black : Christian Traditions on Blacks and Blackness* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1994).



Figure 1.1 Healing of the Gadarene demoniacs. Psalter, fol. 3v (detail). From Canterbury, about 1200.

Chapter Two

In his article titled "Trying to Make a Monster Human: Judgment in the Biography of Cotton Mather," David Levin laments the false and distorted pictures painted of a man whose legacy has turned him into a "ogre," "not only in surprisingly lowbrow media but also . . . in the work of both the middle and the highest brows."¹ In his attempt to encourage a more nuanced view of Cotton Mather that gives reason to "celebrate [his] extraordinary combination of weaknesses and strengths," Levin provides us with a brief and wide selection of damning voices, among them American poet Robert Lowell's, which was released as Levin's manuscript was in final edits:

The pilgrim has learned to grow twisted with subtlety, like the dark, learned, well-connected Cotton Mather. The supreme bookman: Mather wrote 450 books [a slight exaggeration], all printed [a larger exaggeration]. It seems a slander that he could have done so much harm when all his nights and days were spent writing and looking up brilliant quotations.

Mather, the Salem witch-hanger, was a professional man of letters employed to moralize and subdue. His truer self was a power-crazed mind bent on destroying darkness with darkness, applying his cruel, high-minded obsessed intellect to the extermination of witch and neurotic. His soft bookish hands were indelibly stained with blood--a black image to set against our white busts of Washington and Lincoln. Perhaps in his cross-examinations of the harmless and foolish, Cotton Mather oddly exposed a deep, symbolic, incongruous intelligence that nearly made him immortal.²

Lowell is using color metaphors to express what he sees as the irony and legacy left by our early American "supreme bookman" and "witch-hanger." In Lowell's excoriation of the Puritan father, we

¹ Levin, "Trying to Make a Monster Human: Judgment in the Biography of Cotton Mather," *Forms of Uncertainty: Essays in Historical Criticism* (University of Virginia Press, 1992), 158.

² Levin, 160 (parentheticals Levin's).

have a Mather who says he is fighting "darkness," but he is using "darkness" to do so. He is culpable, and his culpability has "stained [his hands] with blood," and made him stand out in comparison to the "white busts of Washington and Lincoln."

As he seeks to contend with (and ultimately ignore) the "effigy" of Mather that Lowell's words present, Levin uses the same family of color-full metaphors to begin making his own point about the challenge faced by the biographer, who must "[avoid] the temptation to whitewash the black image."³

In these two treatments by individuals whose views of Mather differ so greatly, I see a practical illustration of the linguistic liability that I seek to examine in Mather's own work and in the later chapters of this dissertation. Though their views and portraits of Mather are as near opposed as can be, both Levin and Lowell participate in an understanding of the meanings of "black and white," and of "darkness and light," as stand-ins for a third binary: "guilt and innocence." Levin's decision to avoid the question of Mather's guilt or innocence altogether is laudable and does some work to free us of the need of a duality that must make a human absolutely one thing or the other. One might read Lowell as engaging in the kind of naming — "black"/"white"; "guilty"/"innocent"; "blind"/"visionary" — that Mather does in his writings on witchcraft and the demonic. Lowell responds to Mather's naming of "darkness" by calling Mather himself the true (and deluded) source of "darkness." The meaning and capability of the metaphor remains, as does its power in Mather's and in Lowell's words to carry with it all its attendant, and ancient, associations.

Despite the span of centuries between us, we are the inheritors of the same light-dark dichotomy as Cotton Mather was. The light-dark dichotomy is as available and familiar to us in

³ Levin, 161.

discussions and expressions of good and evil in ways that echo Mather's usages. The problem of the use of "darkness" and "light" in moral ways is perennial: consistent in its persistence and moral application patterns, even as it develops through the ages to partner with changing ideologies and cultures.

Belief in demons as real material beings is not the issue—to ask the question about how credulous Mather was vis-à-vis ourselves is to ask the wrong question. It may even be that asking how the light-dark dichotomy began and why it persists into our time is the wrong question. It is my goal to begin to trace the trajectory of the metaphor in American culture and to conceive of the results of this dichotomy—namely, the production of a dark mask and its white counterpart—and to explore the unity of the conceptual and the actual, the imaginary/envisioned and the material/embodied.

Thus, it is my goal in this chapter to seek out the domains of color-full language and its inevitable racialization, even (and perhaps especially) at moments when the actors and authors are not making explicit mention of or attempting any analysis of race. Matherian scholars speak about the effect of race and color in Cotton Mather's writing less frequently than I had first imagined they might, based on my own readings of his writings about witchcraft, the Devil, and the spiritual and materialized threats he saw facing New England in his day. Many of the sources I've found helpful have localized talk of the nascent color line and Mather's and his community's own prejudices against darker-skinned human beings to moments at which Mather himself explicitly names his subjects in the racial nomenclatures of the day, e.g., "Negroes," "Tawnies," or when he is explicitly

speaking about the challenges of civilizing “heathens,” “savages,” and other encountered groups considered to be spiritually, intellectually, and culturally inferior.⁴

In the secondary texts I have encountered on Mather, his biography, writings, and role in the Salem witch trials, including Jan Stievermann’s rather detailed essay “Genealogy of Races” in the recent *Cotton Mather and Biblia Americana*, the question of race and of the racializing impact Mather’s words have is, for the most part, limited to explicit cases like those described above. It is my goal to see what further we uncover when we apply a sensitivity to color-full language more broadly in Mather’s work. Mather is fiercely active at a pivotal moment of American identity formation; the fact that he is writing at a time of communal stress and collective risk is helpful in bringing to the fore the kind of survivalist pressure and fear of identity loss that assists us in obtaining a view of the mechanisms of chosen identity formation and enforcement, particularly in identifying the real-world groups that serve to reinforce and fruitfully antagonize, by their existence, appearance, and actions, the chosen community’s identity.

In the introduction to *Cradle of Liberty*, Caroline Levander also identifies the tendency of scholarship about early American identity to limit discussions of race to explicit moments:

⁴ Mather does not believe in the inherent division of human beings as having come about as a result of a biological, created difference. Though the different roles and conditions in which human groups find themselves, e.g., in bondage to another group, are considered to have been divinely ordained, these differences in condition do not prove any biological difference among humans, i.e., such that would mark a separate group of subspecies. Moreover, Mather is insistent in expressing deep doubts about the tenability of the idea of an ancient curse—the Curse of Ham—that divided peoples into permanent social categories long ago. He is, nevertheless, not a voice of anti-slavery sentiment; it is the *way* in which the roles of master and servant are carried out that concerns him, the institution itself having plenty of historical and divine sanction in the pages of the Bible he knew so well.

When critical commentaries attend to race, they tend to focus on conflicts between different races within the nation rather than on how the nation is imaginatively created and sustained through racial principles.⁵

This dissertation is an attempt to look for the seeds of experience, discourse, and language/rhetoric that undergird and make possible the association between that which is dark naturally, and that which is understood to be naturally evil, demonic, disgusting, distressingly enticing, and terrifying. This is, I believe, the birthing moment for a distinctly American moral aesthetic, to be applied with meaning at once conceptual and literal. This chapter, I hope, will give us a brief portrait of the evolution of an old family of color-full metaphors such that we see the raw materials that make possible the Dark Mask in American experience. This Mask obscures the individuality and relationships and struggles of those who are naturally aesthetically “darker,” while also providing itself to the larger society as a moveable and removable object: a Dark Mask that can be picked up by, or laid upon, those who do not bear a natural aesthetic resemblance to it, but whose actions or cultural identities do not fit with the vision of a good, bright, “light”/“white” community.

Moving forward, in chapters two and three, we will see the Dark Mask’s usefulness in (white) society building, called upon as a prop, costume, or role to be donned and dropped, in play, in performance, in hyperbole, or for the purposes of measuring whiteness and white identity. In order to know in a reliable way across individual holders of the sanctioned, white identity what behaviors are to be repudiated, a living representation of what is *not* good in human form is desired. It is into this need that the darker-bodied protagonists (written as enemies or as supporting cast members) of American history are written, masked and commodified.

⁵ Caroline F. Levander, *Cradle of Liberty: Race, the Child, and National Belonging from Thomas Jefferson to W. E. B. Du Bois* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

The Dark Mask provides a means of seeing the dark (inferior, evil, savage) other, spotlighting the wicked example of this dark other and encouraging the righteous to walk in (their innate, if challenged) goodness and light. Moreover, it provides those fairer skinned members of the community with a vocabulary to describe the transgressions of in-community members. In many cases, the Dark Mask can be applied for a brief time only and then removed—it hasn't the power to permanently strip the fairer skinned of the possibility of reform and re-acceptance into the right-acting (white-acting) community. In the case of the Massachusetts Bay Colony witches, some of which, in Mather's view, are beyond saving, putting on the Dark Mask can make permanent their separation from the chosen community, and read as a willful rejection of God's salvation. It is interesting that unrepentance, rather than the admission of guilt, is what sends so many "witches" to the executioner. This seems to suggest that when worn by the fairer-skinned, chosen community member, the Dark Mask must be acknowledged to be removed effectively.

The option to remove the Dark Mask is only fully available to those who possess a fairer skin. We see the limits of conversion clearly illustrated by Mary Rowlandson's horrified response to seeing indigenous faces dressed in English garments, the clothes of civility, as well as in the necessity of "medals" to identify those darker-skinned individuals who had converted to Christianity and European-descended society and culture.⁶ Even in such cases of voluntary assimilation, the Dark Mask makes its power felt — *You will never be one of us.*

In this chapter, I would like to take a more holistic look at the deployment of color-full metaphors — "darkness," "light," "black," etc. — one of the most diffuse and potent of these mechanisms of identity assignment and reinforcement, as they are in play in Mather's *The Wonders*

⁶ Lepore, x.

of the Invisible World. By only looking for the seeds of racialization in America in primary sources that explicitly speak of the tawny Indian or the black Negro, we miss all the ways that a moral aesthetic is being constructed in the nascent state to ensure a social stratification along color-full lines. And, perhaps more damningly, we miss the advance of a commoditization of the “darkness” of the racial other in our midst, which funds the construction of white identity and white moral superiority.

The Wonders of the Invisible World

Cotton Mather, born into the third generation of influential Puritan leaders in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was a man steeped in the Bible his whole life. He mastered Greek, Latin, and Hebrew early, and is the author of the first American Bible commentary, *Biblia Americana*, which is experiencing renewed scholarly interest and finally making its way into print (courtesy of The Mather Project). Mather’s gifts and family legacy made him well placed to become the prolific writer and prominent religious personage that he did.

What is perhaps most significant for our purposes is Mather’s commitment to the idea that the invisible world was not only real, but capable of breaking in on the visible world in power. Paul Wise notes Mather’s continued attempts throughout his life to “gather tangible proof of the numinous world around him,” collecting stories of “apparitions” and “deathbed narratives” in order to prove the tangible existence of the realm beyond in the midst of growing skepticism.⁷ Mather was himself visited by an apparition early in his life, which he dutifully documented on one of the frontice pages of his *Diary*, here translated by Wise from the original Latin:

⁷ Wise, 232, 233.

A strange and memorable thing. After outpourings of prayer, with the utmost fervor and fasting, there appeared an Angel, whose face shone like the noonday sun. His features were those of a man, and beardless; his head was encircled by a splendid tiara; on his shoulders were wings; his garments were white and shining; his robe reached to his ankles; and about his loins was a belt not unlike the girdles of the peoples of the East. And this Angel said which it is not fit to set down here. But among other things not to be forgotten he declared that the fate of this youth should be to find full expression for what in him was best: and this he said in the words of the prophet Ezekiel [Mather quotes Ezek. 31:3, 5, 7, and 9].⁸

This is light incarnate, in the form of a visible angel in human form. He is beardless, wearing long, shining white robes, and possessed of a face that shines “like the noonday sun”—the polar opposite of utter darkness, in terms both natural and symbolic. Mather’s identification of the angel as a personal messenger is significant, not only for those seeking to understand Mather’s view of his own divine destiny, but also as illustrative of a self-identification with a light-filled, and “fair” protagonist. The final verse of Ezekiel that Mather quotes is taken from the thirty-first chapter, in which God speaks to the prophet, telling him to address himself to the Pharaoh of Egypt. It reads, “I have made him fair by the multitude of his branches: so that all the trees of Eden, that were in the garden of God, envied him” (Eze 31:9). In this chapter, the cedar tree, symbol of the defeated Assyrian, which has grown tall and lovely, to the envy of others in the garden of Eden, has succumbed to the sin of pride, for “his heart is lifted up in height” (v. 10). For this transgression, “[the LORD] have therefore delivered him into the hand of the mighty one of the heathen; he shall surely deal with him: I have driven him out for his wickedness” (v. 11).

Clothed in the lovely aesthetic contents of Mather’s vision, with its shining, white robed, fair apparition, is a word of warning. It is only by God’s will that the tree is able to surpass all the other trees in Eden, but when that tree that God has lifted up begins to exalt itself, God’s punishment is severe. It makes one wonder to what extent Mather saw himself as having been driven into the land

⁸ Wise, *Cotton Mather and Biblia Americana*, 230.

of the heathen already, surrounded on all sides by indigenous peoples and part of a community engaged in ongoing wars with both the peoples and the natural elements of the New World. However, in the case of Mather's New England, it would not have been as a punishment, but as an opportunity to remain humble and faithful while bringing the much-needed light of God into dark places; Mather himself was always on the lookout for ways to intensify his faith experience and to follow God's will. Robert Middlekauff records Mather's tireless efforts, in prolonged prayer, fasting, and study as a response to an anxiety that comes of such a high call:

This anxiety, perhaps more than anything else, made his psyche what it was. His anxiety was a psychological component of virtuous epicurism: to satisfy it, which meant simply to keep it under sufficient control to prevent a breakdown, he could take no rest. Whatever he did in his outward life, from preaching to rearing his children and performing essential bodily functions, had to be done with his entire being fixed on God. . . . The result was that his inner life was marked by tension that few men find tolerable for long.⁹

In his *Wonders of the Invisible World*, one can see Mather's anxiety extended beyond his own experience of and response to the divine to include the experiences and fate of his beloved community, New England, the New Israel of God.¹⁰ There is both opportunity and risk in his vision for himself, and by extension, for New England. If we imagine that Mather saw himself in the figure of the tree made fair by God's will, the use of the biblical passage opens up a possibility for exaltation and for playing a part in the divine vision for the world by setting an example for its peoples; the risk is that once made great and fair by God's hand, the punishment for pride and sin is fierce and final.

For our purposes here, I am interested in Cotton Mather as an extraordinarily faith-filled—often criticized as credulous—witness to the events, which he himself admits are as “snarled” as

⁹ Robert Middlekauff, *The Mathers; Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 199.

¹⁰ *WIW*, 77.

can be, of 1692 and 1693, and as a prominent figure deeply concerned with the future of the Puritan experiment in the New World. It is my hypothesis that the logic of the metaphors that Mather is making in *Wonders of the Invisible World* is shared across centuries through changing politics and an evolving American culture, which is still wrestling with the same representational, moral aesthetic, and implications of an American identity that has whiteness and goodness (so often deployed, consciously and subconsciously, as synonyms) at its center. Mather's involvement in the Salem witch trials, while unofficial, was significant (like that of his father Increase Mather), and his reputation has been ill-affected as a result of his role in what is commonly thought of as the hysteria of the witch trials, not merely in the latter days of his life, but also in the centuries following his death. Levin laments the popular image of Mather as the "credulous pedant" and bloody-handed, Puritan "monster," even while he admits of the impossibility of creating an "historically human characterization vigorous enough to compete with the effigy for public attention."¹¹

What is a representational challenge for the biographer, who seeks to walk a line between inviting either a blind approval or virulent condemnation, is in our case a helpful complication. Mather, yet alive in print and American legacy, believes in things that are, for many of us, no longer socially normative to express explicitly as literal beliefs. However, the language Mather uses to describe and discuss those things, in particular the ways that he treats the threat of dark demonic activity and the black and monstrous things that go bump in the night, many of which are records of eye-witness accounts, are yet in common use. Light versus darkness, day versus night, righteousness versus wickedness, white versus black, divine versus demonic: these familiar

¹¹ Levin, 161, 163, 162, 163

dichotomies are fiercely at play in Mather's prose. Mather's moral aesthetics, as epitomized in his *Wonders of the Invisible World*, though certainly not unique to him, are not without significance for representational meaning-making throughout American history. This is not to say that Mather's perspectives and descriptions provide an origin story for the light is good / dark is evil dichotomy and the attendant pairings in American history. Rather, I find in Mather a rich record of the application of this light-dark moral aesthetic, and an early compendium of observations and fruitful ambiguities that will accompany the aesthetic long beyond their use in Mather's time.

The argument I am making is based upon a connection that Mather draws without shrinking: namely, that our conceptions of the material world and invisible world are deeply, and inextricably, intertwined. The unseen world is the world of spirits, of the divine and its enemies, of magic and witches, but also of angels, and of Christ's deliverance of the faithful in time of trial. This unseen world is in play constantly in the imagination. Meanwhile, the unseen spirit world, the world of wonders, may break through into the visible world in astounding ways; moreover, these visible events are instructional, showing those who see and hear of them what lies beneath the material world. It is not necessary for one to have been present at the appearance of a demon, at the moment of possession, or at the moment of the onset of convulsions in a victim of witchcraft to have one's imagination enriched and shaped by accounts of these events. In this analysis, I will focus on the ways that what is unseen is made visible, through the apparitions that plague the people of Massachusetts, and is amplified and codified by Mather's and eye-witnesses' choice of descriptors and Mather's narratological understanding of the significance of events in New England. My aim is to use Mather's descriptions of the 1692 witch scare in New England to gain some insight into the flavor and content of contemporary representations of the demonic, and into what imaginative milieu the questions about trial procedures and shared (civilized) identity are being posed. Beginning this exploration with Cotton Mather will also, I hope, illustrate the way that the light-

dark moral aesthetic functions on different levels linguistically. It is of interest that his descriptions contain both material manifestations of darkness, as in the “small Black man,” familiar to us from Athanasius’ depiction, who appears to witches, and figurative representations of darkness, as in the “Dark Time, yea, a Black Night indeed” that has fallen on New England.¹² In his writings, and *Wonders* is no exception, one can see Mather’s commitment to the plumbing not only of the biblical witness, with which much of his moral aesthetic is in lock step, but also a desire to apply, seek out, and locate examples of that sacred witness in real-time lived experience, a desire which, we shall see, attends the problem of what to make of those darker-hued human creatures with whom one is obligated to interact in a way befitting the faith.

Wise calls Mather’s approach to the biblical testimony concerning the supernatural “whether demonic or angelic, . . . decidedly empiricist in orientation,” as Mather makes use of his own experience and visions in his reflections on the supernatural realm. These experiences complement the biblical witness, but they are not meant to stay in the realm outside the material:

Mather’s deliberations on such experiences always aim at demonstrating, in quasi-scientific manner, the literal truth of the biblical revelations about the invisible world, and at establishing the laws of the supernatural realm in order to link these into the known laws of the natural realm.”¹³

There is a unity we find in Mather between the natural and the supernatural that I think of, via Emilie Townes’ work on what she has named the “fantastic hegemonic imagination,” as a unity between the representational and the material, or between the aesthetic/conceptual/symbolic and the real. This reading of the presumed truth of the textual, ancient witness onto the complex and chaotic world of the material present demands a stable, committed framework within the

¹² *WIW*, 88, 91.

¹³ Smolinski & Stieverman, 228.

imagination, through which the world can be read satisfactorily as being in harmony with the framework provided by the authoritative sacred text.

Mather was not alone in viewing the world in this way. As Kai Erikson remarks, for Puritans, “Everything that happens in the present world is only a flickering reproduction of something that has happened before, a repetition of some divine truth, and the Puritans assumed that they could discover the archetypes from which their own experience was derived by careful study of the world around them.”¹⁴ However, this archetypal thinking did not eliminate doubt and fear as regards the work of salvation, which was not assured for Puritan practitioners—only God knew the salvation status of the believer. In *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, David Hall notes different possible responses to an idealized faith in four patterns: 1) living up to the ideal, which produced a “small core” of the ideally faithful, 2) to be a formal Christian until “provoked to self searching by a sudden crisis,” 3) to participate in the religious life of the group, but at a distance, as in the case of his “horse-shed” Christians, 4) to succumb to despair.¹⁵ The existence of these diverse responses to the impositions of an ideal faith show the lack of assurance of salvation experienced by Puritans of the period:

The crucial fact behind these patterns is that half or more of all lay people never found the confidence to testify about the work of grace. The men and women who stood up in Wenham, Cambridge, and Windsor were listened to in silence by most of their neighbors, who went home year after year without ever qualifying for *full* membership. . . . Too much striving after grace, too much straining for assurance, could have sad consequences.¹⁶

¹⁴ Kai Erikson, *Wayward Puritans; a Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Wiley, 1966), 49.

¹⁵ David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 130.

¹⁶ Hall, 130-131.

Church membership, a means toward the assurance of salvation, declined in the years following the first arrival of Puritans in the New World, and became a new source of anxiety for church leaders.

Harry Stout describes this problem, which evoked much fear over the immortal fate of the community's children, and the stakes that rose with each successive generation:

[Increase] Mather's challenge to the rising generation was not an easy one. If they succeeded in keeping the covenant, they praised only the founders; to warrant praise in their own right the children must somehow outdo the founders, a near-impossible task. And if they failed, they had no one to blame but themselves. From birth to death they would be a generation of "great hopes" and "great fears."¹⁷

These "great hopes" and "great fears" find color-full expression in the writings of Cotton Mather, son of Increase Mather. That God's salvation was not assured, even to the chosen community, did not prevent the creation of a hierarchy of purity and practice within the faith, nor did it foster feelings of equality with the inhabitants of the land. On the contrary, it is my suspicion that this lack of assurance was an integral part of the engine of fear and ego driving the chosen community's belief in its own superiority and fragility at once, and insistence on the demonic otherness of the peoples they encountered in the "wilderness."

Reasonable Fear

Mather delivers up to us in *The Wonders of the Invisible World* a portrait of a community besieged, terrified, and at its wit's end. The following selection from Mather's "Hortatory and Necessary Address, to a Country Now Extraordinarily Alarum'd by the Wrath of the Devil" is one of many illustrative passages:

¹⁷ Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 70.

This is the Descent which, it seems, the Devil has now made upon us. But that which makes this Descent the more formidable is; The *Multitude* and *Quality* of Persons Accused of an Interest in this *Witchcraft*, by the Efficacy of the *Spectres* which take their Name and Shape upon them; causing very many Good and Wise, men to fear, That many *Innocent*, yea, and some *Vertuous* Persons, are by the Devils in this matter Imposed upon; That the Devils have obtain'd the power, to take on them the Likeness of Harmless People, and in that Likeness to Afflict other People, and be so abused by Præstigious *Dæmons*, that upon their Look or Touch, the Afflicted shall be oddly Affected. Arguments from the *Providence of God*, on the one side, and from our *Charity* towards *Man*, on the other side, have made This now to become a most Agitated Controversy among us. There is an *Agony* produced in the minds of men, Lest the Devil should sham us with *Devices*, of perhaps a finer Thred, than was ever yet practised upon the World. The whole Business is become hereupon so *Snarled*, and the Determination of the Question one way or another, so *Dismal*, that our Honourable Judges, have a Room for *Jehoshaphat's* Exclamation, *We know not what to do!* They have used, as Judges have heretofore done, the *Spectral Evidences*, to introduce their further Enquiries into the Lives of the Persons Accused; and they have thereupon, by the wonderful Providence of God, been so strengthened with *Other Evidences*, that some of the *Witch Gang* have been fairly Executed. But what shall be done, as to those against whom the *Evidence* is chiefly founded in the *Dark World*? Here they do solemnly demand our Addresses to the *Father of Lights*, on their Behalf. But in the mean time, the Devil improves the *Darkness* of this Affair, to push us into a *Blind Man's Buffet*, and we are even ready to be *Sinfully*, yea, Hotly, and Madly, Mauling one another, in the *Dark*.

The Consequence of these things, every *Considerate* man trembles at; and the more because the frequent Cheats of Passion, and Rumour, do precipitate so many, that I wish I could say, The most were *Considerate*.

But that which carries on the Formidableness of our Trials, unto that which may be called, *A wrath unto the uttermost*, is this: It is not without the *wrath* of the Almighty *God* Himself, that the *Devil* is permitted thus to come down upon us in *wrath*. It was said, in Isa. 9. 19. *Thro the wrath of the Lord of Hosts, the Land is Darkned*. Our Land is *Darkned* indeed; since the *Powers of Darkness* are turned in upon us: tis a *Dark Time*, yea, a *Black Night* indeed, now the *Ty-Dogs* of the Pitt, are abroad among us: but, *It is thro the wrath of the Lord of Hosts!* Inasmuch as the *Fire-brands of Hell* it self are used for the Scorching of us, with cause enough may we cry out, *What means the Heat of this Anger?* Blessed Lord! Are all the other Instruments of thy Vengeance, too Good for the chastisement of such transgressors as we are? Must the very *Devils* be sent out of *Their own place*, to be our Troublers? Must we be lash'd with *Scorpions*, fetch'd from the *Place of Torment*? Must this *Wilderness* be made a Receptacle for the *Dragons of the Wilderness*? If a *Lapland* should nourish in it vast numbers, the Successors of the old *Biarmi*, who can with looks or words bewitch other people, or sell Winds to Marriners, and have their *Familiar Spirits* which they bequeath to their Children when they dy, and by their Enchanted Kettle-Drums can learn things done a Thousand Leagues off; If a *Swedeland* should afford a Village, where some scores of Hagggs, may not only have their Meetings with *Familiar Spirits*, but also by their Enchantments drag many scores of poor Children out of their Bed-Chambers, to be spoiled at those meetings; This, were not altogether a matter of so much wonder! But that *New-England* should this way be harassed! They are not *Chaldeans*, that *Bitter and Hasty Nation*, but they are, *Bitter and*

Burning Devils; They are not Swarthy Indians, but they are Sooty Devils ; that are let loose upon us. Ah, Poor New-England! ¹⁸

What words of comfort can be given to a community so destabilized and beset that its ruling class is driven to exclaim, “We know not what to do”? By Mather’s account, New England is in a state of terror and confusion, which has caused “many Good and Wise men” to fear, and “every *Considerate* man [to] tremble.” The community in Mather’s description is crying out under the Lord’s wrath, as executed by the Devil, befuddled as to what has brought this tragedy upon it. Heretofore “Harmless People” are being impersonated by the Devil, and Mather is filled with dread that the witchcraft, possessions, and other demonic mischiefs are but a sign of a greater plague, “some wasting *Mortality*,” to come.¹⁹ The community’s young children, asleep in their beds, are at risk of being dragged off in the night and “spoiled” at demonic meetings with “*Familiar Spirits*.”²⁰

In Mather’s narration, it is significant that he includes his own evaluations of the persons he describes as being afraid; these are not just any men of the community, but “Good and Wise” and “*Considerable*” ones; the narrative effect of which is that the object of their terror is made all the more forbidding. Moreover, the crisis the community is facing is one that has interfered with the confident functioning of its government, in particular the justice system. The problem is not merely

¹⁸ *WIW*, 90-92.

¹⁹ *WIW*, 92.

²⁰ The imaginative association of the “wilderness” of the New World with dark and demonic spirits does not end in Mather’s time; the theme is one rehearsed repeatedly in American cultural production, and can be found iconized in literary classics like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and Washington Irving’s “The Devil and Tom Walker.” For example, *The Scarlet Letter*, with its retrospective view of Salem, reprises the envisioned threat to the social order in a critical and sensitive depiction of the boundaries between the town, seat of civilization and order, and the forest, where the “Black Man” (the Devil) is said to walk and where “an idle and vagrant Indian, whom the white man’s fire-water had made riotous about the streets, was to be driven with stripes into the shadow of the forest.” (Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 47.)

that some wrongdoing or diabolical activity was discovered, but that the *means* of discovering it and the finality of the punishment (execution) have become a source of “agony in the minds of men,” lest the Devil’s aim all along was to bring about the wrongful conviction of innocent individuals—a feared end that many of the primary leaders and witnesses eventually confessed did come to fruition in the execution of many who were, in fact, innocent and the wrongful imprisonment of many more. Though Mather never recanted his belief in the truth of the Devil’s activity in the colony, in *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, it is crucial to him that he and those whom he exhorts hold as many possibilities in tension as they can. The Devil may imitate and possess the innocent, he may send invisible emissaries to make trouble, he and his demons may be summoned by wicked witches, but he also may be thought to be where he is not. The Devil’s power to unsettle the leaders of the community and throw them into confusion is a sign of the strength of the attack, which begs swift and accurate interpretation since, Satan being unable to work without divine sanction, God’s will must be behind it all.

Mather’s fear on behalf of his terrified, suffering community is not merely borne of his membership in it. His are the people of the “New-English Israel,” the “vine” chosen by God to be planted in America: an honor and challenge to which they have risen well. Mather’s New Englanders, and particularly the first founders of the settlement in the New World, are, in his consideration, so pure that “I suppose there is no land in the Universe more free from the debauching, and the debasing Vices of Ungodliness.”²¹ This New-English Israel does not exist in a vacuum, but is tied to its mother, “Old England,” of which Mather speaks highly, and naturally so, for “her poor American *Daughter*” is dependent upon her for her ongoing, chartered existence.²²

²¹ *WIW*, 25.

²² *WIW*, 84.

On Mather's account, the coming of the European to the Wilderness of the New World was itself an act of spiritual warfare. Given the purpose so many Puritans saw in their arrival and hard-fought survival in the land, this interpretation of the English unlooked-for presence in unknown wilderness is not surprising. In Mather's articulation of the problem, the settling of the New World caused the Devil great distress, as he saw such a Godly people inhabit the land previously peopled by the Devil's own.²³ Seeing the blessedness and privilege of New England, the Devil, disturbed, came upon the people in wrath: "O, says he, *I cannot bear it, that man should not be as miserable as my self.*"²⁴ Mather speaks of the purpose of the European settlement in America in terms of a divine plan for the world-wide propagation of the gospel. It is very important that the European, and specifically English, origins of the chosen people do not pass us by. Mather writes,

Surely, *America's Fate*, must at the long run include *New-England's* in it. What was the design of our God, in bringing over so many *Europæans* hither of later years? Of what use or state will *America* be, when the *Kingdom of God* shall come? If it must all be the Devil's propriety, while the *saved Nations* of the other hemisphere shall be *Walking in the Light of the New Jerusalem*, Our *New-England* has then, 'tis likely, done what it was erected for. But if God have a purpose to make here a seat for any of *those glorious things which are spoken of thee, O thou City of God*; then even thou, *O New-England*, art within a very little while of better days than ever yet have dawn'd upon thee.²⁵

Salvation and the hoped-for possibility of "*Walking in the Light of the New Jerusalem*" is not merely an individual affair; rather, entire nations, and previously savage parts of the world, can be

²³ *MCA*, 42. The full quote reads: "But, as probably, the devil seducing the first inhabitants of America into it, therein aimed at the having of them and their posterity out of the sound of the *silver trumpets* of the *Gospel*, then to be heard through the Roman Empire; if the devil deprive any Europeans of the two benefits, *Literature* and *Religion*, which dawned upon the miserable world, one just *before*, the other just *after*, the first famed *navigation* hither, 'tis to be hoped he will be disappointed of that expectation." Note that Mather ties salvation and literary production together in this passage.

²⁴ *WIW*, 58.

²⁵ *WIW*, 83.

considered saved or damned, in keeping with God's plan for the world, and, more specifically, for the *end* of the material world and the final judgment of all peoples.

Thus, Satan's anger at the European's arrival in the Wilderness and the power that he has been given to run amok among the New English are part of a divine plan. Or at least they must be, in Mather's estimation, since the Devil has no power but that which he is allowed by the "Concession of God."²⁶ Mather struggles with the dissonance between New England's exemplariness and what seems to be a divine punishment for wickedness. Whatever the cause—Mather seems to settle on both the Devil's jealousy and individual wrongdoing within the New English community, which invites the Devil's attacks—if New England has brought the light of Christ to America, making a place for "*those glorious things which are spoken of thee, O thou City of God,*" she has great glory in her future.

There is not only religious identity at stake in Mather's assessments, but also burgeoning nationalist identity and pride. Blessed, chosen New England is the envy of the Devil, not only for its piety, but also for its superior Constitution.²⁷ Though the Devil is in possession of considerable supernatural powers and legions of demons at his command, he is nevertheless jealous of the privileges enjoyed by these Europeans, who are under God's and Godly humans' exemplary governance.²⁸ That God should allow the Devil to carry out his wrath on such an exemplary people is a source of shock for Mather, who questions, "Are all the other Instruments of thy Vengeance, too Good for the chastisement of such transgressors as we are?" Mather makes favorable comparisons

²⁶ *WIW*, 59.

²⁷ *WIW*, 34.

²⁸ This is also Mather massaging the governors of the Bay Colony and the Judges, though that doesn't mean he is not sincere. The hyperbole of his praise is a clue to a bit of political motivation here. Cf. Levin, 219.

of New England to other locales struck by dragons, familiar spirits, and kidnappings, and wonders how it can be “that *New-England* should this way be harassed!” The other recipients of God’s wrath and judgment were met with earthly foes, “*Chaldeans*” and “*Swarthy Indians*,” while poor New England is suffering under the wrath of “*Bitter and Burning Devils*,” of “*Sooty Devils*.”

Mather’s high and prominent praise of the earthly authorities of America in *Wonders of the Invisible World* makes a good deal of sense given his recorded reasons for writing it. David Levin’s and Kenneth Silverman’s biographies discuss Mather’s intent to use his book to defend the judiciary, “just as popular and ministerial clamor against the trials was bringing them to a halt.”²⁹ Mather’s book, published controversially alongside his father’s *Cases of Conscience*, was meant to “vindicate the country, as well as the judges and juries.”³⁰ Mather describes the work of creating *Wonders of the Invisible World* as “Heart-breaking Exercises” done in the sight of God and in “designed Service for his Glory, and for his People.”³¹ This work was intended to defend the courts and educate the people (learned leaders), but was also “aimed at the Information and Satisfaction of Good Men in another Country, a thousand Leagues off,” and hoped to contribute to America (Massachusetts Bay Colony) and England remaining on good terms.³²

In *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, Mather is writing as the representative of a community that is deeply precious and under siege, not only by the Devil’s hordes, but also by material fears—the fear of attacks from Indian forces, fear of the elements, fear of wasting sicknesses, and anxieties over the future of the whole Massachusetts Bay Colony enterprise.

²⁹ Silverman, 114.

³⁰ Levin, 219.

³¹ *WIW*, 18.

³² *WIW*, 19.

Civilization had come to the New World and proved to be a very tenuous thing. Added to the challenges of maintaining a society in the wilderness that would be readily distinguishable from the societies and cultures of the savage, “Tawny” inhabitants of that wilderness, was the dark spectre of witchcraft and the demonic activity it invited. The transgressions of the witches, which removed them from the chosen community (as well as from the category “human,” as we shall see), stemmed from their interaction with beings that were decidedly outside the civilization project, and rabidly opposed to it. To fraternize with the Devil was not only to reject outright the witness of the faith, it was also a rejection of the civilization project in favor of joining the forces of the chief demonic spirit whose delight would be to see New England’s promise go unfulfilled.

Things that Go Bump in the Night

The dark and darkness are used in several intertwining and often overlapping ways in Mather’s text. Since the use of “dark” to refer to anything other than the literal absence of light—as in the “dark night” during which the people of New England were wont to be harassed by devilish apparitions—brings us as a reading audience into metaphoric, representational territory, we are in a great many cases in *Wonders of the Invisible World* dealing with a multiplication of meanings and allusions each time the word (and its cousins) appear. A great example of this phenomenon is Mather’s statement in the opening section titled “The Author’s Defense”:

I have indeed set myself to countermin the whole PLOT of the Devil, against *New-England*, in every Branch of it, as far as one of my *darkness*, can comprehend such a *Work of Darkness*.³³

³³ *WIW*, 18.

In this sentence we have at least two meanings of “darkness” at play: 1) darkness as blindness or want of the powers of understanding, and 2) darkness as evil. To these two may also be added, in the case of “Works of Darkness,” darkness as invisible, darkness as incomprehensible, and darkness as a proper noun describing the powers of supernatural demonic beings.

In theological terms, to be in darkness is to be in damnation, separated from the light and salvation of God. Mather’s brief summation of the state of the Devil is based on this understanding: “A Devil is a Spiritual and a Rational Substance, by his Apostasy from God, Inclined unto all that is Vicious, and for that Apostasy confin’d unto the Atmosphere of this Earth, in Chains under Darkness, unto the Judgment of the Great Day.”³⁴ Hell, Satan’s home, is a dark prison, but it is also a “*Dark Kingdom*,” populated with those “*Incarnate Legions*” of demons, who fell from heaven with the Devil.³⁵ It is not only the quality of the place and the name of the kingdom that bears the name “Dark,” but also any of the acts or abilities that come from the Devil and those under his command. Hence, we have not only a dark kingdom, but also “Works of Darkness” and “Powers of Darkness.”³⁶

The Devil (and by extension his horde), being not human, but a “spiritual and rational” substance, is not visible to the human eye, though humans can feel the ill effects of his work and be made subject to his power, e.g., through the spells of a witch. At the heart of our problem is the use of descriptive, visual language to describe that which is not usually visually accessible. The Devil is naturally invisible, until he takes on a visible form. Mather, troubled by the powers of invisibility associated with witchcraft, goes to the biblical witness for clarification. Since the main aim of the

³⁴ *WIW*, 54.

³⁵ *WIW*, 32, 27.

³⁶ E.g., *WIW*, 91, 67.

Devil is to tempt the faithful, the account of the temptation of Christ found in Matthew is of particular use to Mather. His description of the encounter Christ has with the Devil is revealing:

There were especially Three *Remarkable Assaults of Temptations*, which the *Devil* it seems, visibly made upon our Lord; after he had been more invisibly for Forty days together *Tempting* of that Holy One.³⁷

Mather emphasizes the three moments at which the Devil is made materially manifest to Christ in the wilderness, which reveal the form of the being that was “invisibly” tempting Christ prior to those manifestations. The identity of the tempter and, intuitively, the true appearance of that tempter, are not changed, only his visibility. The testimony in Matthew’s gospel is an instance of what Mather earlier calls the “*Plastic Spirit of the World*” moving to show what is usually hidden from human view. He defines witchcraft as that which “seems to be the Skill of Applying the *Plastic Spirit of the World*, unto some unlawful purposes, by means of a Confederacy with *Evil Spirits*.”³⁸ The Devil and these evil spirits have the power, particularly, it seems, when summoned by the criminal activity of witches, to move between invisibility and visibility at will.

From Mather’s accounts and the trial records, it would also seem that there are a limited number of possibilities for the visible form that demons and the Devil can take. Among these are 1) in the physical form of a possessed individual, including in the “Appearance of Innocent Persons,” 2) as a small “tawny” or “black” male-bodied being, 3) as a black or dark animal, e.g., a pig or a puppy, 4) as a monster, e.g., a “black Thing” with a “Body . . . Like that of a Monkey, the Feet like a Cocks, but the Face much like a Mans.”³⁹ Not surprisingly, the potential invisibility of the demonic, which can imitate “*Vertuous Persons*,” is quite high on the list of terrors Mather chronicles. It is terrifying that

³⁷ *WIW*, 177.

³⁸ *WIW*, 164.

³⁹ *WIW*, 139.

the appearance of a demon should not match the truth of its nature, which is black and evil. The demon that hides in the appearance of the white skin and social/spiritual position of the innocent acts according to its own lying nature, and thereby brings confusion and “agony” into the minds of men.

Long before Ralph Ellison made the connection in his *Invisible Man*, blackness and invisibility were two sides of the same coin. The demonic apparition, even the apparition of a respected, innocent member of the community, is still a manifestation of darkness, attained via the powers of darkness / the “Black Arts.” This capability is not a true crisis of identification or identity, though it is exceedingly difficult for humans, themselves in darkness and blindness while on earth, to untangle the “*Snarled*” business of witchcraft in the land. The demon, however he may appear to mortal eyes, remains dark, and through his powers resemble the powers attributed to the angels (e.g., when they appear “Cloathed with *Light* or *Fire* upon them”), a demon’s ability to take on invisibility and the appearance of virtuousness are “but a Blasphemous Imitation of certain Things recorded about our Saviour or His Prophets, or the Saints in the Kingdom of God.”⁴⁰ The demonic imitation of angelic forms does not change the descriptive language; though they appear clothed with light, they are yet manifestations of dark power.

The ability to see or to feel the invisible malevolent forces in the material world is limited to the few who are afflicted; and it is their conviction, their witness in spite of the fact that no one else can see what they see, which confirms the other-worldly presence of witchcraft. Deodat Lawson’s account in *A Brief and True Narrative*, released in 1692, opens with two such scenes:

On the Nineteenth day of *March* last I went to *Salem* Village, and lodged at *Nathaniel Ingersol’s* near to the Minister Mr. *P.’s* House, and presently after I came into my Lodging, Capt. *Walcut’s* Daughter *Mary* came to Lieut. *Ingersol’s* and spake to me; but suddenly after,

⁴⁰ *WIW*, 163-164.

as she stood by the Door, was bitten, so that she cried out of her Wrist, and looking on it with a Candle, we saw apparently the marks of Teeth, both upper and lower set, on each side of her Wrist.⁴¹

In the paragraph that follows this passage, Lawson tells of twelve-year-old Abigail Williams' fits, during which she was "hurried with violence to and fro in the Room (though Mrs. *Ingersol* endeavored to hold her)," attempted flight, and announced that she saw "Goodw. N. And said, *Do you not see her? Why there she stands!*" For a modern reader, it can be hard to reconcile the adult witnesses' credulity with the fact of the children's behavior, which may be interpreted without bringing the Devil into it—e.g., Emerson Baker⁴² has suggested that the social status of the later young female accusers (Hubbard, Warren, Lewis, and Churchwell, each a servant and/or an orphan) and the hard, traumatic treatment they underwent (threats and physical/emotional abuse) made them susceptible to conversion disorder.⁴³ Or M. M. Drymon, who has recently suggested that

⁴¹ Deodat Lawson, A brief and true narrative of some remarkable passages relating to sundry persons afflicted by witchcraft at Salem village, which happened from the nineteenth of March to the fifth of April, 1692 collected by Deodat Lawson (Ann Arbor, MI ; Oxford (UK): Text Creation Partnership, 2004-03 (EEBO-TCP Phase 1)), accessed 21 Dec 2016, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A49794.0001.001>.

⁴² Emerson W. Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft: The Salem Trials and the American Experience* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴³ The disorder, which Freud identified, is so named for the "conversion" of personal mental anxieties into physical maladies: "Although a psychological ailment, conversion disorder causes physical symptoms that are completely real—they are not in any way faked or controllable by the sufferer" (Baker, 100). It is fascinating, though perhaps not surprising, that the girls' testimonies themselves may be read as "true," in so far as they did see and feel the stimuli in question, and that, even in the cases where the wounds of purportedly demonic origin may have been self-inflicted, believe that they were being possessed/attacked by the Devil in material ways, and testify to the fact. A larger discussion about the role of the mentally disturbed or abnormal in society and in facilitating spiritual discoveries for those not gifted/cursed with the ability to see the invisible might be mounted here.

an outbreak of Lyme Disease resulted in the kinds of fits the bewitched parties in Salem exhibited.⁴⁴ Articulated in another, less sensitive way, the children might simply have been called bad seeds, and their behaviors ignored, treated as willfully disobedient, unexceptional attention-seeking. However, the possibility of an actual demonic power that employs invisible means elevates the problem from the domestic sphere to a supernatural one.⁴⁵

The problem of invisible foes that produce visible injuries and disturbances, in addition to striking terror in the hearts of the community and its leaders, is a source of information about the world unseen. Mather remarks,

That we are *Safe*, when we make just as much *Use* of all Advice from the Invisible World, as God sends it for. It is a *Safe* Principle, That when God Almighty permits any Spirits from the Unseen Regions, to visit us with Surprising Informations, there is then something to be *Enquired* after; we are then to *Enquire* of one another, *What Cause there is for such Things?* The peculiar Government of God, over the Unbodied Intelligences, is a sufficient Foundation for this Principle.⁴⁶

Mather is here concerned with the risk of false convictions or evidences against the innocent, whose forms may be produced as “spectres” by “some over-powerful Conjuror.”⁴⁷ Using their capability to invisibility, the powers of darkness may enter a meeting house unseen by anyone and cause havoc, they may underwrite a witch’s conjuring of spectral likenesses of persons living or dead, and they

⁴⁴ See M. M. Drymon, *Disguised as the Devil: How Lyme Disease Created Witches and Changed History* (Brooklyn; New York: Wythe Avenue Press, 2008).

⁴⁵ One might ask, What then of those who claim the judge’s and townspeople, far from fearing literal devils, were using the girls’ hysterical testimonies to their own aims – e.g., property seizure, personal vendettas, etc.? In this case, the problem *does* become a supernatural one, at least *rhetorically*. And rhetoric makes all the difference. This is about something deeper than conscious, free belief; this is about molding an imaginary landscape, which comes out of, and influences the material world. Put another way, it doesn’t matter how much an individual believes or doesn’t believe. This is about language.

⁴⁶ *WIW*, 40.

⁴⁷ *WIW*, 39-40.

can act and/or speak to humans without being seen. The power of invisibility compounds the problem of permeability between the material and supernatural worlds, since those who appear to be safely part of an (afflicted) in-group might be compromised without appearing any differently; Moreover, an event that might otherwise seem to have been brought about by material causes—for instance, the collapse of a meeting house that was known to be in need of repairs—may be in fact a result of dark, supernatural powers.

These encounters with invisible dark powers were fruitful in the extreme for Mather, beyond their applications as evidence at trial. Levin writes of Mather's desire for supernatural knowledge, which we have seen he regarded as given to men by God. In addition to supplying him with information to apply to his studies in medicine and the supernatural world, these moments of breaking through provided him with knowledge that accompanied his own experiences with the invisible world (e.g., in his early vision of the angel in his youth) and buttressed his "religious conviction," itself a higher brand of knowledge:

Actual engagement with the Devil in defense of a human soul [Martha Goodwin and Mercy Short] confirmed his deepest faith in the same way, though of course in a lower register. . . . His experience itself needed no argument. It filled his consciousness with the essential knowledge beyond articulation.⁴⁸

Here we see an example of the need of the (supernatural) other, the foe that makes the convictions of faith a palpable reality. The manifestations of dark, demonic power in the land confirm the reality of light, divine, and angelic power.

When the apparitions of the demonic are not spectral recreations of known persons or the invisible activity of bodily possession or material mischief, they are consistently black or

⁴⁸ David Levin, *Cotton Mather : The Young Life of the Lord's Remembrancer, 1663-1703* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 226.

monstrous. The “Black Man,” (“As the Witches call the Devil; and they generally say he resembles an Indian”), is a favorite of the Devil for appearances, and the phrase is used to mean the Devil, even when he is acting invisibly.⁴⁹ The “Black Man” appears to the bewitched and to those who practice the Black Art of witchcraft; his chief aim is the temptation and subsequent damnation of the chosen people of New-English Israel (by means of the diabolical Book which his witches have signed and which he would like all others to sign). Mather gives a vivid description of this black prince of evil and his descent: “The *Devil*, Exhibiting himself ordinarily as a small *Black man*, has decoy’d a fearful Knot of Proud, Froward, Ignorant, Envious, and Malicious Creatures, to List themselves in his Horrid Service, by Entring their Names in a *Book* by him Tendred unto them.”⁵⁰

What is striking about this passage is the way that fraternizing with this “small Black man” has blurred the lines of the witches’ humanity. They are not women and men; rather, they are “fearful . . . Creatures,” transformed forever by their pact with the Devil. In the postscript to *Cases of Conscience*, Increase Mather uses the same terms to describe witches: “There are such horrid Creatures as Witches in the World; and . . . they are to be extirpated and cut off from amongst the People of God. . . . More than one or two of those now in Prison, have freely and credibly acknowledged their Communion and Familiarity with the Spirits of Darkness.”⁵¹ The threat of permanent corruption of one’s humanity by means of communion with these dark spirits is real. Allegiance and identity are bound tightly together. When I ally myself with the forces of darkness, I cease to be a part of the beloved (saved) and protected community; what’s more, I also cease to be of like *kind* with that community. A witch is not a woman. A sorcerer is not a man. They may look

⁴⁹ *WIW*, 130.

⁵⁰ *WIW*, 88.

⁵¹ *CoC*, 274.

and sound the same, and may even speak deceptively fairly, but their allegiance with the powers of darkness has changed them.⁵²

Humans and those masquerading in human form are not the only material manifestations of demons in Massachusetts. They also appear in animal form, though the telling black coloring is a sign of their true nature. In *Wonders of the Invisible World*, we learn about one John Kembal and an incident involving some local puppies, one of which Kembal wished to acquire and was turned down.

Within a few days after, this *Kembal*, coming out of the woods, there arose a little Black Cloud in the N. W. And *Kembal* immediately felt a force upon him, which made him not able to avoid running upon the stumps of Trees that were before him . . . When he came below the Meeting House, there appeared unto him, a little thing like a *Puppy*, of a Darkish Colour; and it shot backwards and forwards between his Legs.⁵³

Kembal seeks to kill the puppy with his ax, but is unable. Another quicker “Black Puppy . . . Bigger than the first, but as Black as a Cole” appears to threaten Kembal, who thought it would “have tore his Throat out.” Kembal’s late invocation of the name of Jesus Christ saves him in his distress, and at the Name, the dark phantom vanishes into thin air.

Kendal’s fear is not merely a fear of things otherworldly or of that which threatens one’s eternal soul after death. Kendal fears imminent physical injury, the likes of which we see play out in the Salem courtroom as those testifying to the presence of witches among them are stabbed with pins, sent into fits, and thrown about bodily. The forces of darkness have power in the material world to inflict lasting injury, whether by possessing a human host and causing that host to do damage to themselves or others, or by taking material form as in the case of Kembal’s black puppy who might have torn his throat out had he not called on the name of Jesus in his distress.

⁵² Cf. Muchembled, 82-83.

⁵³ *WIW*, 147-148.

Mather's record in *Wonders of the Invisible World* includes references to demonic appearances not only as animals (e.g., the "black pig" we meet in the tale of Bridget Bishop's sorcery)⁵⁴, but also as "monsters" and as "things." In discussing the characterizations of the Devil in the medieval and early modern periods in Europe, Muchembled stresses the difference between Satan and the demonic on the one hand, and monsters and the monstrous on the other:

The minimal role allowed to Satan in this list [of Ambrosie Paré's] is typical of the period, because monsters were not confused with demons, even if they sometimes resembled each other in appearance in illustrations. It might be said that demons were seen as immaterial, acting through interposed bodies, which was accepted by most demonologists, whereas monsters were part of reality. The former incarnated diabolic temptation, the latter were a product of the divine will.⁵⁵

If we take Muchembled's summary and apply it to Mather's use of "monsters" and abominable "things" in his text, the possibility for a fully material representation of a divine ill will or displeasure emerges. Mather's performed apocalyptic communal cry of "Wo! Wo! Wo! Because of the Black things that Threaten us!"⁵⁶ not only makes New England a descendant of an evolved threat, which was first experienced "when the *Times of the Jews* were to be finished," but also, coming at the end of an assessment of nations' roles and sufferings at the end of days, populates the phrase "black things" with material meaning. There is flesh and blood that can be attached to the label "things" or "monsters," as Muchembled's summary suggests, and this label is not limited to those outside the community, i.e., the indigenous peoples of the land and the "Familiar Spirits" that are their imagined deities.

⁵⁴ *WIW*, 139.

⁵⁵ Muchembled, 82.

⁵⁶ *WIW*, 71.

It is of great significance that the label “monster” can be applied to those who display no physical (i.e., medical) abnormality, and moreover that the community’s leaders and systems of power do much of the work in adjudicating the meaning and application of the label and in providing the community with a definition in action, as it were: “the burning of witches defined the furthest point on the scale of extreme abnormality constituted by giving oneself to the devil.”⁵⁷ Mather was himself engaged in this kind of defining project in *Wonders of the Invisible World*, where monsters can be made through sinful behavior, faithlessness, and most extremely, by consorting with the Devil. The category looms large in the community, much like the dark forests and unconquered/unsettled lands around the colony; the ease with which a human member of the community can devolve into a monster is frightening:

The Body of the People are hitherto so disposed, the Swearing, Sabbath-breaking, Whoring, Drunkenness and the like, do not make a Gentleman, but a Monster, or a Goblin, in the Vulgar Estimation.⁵⁸

Part of the terror of this possibility, I imagine, must stem from its potential irreversibility. On occasion, in discussing one who has come under the Devil’s power, Mather speaks of those who can be brought back, either by their own prayers and by casting out the demons that afflict/tempt them by calling on Jesus’ name, but there are other cases in which there can be no deliverance from the power of evil save through the courts and execution. The permanence of this “solution” weighs heavily on Mather’s heart—it certainly is a political concern as the court has come under increased scrutiny—and his anxieties about wrongfully convicting the innocent fill many pages.

In Mather’s descriptions, the name of “monster” is often unmoored from a visible physical difference, but is nevertheless associated with the powers of darkness, in this case, a power darkly

⁵⁷ Muchembled, 83.

⁵⁸ *WIW*, 25.

working on the community to tempt and encourage them to commit crimes against God and civilization. We learn in Mather's record of John Louder's testimony that one suspected witch Bridget Bishop, whose eerie form appeared to him in the night, was responsible for sending a black pig, and a talking black monster to harass and tempt Louder. This monster's appearance was chimerical—"the Body, was like that of a Monkey, the Feet like a Cocks; but the Face much like a mans"—and his body was not materially substantial, though he was able to speak with Louder, disappearing after Louder was unable to clap hands on him, only to reappear later to accost him. This "black thing" which jumped in at the window, was finally repulsed by Louder's calling on the power of the God of Light: "*The whole Armour of God, be between me and you!*" The creature retreats to the wilderness, flying over Louder's orchard, and in its escape dislodging apples and flinging dirt on Louder that struck him dumb for three days.⁵⁹ Muchembled's soundly material "monster" is significantly blurred here as well; the threat is both localized and unpredictable—localized by its source in the suspected neighbor Bishop, and unpredictable in the deployment of demonic mischief. In this case, we may be dealing with a representation of the Devil Himself or at least a higher ranking demon, since the creature tempts, "*I understand that you are in some Trouble of Mind, and if you will be ruled by me, you shall want for nothing in this world.*"⁶⁰ Though she appears as a human woman, a member of the settled community, through her actions, the material Bishop is every bit a "monster" as much as the "black thing" she calls upon to torment her neighbor.

This is a problem of contamination, and of the material world being much more fluid and vulnerable than one might expect. Blurring the lines of categories—in the case of the monstrous mixture of distinct animals who visited Louder, or the transgression and affiliation with dark forces

⁵⁹ *WIW*, 139.

⁶⁰ *WIW*, 139.

by a woman who was a part of the community seeking to walk in the Light of Jerusalem—is a terrifying and destabilizing vision for Mather and those he represents. In what follows, I will look at a handful of analyses of the causes and characteristics of the Salem witch scare, and examine Mather’s calls to unity and to Puritan piety as a means of fighting the forces of darkness, reading it as a call to the creation of a distinct and more securely *pure* New English identity.

Threatened Identity

Cotton Mather does not merely describe the threats and terrors being experienced in New England by the power of the forces of darkness; he also provides antidotal behaviors, attitudes, and spiritual observances that will serve as weapons against the dark threat, particularly that threat which has come among the people such that it is no longer aesthetically obvious who is under the power of the Devil and who not. Unity is the main thrust of his call, which he makes here in *The*

Wonders of the Invisible World:

’Tis necessary that we unite in every thing: but there are especially two Things wherein our Union must carry us along together. We are to unite in our Endeavours to deliver our distressed Neighbours, from the horrible Annoyances and Molestations with which a dreadful Witchcraft is now persecuting of them. To have an hand in any thing, that may stifle or obstruct a Regular Detection of that Witchcraft, is what we may well with an holy fear avoid. Their Majesties good Subjects must not every day be torn to pieces by horrid Witches, and those bloody Felons, be left wholly unprosecuted.⁶¹

We have in this passage the employment of judiciary language—“felons,” “unprosecuted”—combined with a call to unity, and more particularly an admonition against standing in the way of the routing out of witchcraft. Uniting in the face of a powerfully united threat seems the only sensible response. Mather explains that though “the Devil” is often spoken of in the singular, this is

⁶¹ *WW*, 39.

a deceptive naming, since “the High Places of Our Air, are Swarming full of those Wicked Spirits, who Temptations trouble us; they are so many, that it seems no less than a Legion, or more than twelve thousands may be spared, for the Vexation of one miserable man. But because those Apostate Angels, are all United, under on Infernal Monarch, in the Designs of Mischief, ’tis in the Singular Number, that they are spoken of.”⁶²

Mather deftly links the “detection,” and the “extermination” of witches in the land to the spiritual identity project that New England has begun.⁶³ In this light, a large part of the New English “New Experiment” is the routing of the Devil and his legions from the land⁶⁴; this is the natural correlate to saving/converting the savage peoples of the land, whose pathetic representation on the colony seal reveals how closely this exorcizing/saving project is rooted to the core identity of the colony, which strives to bring its “light” into the “darkness.” This is a story about the mechanisms that generate and sustain identity, particularly an identity felt to be under siege. To look at the main thrusts of these processes in colonial New England, particularly as they inform and exacerbate the meaning and force of “darkness,” I will turn briefly to the work of John Demos, Kai Erikson, and Jill Lepore.

John Demos' work on the biography, psychology, sociology, and history of witchcraft and witchcraft scares in New England—of which, he writes, the Salem witch scare of 1691-92 alone is but a small representation—seeks to give us a broader picture of the role and character of those suspected of witchcraft, who are both underwriting the promise of New English spiritual battles as

⁶² *WIW*, 174-175. The use of the possessive “Our Air,” is significant to our avenue of inquiry, as the air is populated by a demonic force who does not belong there, but which God has permitted to come into the space now proprietary to God’s chosen.

⁶³ *WIW*, 38.

⁶⁴ *WIW*, 39.

well as serving to reinforce the wider community's sense of itself as "good," i.e., free from dark, demonic possession:

To discover the Devil—in a sense both literal and metaphoric—was, after all, their chief goal from the start. Through Elizabeth's possession [Elizabeth Knapp of Groton] they confronted the evil (the "promises," the "temptations") which plagued them all. There were many levels of resonance. There was the naming, the locating, the making tangible, of what had hitherto seemed obscure. There was a certain kind of tasting—a vicarious indulgence of forbidden wish and fantasy. And there was, at the end, a decisive act of repudiation: *The Devil is in Elizabeth, not in me . . . The evil is there, not here . . .* Thus did the beholders sound their own depths, sorting the good from the bad. They emerged—one imagines—with a stronger, sharper sense of themselves. They were cleansed.⁶⁵

Demos' book, which focuses strongly on the members of the chosen community in Massachusetts Bay, and on those qualities, both of the individual and of the group, that made for a viable suspicion of witchcraft, charts in colonial New England what is truly a "transcultural" phenomenon: the "tendency to 'project,' to 'scapegoat,' to extrude and expel that which individuals (or groups) define as bad."⁶⁶ One of the common qualities of Demos' researched witches is that their appearance follows "profound disturbances in human relationships."⁶⁷ Among these is begging resources or favors of other members of the community, one way that a witch begins to demonstrate her vulnerability.⁶⁸ Moreover, many of those community members accused of witchcraft had already been identified in other disputes or brought up on non-witchcraft-related criminal charges.

In Demos' estimation, witchcraft enters into the community's suspicions as part of an array of boundary defining and maintaining mechanisms, but also as a community's natural response to a deeper identity crisis. He summarizes the problem here in psychological terms:

⁶⁵ Demos, 129-130.

⁶⁶ Demos, 13.

⁶⁷ Demos, 34.

⁶⁸ Demos, 34-35.

Strong, purposeful, effective as they undeniably were, many of the New Englanders seem to have felt persistently vulnerable in their core sense of self. Tremors of uncertainty plagued their struggle to grow and endure as free-standing individuals; they could not feel confident of maintaining the existential boundaries of their lives. And . . . such feelings were evoked with particular intensity by the figure of the witch.

By a separate but parallel route she evoked other feelings as well. The intrusive, demanding traits so widely attributed to her are best viewed as projections. Her victims were presumably uncomfortable about similar tendencies in themselves, about their own wishes to intrude, to encroach, to dominate, to attack—their whole assertive side. As frequently happens in such situations, they dealt with their conflict by externalizing it. Not they, but rather their neighbor—the “witch”—possessed the traits they so deeply despised.⁶⁹

This kind of identity insecurity is also in play in Kai Erikson's analysis of the witch in *Wayward Puritans*. Both Demos' and Erikson's studies of the witch are put in terms of a study of the development in the colonial setting of what Erikson puts in terms of “deviation and conformity.” In Erikson's text, which provides a sociological analysis of the Puritan colony, the definition of “the nature of deviation” is also the definition of “the boundaries of their [Puritans'] new universe.”⁷⁰

Erikson speaks of an identity crisis borne of several key paradoxes in Puritanism—“a respect for individual freedom and a need for external discipline, a sense of personal privacy and a system of public accountability, a reliance on self-assertion and a belief in erratic fate”—and of the new colony's increased feelings of separation from its parent country, where the rise of toleration of a wider range of beliefs caused the colonists no little anxiety.⁷¹ Thus, the Massachusetts Bay Colony “had lost its main reason for existing,” “the English Puritans [having] lost interest in the model which Massachusetts had offered for their instruction.”⁷² It is for this reason, that there is a kind of desperation in the task of declaring and concretizing the identity of New England, the

⁶⁹ Demos, 209-210.

⁷⁰ Erikson, 23.

⁷¹ Erikson, 53, 111-112.

⁷² Erikson, 112.

chosen people of New Israel. The best method for dealing with this collective identity crisis, which both Erikson and Demos, and historian Jill Lepore agree was fiercely at play in Puritan thought, writings, and imaginings, is to define one's own group by comparison with an external or externalizable other, by saying, "We are this, because we are not that."

The First and Second Indian wars, which are for the most part absent in Demos' *Entertaining Satan*, and present only in brief mention and analysis in Erikson's *Wayward Puritans*, are at the center of Jill Lepore's *The Name of War*, which provides insights into the content of the budding New English identity, particularly as that identity is complicated and bolstered by encounters with the indigenous peoples of the land: the heretofore servants of the Devil until the arrival of God's people in the wilderness. Erikson does, however, discuss the importance of the savage and demonic wilderness in the Puritan imagination as a representational cache, one which we see unleashed to full effect during the witch scare in Salem:

The original settlers had landed in a wilderness full of 'wild beasts and wilder men'; yet sixty years later, sitting many miles from the nearest frontier in the prosperous seaboard town of Boston, Cotton Mather and other survivors of the old order still imagined that they were living in a wilderness—a territory they had explored as thoroughly as any frontiersmen. But the character of this wilderness was unlike anything the first settlers had ever seen, for its dense forests had become a jungle of mythical beasts and its skies were thick with flying spirits. In a sense, the Puritan community had helped mark its location in space by keeping close watch on the wilderness surrounding it on all sides; and now that the visible traces of that wilderness had receded out of sight, the settlers invented a new one by finding the shapes of the forest in the middle of the community itself.⁷³

To return to Mather's description of the necessity of the kind of unity that can root out the Devil, we can see him calling New England to a shared task of detection, examination, and extirpation—just the kind of task that is a powerful method for strengthening the bonds of shared identity. Put

⁷³ Erikson, 157-158.

another way, We are the ones who work together to pray, fast, attend church, and drive out the Devil wherever he may appear to destroy us.

Lepore, unlike Erikson, describes a New England very much inhabited by and concerned with the place (or non-place) of indigenous peoples. In Lepore's *The Name of War*, the traumas and anxieties that accompanied and followed in the wake of King Philip's War were far from over by the third generation of Puritans in the New World:

For Cotton Mather, as for his father, King Philip's War was a holy war, a war against barbarism, and a war that never really ended. Some of the tensions that had brought colonists and Indians to war in 1675 were no more resolved when Increase wrote his *Brief History* than when Cotton wrote his *Magnalia Christi Americana*. Questions about the sovereignty of Indian peoples and the legitimacy of English land claims had been more avoided than answered, and, most distressingly, the colonists' fears about 'degenerating' into Indians had only been exacerbated by their own "savage" conduct in the war. . . . No matter how much the colonists wrote about the war, no matter how much or how eloquently they justified their cause and conduct or vilified Philip, New England's colonists could never succeed at reconstructing themselves as "true Englishmen."⁷⁴

This much required and practically elusive identity—that of "true Englishmen," as a civilized and morally, spiritually, and culturally superior community—is at the heart of Lepore's study of the war and its aftermath and records. This true English identity was challenged not only, in Lepore's analysis, by those indigenous peoples that were active combatants in the First and Second Indian Wars, but also by those indigenous folks who had converted to Christianity, spoke English, were educated in the colony, and even led churches in the colony.⁷⁵

Three of the main loci in which Lepore situates the deeply desired (and required) ideal of true Englishness are in the ownership of property—in particular a house, livestock, and cultivated,

⁷⁴ Lepore, 175.

⁷⁵ E.g., John Sassamon, educated at Harvard, a minister of a Christian Indian town (Namasket), linguistic and cultural intermediary to the English in Massachusetts before his murder (Lepore, 21-48).

orderly looking land—in the use of the English language, and in clothedness of a markedly European cultural origin. The lands claimed by the settlers meant more than mere habitation and livelihood: the possession of them provided a means of differentiating the (New) English vision for the world, its salvation, and Christian civilization. Lepore writes about the tendency of the first generations of English settlers to associate their houses and cultivated lands with their identities as civilized Englishmen and not savage Indians:

Nearly all of the damage to the English during King Philip's War—the burning of houses, the spilling of blood, the English becoming Indianized—was understood as attacks on bounded systems. . . . But the concern with barriers was not limited to physical, geographical boundaries. It extended also to violations of English bodies, and , perhaps most terrifyingly of all, to Algonquian encroachments on English culture.⁷⁶

The barrier between the two—English and Indian—as Lepore examines it, is much thinner than desirable for the New English colonist, who was holding dearly to an identity at risk—both from the proximity of the heathen, the wildness and (as the colonists experienced it) chaotic nature of the land, and the distance and shifting politics of the mother nation, twice removed by generations by Cotton Mather's time.

This housed and cultivated (that is to say, "improved" by European means), civil self-understanding was fed by contact with indigenous populations, and the differences in culture encountered were interpreted as signs both of the enemy's inferiority and the colonist's superiority and served to provide stability to an identity under pressure. Indigenous tribal habitations were not given the civilized dignity of the word "house," but were referred to as "wigwams," "camps," "Dens," "nests," "gloomy forests," "swamps," etc.⁷⁷

But Tompson [Benjamin Tompson, Boston poet] was also speaking metaphorically when he, like many colonists, portrayed the Indians as if they had no clothes and no homes and

⁷⁶ Lepore, 74.

⁷⁷ Lepore, 84-85, 88.

suggested, even, that the Indians had no bodies—they blended so well with the woods as to be almost invisible there, indistinguishable from the wilderness around them, more like plants than people or, if animate, more like animals.⁷⁸

This kind of portrayal of indigenous peoples and cultures served also as a warrant for the taking of the land by the English “as a *vacuum domicilium*.”⁷⁹ No bodies and no homes and no civilized status meant no claims to the land; it also meant that the New English could peg their own identities—their own selves and personhood—to that of the “Indian,” who seemed to have none.

One of the many troubles of such a strategy to maintain and differentiate communal identity is that it demands an impossible impermeability of culture and language which was at odds with the Puritan spiritual ambitions in the land, namely, to bring the light of God to those savages living under and according to the powers of darkness. When indigenous faces appeared above markedly English clothing, the sight invoked disorientation and even horror in colonial onlookers. Lepore quotes Mary Rowlandson’s assessment of a group so dressed: “My heart skipped within me,” Rowlandson writes, “for they were dressed in English apparel . . . but when they came near, there was a vast difference between the lovely faces of Christians, and the foul looks of these heathens.”⁸⁰ One can easily surmise the problem: dark, racially different faces, wearing English hats and neckcloths, could be but an imitation of that which was deemed “Christian”; that which is a cultural marker of Englishness is also an exclusive marker of Christianness. Culture here does not translate when applied to darker bodies, however. It is not merely about the clothes and manner—it is about the “looks of these heathens,” the very thing they cannot change. In this way, inferiority, heathenism, and enemy-status is ultimately ineradicable, even where steps can be taken to bring

⁷⁸ Lepore, 85.

⁷⁹ Lepore, 85.

⁸⁰ Lepore, 80.

the outsider in and convert him to the ideals and religion of the English. This is the power of the Dark Mask, when darker skin and non-European features make its removal impossible.

Cotton Mather's statements about the problem of indigenous languages are telling in this regard:

In 1710 Cotton Mather would write, "It is very sure the best thing we can do for our Indians is to Anglicize them in all agreeable instances; and in that of languages, as well as others. They can scarce retain their language, without a tincture of other savage inclinations, which do but ill suit, either with honor, or with the design of Christianity."⁸¹

The eradication of indigenous cultural practice and linguistic inheritance is a necessary part of the process of conversion. Even at the level of language, Satanic forces had made themselves strong in Indian culture—so far so that only an abandonment of all trappings could satisfy the demands of civilization (albeit a lesser one). The English were the bringers then, not only of the content of the gospel, but also of the most perfected means, cultural and linguistic (both gifts of the Almighty God to God's chosen race), of engaging with and achieving the demands and blessings of the faith.

Devils Among Us

In the "General Introduction" to his *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Mather paints a glorious picture, both of the hardships endured by the New English colonists, wrongfully maligned and driven from their land as "Churches of *exiles* . . . into an horrible wilderness, meerly for their being well-willers unto the Reformation,"⁸² and of the promise and example of their Godly experimentation in the New World. He writes, freely using the metaphors of light and dark to describe the spiritual scene:

⁸¹ Lepore, 44.

⁸² *MCA*, 26.

But behold, ye European Churches, there are golden Candlesticks [more than seven times seven!] in the midst of this "outer darkness:" unto the upright children of Abraham, here hath arisen *light in darkness*. And, let us humbly speak it, it shall be profitable for you to consider the *light* which, from the midst of this "outer darkness," is now to be darted over unto the other side of the Atlantick Ocean. But we must therewithal ask your Prayers, that these "golden Candlesticks" may not quickly be "removed out of their place!"⁸³

Mather's New England is the light shining from the "outer darkness," out of the "wilderness," a beacon of righteousness and Godly society the example of which ought to edify not only the dark heathen it has come to save, but also its mother country across the Atlantic Ocean.

There is so much at stake in retaining the New English (Christian) identity; and thus there is much at stake in the policing of its boundaries. It is into this need that the boon of color comes as an effective tool, making it easy to isolate and identify the outsider whose outsidersness/permanent deviation from the socially sanctioned (if only aesthetically) provides a satisfyingly straightforward, solution to identity crises. With a collective identity tethered to that which is denied inclusion within it, a permanent touch point (darker-ness of the skin) or series of markers (cultural and/or linguistic difference) to cover that which is "not chosen" is necessary to maintain the stability and felt purity of the community in question. Thus, darkness has the power to describe symbolically the actions of bodies that do not carry its aesthetic mark; meanwhile, that which is demonic can take up resilient residence in those who, according to the moral aesthetics in play, "look like devils."

It is because of the ongoing presence of darker skinned persons within and nearby to the chosen community that such living material comparisons are made possible. As we shall see, the approach to Christianizing the Negro, for example, is different than that applied to fair-skinned New English community members. Contamination is a present danger—not only that which is considered the inherited state of the "Tawny Indian" and "Negro," but chosen (white) community as

⁸³ *MCA*, 27, parentheses in original.

a result of temptation, or too close interactions with the savages of the land. Where the indigenous inhabitants of the land may be described as having the “look” of Devils, when fair-skinned community members transgress, they are behaving as Devils do:

Have not many of us been *Devils* one unto another for Slanderings, for Backbitings, for Animosities? For *this*, among other causes, perhaps, God has permitted the Devils to be worrying as they now are, among us. But it is high time to leave off all *Devilism*, when the *Devil* himself is falling upon us: And it is *no time* for us to be Censuring and Reviling one another, with a *Devilish wrath*, when the *wrath* of the *Devil* is annoying of us.⁸⁴

If we can “consider our ways,” there must needs be a distinction between “our” ways and the “ways” of demons. The trouble with this is that into the category of “ways,” all manners of customs, behavioral patterns, and social interactions are placed. Further, the power of the state and of the churches is called to task to encourage the desired behaviors and to punish the “Unreformed.”⁸⁵

The category of the “Unreformed” within the colony is of interest to our investigation of humans whose bodies and behavior mark them as servants of the Devil. Mather records reports of the “Children of *New-England*” who “have *secretly* done many things that have been pleasing to the Devil.”⁸⁶ Chief among these is the “Sin of Unbelief [which] may be reckoned as perhaps the chief *Crime* of our Land.”⁸⁷

When one does not receive Jesus, who is of Heaven, then that Unbeliever is given over, “by the just vengeance of Heaven,” into the Devil’s keeping, branded by him who has become “a *Master*, a *Prince*, a *God*, unto the miserable Unbelievers.”⁸⁸ Significantly, it is not only the eternal fate of the

⁸⁴ *WIW*, 95-96.

⁸⁵ *WIW*, 100.

⁸⁶ *WIW*, 101.

⁸⁷ *WIW*, 103.

⁸⁸ *WIW*, 104.

apostate individual that is at stake, or even merely his or her potential corruption of others by their evil example: the trueness of the whole faith itself is threatened by the presence of dark powers working in and through those individuals and through having taken up residence in the places of the world previously belonging to the Devil. In his commendations of the authorities, which pepper the text, Mather uplifts the “most commendable Cautiousness, in those gracious Men, to be very shy lest the Devil get so far into our Faith, as that for the sake of many Truths which we find he tells us, we come at length to believe any Lyes, wherewith he may abuse us a length.”⁸⁹ The threat of contamination posed by the land, and by those un-Christian bodies in the land, is a risk to the community’s relationship with God and its ability to abide by God’s laws in the face of unprecedented encounters with the powers of darkness.

Beyond the use of color-full language to describe the battle against the dark demonic adversary within and without, this is the forging of a symbiotic relationship between the chosen (white) community’s identity and the (dark) heathen. While the heathen remains unconverted, and dark in material *and* spiritual terms, this connection is more or less stable. To the chosen community a host of behaviors are possible and clearly categorizable as either faithful (pure, good), Godly, and signifying the light, or apostate (contaminated, evil) and signifying the darkness. The comparison of New English and heathen is a dramatic, high-contrast comparison between light and dark, in conceptual, spiritual, and, critically, material terms.

What happens, then, when those dark ones who have become the guarantors of New English identity begin to exhibit the cultural, social, and religious behaviors of the faithful? Put another way, what happens when one who wears the Dark Mask behaves in ways not consistent

⁸⁹ *WIV*, 38.

with the negative foundational expectation and (white) need of a dark other against which to measure one's spiritual, cultural, and civil successes, and to provide a means of safely characterizing one's failures?

Praying Indians and Catechized Negroes

As we have seen, close connection with the powers of darkness brings about monstrosity, a departure from the category of humankind. There is something of the monstrous about each of the forms that the Devil and demonic spirits take, including those forms recognizable to the people of New England as naturally derived, like the Devil's presumed semblance to an "Indian." Though the Devil is not, literally speaking, an "Indian," a race of peoples with which New England has at the time of the Salem witchcraft scare many terrifying and bloody encounters, the Devil is united with them, first by way of explanation—their heathen practices have brought him strength in the land—and second by way of similitude comparison. In his *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Mather writes of the converted "*praying* Indians" of Martha's Vineyard,⁹⁰ who have firsthand knowledge of witchcraft, they themselves having practiced it before their proselytization:

The Indians of Martha's Vineyard, who are now serious Christians, will, upon their own too certain knowledge, abundantly acknowledge the witchcrafts wherein they had actual conversations, and explicit confederacies with devils, while they were yet Pagans. They know that many persons among them have been, by the zeal of their parents, dedicated unto their infernal gods, and educated for the special service of those gods; but that the *dæmons* accept only some here and there, to make dangerous *powaws* or wizards of them.⁹¹

These "*powaws* or wizards" were testified to be responsible, much like witches in Europe and New England, for events both destructive and beneficial. However, it is the source of power that matters

⁹⁰ *MCA*, 442.

⁹¹ *MCA*, 445.

and, as no ultimate good can come of affiliation with the Devil, the extinguishing of these native witchcrafts are a source of pride (some notable converted Indians have even themselves become preachers, spreading the gospel to the others) and rejoicing.⁹²

However, the problem of aesthetic appearance remains in play despite the possibility of conversion. A “*praying* Indian,” minus the social trappings that signify her conversion, cannot help but appear much like a “heathen” one. And since the Devil is known to appear “tawny,” the aesthetic connection is a lasting one. There must be something added through one’s experience with a particular “tawny” person, or via testimonies like Mather’s which vouch for particular Indians, adding the helpful adjective “*praying*” to assist us to separate these particular ones from the mass of regular and presumably non-praying (except to “infernal gods”) others. So what is signified by “tawny” is more than an assertion of color. It must be, when there is agreement between the heathenish behaviors with which the Indian is credited and the affiliation of the color of the Indian’s skin with the color of the Devil’s. Here the invisibility of the Devil and demons becomes much thinner. Although the *praying* Indians of Martha’s Vineyard testify to the same invisible powers of witches, to afflict their victims at distance and without being perceived, the *powaws* themselves share the imagined appearance of the Devil in the color of their skin (and in their garments).

The boundaries of humanity as a category seem from these observations to be shared by the boundaries of salvation. This is not a surprise, since to be saved is to be brought out of darkness and into the light.⁹³ But this transition from darkness to light and vice versa is accompanied by social, cultural, behavioral, and color markers, which map out by race such that that which is indigenous to

⁹² *MCA*, 441-446.

⁹³ E.g., in the legend of St. Christopher’s conversion from dark, human-eating, dog-headed Réprebos to fair-skinned human after his baptism.

non-Europeans is diabolical. So much so that Mather was able to conclude that every bit of indigenous culture, down to the languages themselves, was incapable of bringing about any true conversion to the faith.

It was not only indigenous Americans who provided the colonists with real-life aesthetic correlates, possessing a skin and customs that purport to dealings with the Devil. At the time of the witchcraft scare in New England, enslaved Africans and West Indians were recognized parts of the settled community. Though most likely not herself an African, one of the most influential players in the Salem courtroom proceedings was a darker-skinned slave.⁹⁴ Mather himself owned slaves, and in 1706, in keeping with his Bible-based understanding of the role of slave master, published an essay exhorting slave holders to look to the faith of their Negro servants:

And such an Opportunity there is in your Hands, O all you that have any **Negroes**⁹⁵ in your Houses; an Opportunity to try, Whether you may not be the Happy *Instruments*, of Converting, the *Blackest* Instances of *Blindness* and *Baseness*, in to admirable *Candidates* of Eternal Blessedness. . . . Make a Trial, Whether by your Means, the most *Bruitish* of Creatures upon Earth may not come to be disposed, in some Degree, like the *Angels* of Heaven; and the *Vassals* of Satan, become the *Children* of God. Suppose these Wretched *Negroes*, to be the Offspring of *Cham* (which yet is not so very certain,) yet let us make a Trial, Whether the CHRIST who *dwelt in the Tents of Shem*, have not some of His Chosen among them; Let us make a Trial, Whether they that have been Scorched and Blacken'd by the Sun of *Africa*, may not come to have their Minds Healed by the more Benign *Beams* of the *Sun of Righteousness*.⁹⁶

We can see the language of light and dark at play in this clever passage, in which Mather makes free and witty use of our aesthetic metaphor, in this case worded as blackness, which describes the skin

⁹⁴ Elaine Breslaw traces Tituba's roots before her arrival in Barbados to northern South America (present day Guyana or Venezuela), and suggests that she is likely of Amerindian, and specifically Arawak descent (Breslaw, 12-20).

⁹⁵ The word Negroes is written in black letter.

⁹⁶ Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized. An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity* (Boston: B. Green, 1706), 2-3.

of the Negro, but also his social and spiritual condition. Blackness is here also as a superlative of badness, as in the "*Blackest Instances of Blindness and Baseness.*" The multiplication of meaning that is our focus is packed tightly into Mather's verbiage. There are two Suns in this passage, one the material sun of Africa, which is to blame for the dark skin of the African, and the other, "more Benign," the divine "*Sun of Righteousness,*" to be attained through a Christian master's education and conversion. Before conversion, those marked by the "*Sun of Africa*" are also identifiably the most "*Brutish of Creatures upon Earth,*" and, even worse, as the "*Vassals of Satan.*"

Mather ascribes humanity to the Negro, as "God hath made of one Blood, all Nations of man, he is thy Brother too"; he ascribes to God, every earthly Master's "more Absolute Master," a command to see to the spiritual development of their slaves. The Master who provides for the material needs of his Negro servant without also bringing that servant "unto the Knowledge and Service of that glorious Master," puts his own soul in peril, as he will bear not only his own sins, but also "the guilt of their [his Negro slaves'] Barbarous Impieties, and Superstitions, and their neglect of God and their Souls."⁹⁷

Mather is not so naive as to think that the Negro slaves' capacity to a saving knowledge of the faith is equal to that of a white man's (or white woman's). In fact, his essay closes with recommended simplified (at two levels) catechisms designed specifically for slaves by intellectual capability. He admits that although "the God who *looks on the Heart,* is not moved by the color of the *Skin . . .*

Indeed their *Stupidity* is a *Discouragement.* It may seem, unto as little purpose, to *Teach,* as to *wash an Æthiopian.* But the greater their *Stupidity,* the greater must be our *Application.* If we can't learn them so much as we *Would,* let us learn them as much as we *Can.* A little divine *Light* and *Grace* infused into them, will be of great account. And the more *Difficult* it is, to fetch such *forlorn things* up out of the perdition whereinto they are fallen, the more

⁹⁷ Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 16.

Laudable is the undertaking: . . . Let us encourage ourselves from that word: Mat. 3.9. *God is able of these Stones, to raise up Children unto Abraham.*⁹⁸

We are left with an idea of the dark-skinned slave associated with sunken stones, of dirtiness that cannot be washed off, of “forlorn things,” of stupidity, and of a simultaneous helplessness and wantonness. The slave cannot help himself out of the damnation into which, in his blackness, he has fallen, since the gospel was given to the (European) nations chosen to receive it. His spiritual fate is yet, thankfully for him, a mystery, even while his earthly one is not. Mather counsels compassion and duty toward the Negro that will provide a chance at salvation, since “the State of your *Negroes* in this World, must be low, and mean, and abject; a State of Servitude. No *Great Things* in this World, can be done for them.”⁹⁹ Though Mather admits of a brotherhood between the white person (simply communicated in the text by means of the first and second persons plural) and the Negro, it is an otherworldly brotherhood, a mystery to be revealed in the “*World to Come*,” which allows for the contradiction that a man may enslave his brother.

In his brief analysis of this text that features Mather’s “dreadful punning on the Negro’s color,” Winthrop Jordan takes note of Mather’s uncertainty about the Negro’s descent from Ham, which would mark him with the divine curse of servitude. In Jordan’s analysis, the way in which “that old idea of Ham’s curse floated ethereally about the colonies without anyone’s seeming to attach great importance to it,” or “to connect the idea with inherent depravity,” is a testimony to colonial, and particularly Puritan, ideas of the equality of all souls before the creator, regardless of the bodies in which they reside.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, as we know from Mather’s own pen, equality of the

⁹⁸ Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 24-25.

⁹⁹ Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 14.

¹⁰⁰ Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 201, 202.

soul does not translate into equal treatment on earth. Jordan's analysis of limited attempts of the period to Christianize slaves includes the problem of the distinctly Protestant "morphology of conversion," which lent an exclusionary quality to the conversion process:

All Protestants felt that true conversion required a transformation of the spirit which could not possibly be accomplished by running the heathen through a mill of sacramental rites. . . . The tedious process of nurturing souls kept great numbers of slaves out of the churches: on technical grounds alone, Protestantism was exclusionary. . . . [W]ith all the Protestant sects, converting heathens required instructing them first. Especially during the early years of slavery's rapid growth in the eighteenth century, there were mountainous practical difficulties. . . . Always, everywhere, there was circumspection. It was characteristic of the entire program for Negro conversion that one of the S.P.G. Missionary's principal duties was to 'catechise' Negroes. This typically Protestant feeling that conversion was a slow and difficult educational experience, that it was a process rather than an act, served not only to emphasize the separation of the races in men's minds but also to make Christianizing slaves seem almost like a process of tribal adoption.¹⁰¹

Besides providing the faithful white slave holder or missionary with an arduous and perhaps impossible task of catechizing slaves, the difficulty of this vast work served to give strength to the racial identification of whiteness with Christianity, with a facility to divine relationship, ethical authority, and a general ability to conceive of and attain earthly goodness.

Both Jordan and Lepore point out the particular benefit to the English reputation and self-regard as a result of a series of autobiographical comparisons, of which the distinction between dark and light skin is the more extreme example:

While Englishmen distinguished themselves from other peoples, they also distinguished *among* those different peoples who failed to be English. It seems almost as if Englishmen possessed a view of other peoples which placed the English nation at the center of widening concentric circles each of which contained a people more alien than the one inside it.¹⁰²

In her discussion of the colonial barbarities of which Europe was guilty in the 16th century, Jill Lepore also identifies the same English impulse to claim righteousness by comparison, in this

¹⁰¹ Jordan, *White Over Black*, 211-212.

¹⁰² Jordan, 86.

case through comparison with the species of colonialism practiced by their European neighbors. This righteousness achieved by comparison, however, produced a “dilemma” that demanded addressing once the English were in direct contact with native peoples:

Twenty years later, those “true English-men” who lived in New England found themselves in a very tricky spot. Barbarism threatened them from every direction: if they continued to live peaceably with the Indians, they were bound to degenerate into savages, but if they waged war, they were bound to fight like savages.¹⁰³

The solution to this dilemma, in Lepore’s analysis, was to wage the war “by whatever means necessary,” however savage, and to use the writing of history to interpret the behavior of English men as being a result of their victimization at the hands of “barbarous savages.” In short, they would be brutal, but they would take no pleasure in it. Lepore exegetes a torture scene that appears in Rev. William Hubbard’s *Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians* (1677), in which a native enemy was captured, tortured, and executed by the English’s Mohegan allies while the English looked on, complicit:

Instead of admitting their pleasure, the English displace it onto the Mohegans standing next to them. Again and again they point out that it is the Indians who are “delighted,” not the English. But even that move is not enough. The line between Englishman and Indian is still too thin. To thicken it, the pain of the event must be displaced too. The Indian in the middle of the circle does not himself “shew any Signs of Anguish.” Instead, the English do. He bleeds but they cry. . . . By feeling the pain of the fingerless, toeless man, feeling it even more than he does, the English onlookers put themselves in his place. Desperate to distinguish themselves from the “heathen” Mohegans, they figuratively hurl themselves back into the center of the circle, where their identity as the tormented victims of barbarous savages is reestablished. Their Englishness has been preserved.¹⁰⁴

The use of the center of the perspectival circle as a means to differentiate between the goodness of the English above all other humans is frighteningly self-actualized. In the retelling of events, the voyeuristic pleasure and even the taint of participation in particularly un-English “barbarisms”

¹⁰³ Lepore, 11.

¹⁰⁴ Lepore, 13.

cannot remove the identification with goodness and righteousness above all others. Where the evidence of complicity and guilt is present, it can be excused away by means of an imagined insensate victim, or a conveniently “savage” source of the barbarous proceedings of which the true victims are the English. There is a durability to the white claim to righteousness; regardless of one’s deeds, beneath it all, the reviewers of history are encouraged and even trained to imagine the sufferings of the white men who watch, rather than the brown man who suffers and dies. It appears that the same mechanism that ascribes barbarity, bestiality, and insensibility to darker-skinned peoples is at work in creating the steep hill to their conversion. E.g., It is not that whites did not seek to convert the Negro, it is that their “stupidity” was too great.

The proof of the colonists’ claim to be a “City on the Hill” truly aligned with God’s will was easiest found in comparison. And the strongest, and perhaps most far-reaching of comparisons metaphorically speaking, that of darkness to light, was to become an extremely useful tool in evaluating and classifying all peoples the English encountered, such that discrete ethnicities and nationalities could be pegged as either more “black” or more “white,” i.e., as “our owne” or “not of us.” Jordan notes this mechanism in his discussion of naturalization acts in the colonies, which afforded liberties to whites regardless of their status as captives, but not to black or native peoples:

Here was the nub: captive Scots were men ‘as our owne.’ Negroes were not. They were almost hopelessly far from being of the English nation. As the Bermuda legislature proclaimed in 1663, even such Negroes ‘as count themselves Free because no p.ticler masters claymeth their servies, in our judgments are not Free to all natural priviledges.’

Indians too seemed radically different from Englishmen, far more so than any Europeans. They were enslaved, like Negroes, and so fell on the losing side of a crucial dividing line. It is easy to see why: whether considered in terms of complexion, religion, nationality, savagery, bestiality, or geographical location, Indians were more like Negroes than like Englishmen.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Jordan, 88-89.

The terror of the Dark Mask is that one's circumstances, actions, and speech do nothing to remove it. If one wears it and is for all to see a free person, one is yet seen as a slave. If one wears it and is for all to see converted and "praying," one is yet a barbarous heathen endlessly linked with the Devil. If one dons the trappings of the dominant culture, its clothes, its language, its social niceties, one is never able to attain the treatment one would receive without the Dark Mask. The dark and light binary demands that the dark be read negatively, so that the light can gain its good, right, and entitled identity.

Toward Topsy

One does not need to be darker-skinned to wear the Dark Mask. However, the darkness of natural appearance cements the possibility of the Dark Mask's application (as well as providing a means of showing off the "reality" of the imaginings that come to life) when the Mask is worn by one upon whose identity (perceived and artificially reconstructed) the Dark Mask was constructed.

The Dark Mask, when applied to darker-skinned people, creates a kind of currency of spoiled identity,¹⁰⁶ in which the language used to name and describe the spoiled one is the same language that must be reapplied by the wearer of the Dark Mask in order to speak within the society that applied it, whether it be to conform, or subvert, advocate, or hide, etc. The problem of shared language featuring the light-dark symbolic dichotomy is the way that the terms of

¹⁰⁶ I borrow the term from Erving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Among the stigmatized identities that Goffman treats are the "tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family" (4). Though many of Goffman's references to the stigma of race contain dated concerns (e.g., the curious category "unrepentant poor" in his analysis), his inclusion of racial, national, and religious deviations from a majority ideal, as identities under pressure and in continuous negotiation of all encounters with "normals," makes his research useful in thinking about the problems the Dark Mask creates for those who cannot remove it.

engagement are corrupted for some and not others. The problem of Christian salvation—who can and cannot be saved—is one such arena of engagement in which it is difficult if not impossible to incorporate fully those who wear the Dark Mask in the process of seeking God’s grace.

One of the most insidious of effects of the Dark Mask is its power to banish the possibility of equality—even equality before a gracious God. Take two children, one fair-skinned and one darker-skinned. Which of these will have the necessary innate qualities that bend toward Godliness and goodness?

In the following chapter, I will take a look at the effects of this inequality the Dark Mask invites, and even demands, despite however well-meaning the attempts to conversion and inclusion. The illustration I will use is of the character Topsy, the young dark-skinned slave girl, first appearing in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and later coming to louder life as a blackface minstrel show favorite and American cultural icon. Like the move Mather makes to encourage the education and catechizing of the Negro and the Indian, Stowe’s attempt to show the emotional life of the American slave and stir white hearts toward anti-slavery sentiment and action betrays a logic dependent on the color of a subject’s skin to determine their possibility toward goodness. The conversion of Topsy is a fascinating and uneasy paradox in Stowe’s account; how can one convert a being whose appearance betrays her alignment and affinity with hell and the demonic to a Christianity whose aesthetic representation is not only light, but white, fairly and blue-eyedly angelic?

Topsy is the child who wears the Mask, and her Dark Mask intimates hell and the devil to all who encounter her in Stowe's novel. Stowe is at pains to show the reach of divine grace, that *even* young black Topsy should be able to receive it. What results is a salvation that is less-than, and in spite-of, Topsy's darkness, which she cannot help, and which manifests in her both visually and behaviorally.

Chapter Three

In *Mightier than the Sword*, historian David Reynolds has the following to say about Harriet Beecher Stowe's iconic black child character, Topsy:

Topsy's brash wickedness comes not only from years of degradation as a slave but also from the Calvinistic instruction she has received from Ophelia. Announcing, "I'se so wicked!" Topsy gives a mini-sermon in which she declares that all people, white or black, are also sinners. "Miss Feely says so," she declares. "I's so awful wicked there can't nobody do nothin' for me." Through Topsy's comic assertion, Stowe makes another stab at Calvinism, aimed this time at its doctrine of total depravity. . . . When Topsy declares that she's the "wickedest critter in the world," she's repeating what she learned from Ophelia, whose religious orthodoxy the novel mocks.¹

While Reynolds acknowledges that the character Topsy is sourced from the tradition of blackfaced minstrelsy in America, he sees in Stowe's portrayal of the abused, neglected, and incorrigible black child an improvement on the type. Topsy is revived many times over on the stage and screen in blackface and in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* merchandise after the novel's publication in glaringly stereotypical depictions; in Reynolds' view, Topsy becomes a problematic stock character via these numerous incarnations in the mode of minstrelsy and not as a result of Stowe's text.² Nevertheless, he admits of Topsy's minstrel roots and the racial stereotypes that come along with them, but spotlights Stowe's use of the relationship between Eva and Topsy to show that black slaves, "even when . . . thoroughly dehumanized, are capable of profound human feeling that can obliterate racial

¹ David S. Reynolds, *Mightier Than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 81.

² *Ibid.*, 80.

barriers.”³ For Reynolds, Topsy and Eva’s friendship is an exemplary move toward racial solidarity, and, in spite of the fact that the character Topsy was later played by white actors in blackface, even her portrayal by whites was a signal of beneficial race-mixing.⁴

What is troubling about this analysis of Topsy’s “I’s so wicked,” catchphrase, voiced in the novel in what he refers to as a “mini-sermon,” is that Reynolds asserts that Topsy, in calling herself wicked, is also calling *all* people, *both* white and black, wicked as well. This reading can help lead us to a more robust critique of Calvinist theology, which is arguably a helpful reading of Stowe’s presentation of the effect on Topsy of her views of herself as totally and hopelessly depraved. However, Topsy’s statement about her own wickedness does not, for her, apply to all beings. Through Miss Ophelia’s teachings Topsy learns that “white folks is sinners too,” but she remains convinced that were she white, it would be easy to be good. Topsy surmises that white people are by nature closer to the good, and that “niggers is the biggest [sinners].” Topsy makes her own blackness the foundation of her statements about her own morality, i.e., lack thereof. What’s more, she makes “great capital of her own sins and enormities,” resolving that if her lot is to be wicked, than why not be the “wickedest critter in the world”? A clever child, Topsy knows that should she

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 81, 243. Reynolds holds that playing in blackface “permitted talented white singers to open up in new ways,” e.g., Judy Garland’s Topsy as ground-breaking musically for the white singer. His assertion that performances of Topsy produce new forms—e.g., Garland’s performance prefiguring “rhythm and blues” and Topsy the minstrel character as the “ancestor of slapstick comedians”—is an overstatement of the originating power of Stowe’s character. Both slapstick comedy and the black music that sourced the Blues had laid down firm roots by the time Topsy and, later, Garland appeared. However, Reynolds’ statements illustrate his far-reaching view of the potential of Stowe’s novel to encourage mixing between the races. Another way to view the kind of playing in the dark in which performers like Garland engaged is as a donning of the Dark Mask for the purposes of overcoming the strictures of behavior demanded by whiteness, i.e., the White Mask, which I will discuss further in chapter four.

try to be good, her black body would remain inferior and she would remain despised and unloved.⁵ Young as she is, Topsy understands with complete clarity her essential moral inferiority to Miss Eva, whose province is angelic goodness, expressed in bodily terms; Topsy, Eva's antithesis, is a dark-skinned slave child who will grow up to be a dark-skinned slave woman, and, since "can't nobody love niggers, and niggers can't do nothin'," equaling Eva in good behavior will do her no good.⁶

Stowe works hard to show how a child like Topsy can actually gain a reward for her goodness, in the love of the white child and white woman who adopt her, breaking down the barriers of racist revulsion to touch and connect with Topsy, and in the promise of heaven. However, the problems raised by Topsy's signature black body—her dark skin, her "wicked" "glittering eyes," her diabolic grin—which, we are informed, is but one of many duplicate specimens in the large population of black slave children not seen in the book—persist and echo after her conversion and ultimate transformation into an African missionary. It is not only Topsy's declarations and Miss Ophelia's revulsion that herald Topsy's connection with wickedness and even with hell itself. Stowe's descriptions of the child emphasize the diabolical connections her physiognomy signals; she is called "imp," "goblin-like," "diabolic" and spoken of as one aligned with the uncanny, with conjuring and magic. Since Topsy's physical otherness (one might even say her ugliness) is expressed in transcendent terms—the recurring assertion that she hails from "Diablerie" is an especially telling example of the phenomenon—her conversion alone, which affects her immortal soul and her comportment, not her physical image, is not enough to sever the

⁵ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, A Norton Critical Edition, ed. Elizabeth Ammons, 2nd ed. (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 228-229, 230, 257-258.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 258.

bond between blackness and wickedness, blackness and the demonic, blackness and the uncanny, blackness and the morally lesser.

Topsy, as the lone darker-skinned black female child featured in the novel, looms large beside Uncle Tom, whose portrayal is meant to be a progressive departure from prevailing opinions of the day about black people. Tom's physical darkness does not provide the same connotations as Topsy's; his "full African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindness and benevolence," and in describing Tom's "whole air," Stowe calls him "self-respecting and dignified . . . with a confiding and humble simplicity."⁷ Neither Uncle Tom's physicality nor those of his three young dark-skinned children work against them in the way that Topsy's does, which makes Topsy a fascinating subject for an exploration of the significance of Stowe's use of the language of the other-worldly to describe her characters.

In the following pages, I will explore the uniqueness of Stowe's portrayal of Topsy in the novel, using Tom's two boys Mose and Pete as the control case for a comparison between Topsy and other of Stowe's dark-skinned child characters; to consider the (im)possibility of an independent black family unit apart from white tutelage and spiritual training; and to unpack Stowe's descriptions of Topsy vis-à-vis her descriptions of the white and mixed-race children Eva and Harry. Thereafter, I will turn briefly to Topsy's roots in minstrelsy and sample portrayals of her essential difference from Eva in early staged performances.

Though even Topsy can be good in Stowe's novel, converted and loved by little Eva and finally by Miss Ophelia, the narration of her transformation is not sufficient to dispel the deleterious effect her body has on her progress; Topsy's uncanny black body—at best comedic and at worst

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

unnerving and repulsive to those who encounter it—is a physical reality that, although it is not mentioned by Stowe in connection with the adult Topsy, must persist as the earthly body she inhabits. Stowe’s own doubts about the possibility of rehabilitating black children can be read in conversation with her silence on the effect of Topsy’s physical adult appearance. Stowe’s faith in the power of religious conversion and upright behavior is quite pronounced in her portrait of Topsy’s future, which notably excludes the embodied form of the future Topsy. Put simply, the love of God is *so great that even Topsy* can receive it. The “even” in that statement is a glaring, lasting one, which, in addition to generously throwing the doors of heaven wide open for all to enter, reveals who needs the most grace of all to be allowed entry. Topsy’s salvation is an *in spite of* salvation, where the *in spite of* refers not only to her benighted condition, but also to her physical self.

What Topsy’s portrayal and evolution in Stowe’s narrative put into relief are the ways in which the Dark Mask is not merely for the face, nor even limited to the pigmentation of the skin, but is, one might say, worn by the whole body: it is inclusive not only of eyes, nose, and hair, but also of movement, sex and sexuality, excretion and ingestion. Its power extends itself, reminiscent of the multiplicitious negative meanings of darkness, such that identical behavior in fairer and darker bodies is read as morally opposite. Further, Topsy’s popularity in blackface minstrelsy reveals the radical mobility of the Dark Mask, which may even be seen as a sign of its identity-confirming/identity-building purposes: when a white actor dons the aesthetic appearance of darkness in the figure of Topsy, she is able to (gleefully) access the transgressions, failings, and comically uncanny/demonic character assigned to darker bodies in the social construct.

Tom's Children

Uncle Tom's appearance in the narrative is preceded by Stowe's warm description of his wife Aunt Chloe, the lay of the cabin she maintains, and its decor. Before being introduced to Tom, the reader is taken through his cabin, from Aunt Chloe by the fire, to the two beds (one the "drawing-room of the establishment," the other "evidently designed for use") to the children, presumably Tom's and Chloe's, gathered in the corner:

On a rough bench in the corner, a couple of woolly-headed boys, with glistening black eyes and fat shining cheeks, were busy in superintending the first walking operations of the baby, which, as is usually the case, consisted in getting up on its feet, balancing a moment, and then tumbling down,—each successive failure being violently cheered, as something decidedly clever.⁸

The children, Mose, Pete, and baby Polly, wait to eat while Aunt Chloe serves young Master George and Uncle Tom before returning to cook for her own babies and herself, and we are told that the boys "seemed rather to prefer eating theirs as they rolled about on the floor under the table, tickling each other, and occasionally pulling the baby's toes."⁹ Though Mose and Pete are depicted as more than a bit wild—roaring "like bears" and rolling about on the floor, their hands covered in molasses—they are joined in their joyful "capering" by both Tom and Mas'r George who too dance about and play with the baby. Theirs is a shared rowdiness, and it is natural to the domestic sphere.

Mas'r George's un-self-conscious presence in the cabin provides a means of seeing children, black and white, as different in condition, but not in animation and mischief. When Aunt Chloe orders Mose and Pete to bed, Mas'r George countermands her: "'La, Aunt Chloe, shove it under, and let 'em sit up,' said Mas'r George, decisively, giving a push to the rude machine."¹⁰ In kicking under

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

the boys' trundle bed, Mas'r George asserts an authority over Aunt Chloe in the direction of her children; however, we are told that she, "having thus saved appearances, seemed highly delighted to push the thing under, saying, as she did so, 'Well, mebbe 't will do 'em some good.'"¹¹ The exact effect of Mas'r George's status (and his contrasting whiteness) is blurred by the close, intertwined interactions between him and Tom's family. Moreover, their exchanges are not one-sided: e.g., Mas'r George teaches Uncle Tom to read, but it is Aunt Chloe who must feed them both; and while Mas'r George agrees to read at the meetin', we are told that he "very readily consented, for your boy is always ready for anything that makes him of importance."¹² In Stowe's portrait, the benefit of this interaction between young master and slave family is felt on both sides, Tom gaining learning, Chloe gaining in Mas'r George an object for the application of her considerable domestic skills, Mas'r George gaining an audience, "admired by the young and blessed by the old," and the boys gaining access to "the meetin'" by means of Mas'r George's word to Aunt Chloe on their behalf.¹³

Nevertheless, there are a few moments in Stowe's description that call attention to Mose and Pete in ways that mark their difference, i.e., in ways that mark the connections with the animal that set them in a category apart from white children.

Two little descriptive moments stand out to show this connection. In the first, Mose and Pete watch and wait hungrily for Mas'r George to finish eating the cakes their mother had prepared:

By this time, Master George had arrived at that pass to which even a boy can come (under uncommon circumstances,) when he really could not eat another morsel and, therefore, he was at leisure to notice the pile of woolly heads and glistening eyes which were regarding their operations hungrily from the opposite corner.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27, 24.

“Here, you Mose, Pete,” he said, breaking off liberal bits, and throwing it at them; “you want some, don’t you? Come, Aunt Chloe, bake them some cakes.”¹⁴

The breaking off of pieces of cake and the call “Here, you” evokes a master’s/owner’s call to a favored dog or farm animal. Before their mother prepares a proper meal for them, the little boys are first fed by the young master’s hand, they glean the crumbs once he is utterly and “uncommonly” full, and at his command their mother goes to make their dinner. Only when satisfied and at leisure does Mas’r George notice the children’s hunger, as one might notice a pet drooling in anticipation in a corner.

In the second instance marking Mose and Pete’s difference, Aunt Chloe’s actions inform the reader of the boundary line between her black children and Mas’r George. Like Mas’r George does later in the scene, Aunt Chloe herself uses the “Here you” address to her children: “Here you, Mose and Pete! get out de way, you niggers!”¹⁵ She scolds them for their rowdy eating and playing under the table and for not having sufficient decency to behave better in Mas’r George’s presence:

“O! go long, will ye?” said the mother, giving now and then a kick, in a kind of general way, under the table, when the movement became too obstreperous. “Can’t ye be decent when white folks comes to see ye? Stop dar ar, now, will ye? Better mind yerselves, or I’ll take ye down a button-hole lower, when Mas’r George is gone!”

What meaning was couched under this terrible threat, it is difficult to say; but certain it is that its awful indistinctness seemed to produce very little impression on the young sinners addressed.¹⁶

Aunt Chloe’s invocation of “white folks” is sufficient to signal the significance of Mas’r George’s presence and that, in the best of all worlds, against which Mose and Pete are comic evidence, his

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

whiteness ought to ensure a lesser child's best behavior.¹⁷ The problem with Mose and Pete, as Uncle Tom puts it, is that "they are so full of tickle all the while, they can't behave themselves."¹⁸ One might see in this problem the perennial problem of young boys and their scrapes, in which category one might place even young Mas'r George's visits to the slave quarters to teach Tom. In that light, Mose and Pete's mischief is merely the mischief of all little boys, prone by nature to be incorrigible and loud. The view works well with Stowe's project, which stresses the similarities between *all* families, slave and free, and the common ties of the domestic sphere.

However, beyond Stowe's considerable talent for endearing comedy and her commitment to revealing these harmonious domestic possibilities and the sympathies between white and black characters in them, we have in the two black boys and the young white master a sign of the essential differences between black and white that Stowe maintains. Mas'r George, while subject to the temptation of pridefulness, has visited Uncle Tom's cabin in the fulfillment of a Christian duty. He teaches Tom to read the Bible, encourages Chloe to allow her children to hear the word, and himself reads at meetin', inserting his own "expositions" in accordance with his mother's careful

¹⁷ The exclamation of "get out de way, you niggers!" is enough to position Aunt Chloe's children as less-than Mas'r George in a way that does not seem limited to the exigencies of the scene, e.g., Mas'r George is present in her home and she might be seen as making a show of shooing her children to make room for him, the guest of honor. However, the use of "you niggers" at the least betrays Aunt Chloe's participation in the use of "nigger" as a generic name for all black people—she is certainly not the only black person in this narrative or others, even those of black authorship, to do so; it may also be that the use of "you niggers," classes Mose and Pete with the unseen black multitude, ignorant and incorrigible as a rule. This reading might create a conversation between this scene and the later scene, discussed below, in which Topsy is revealed via the conversations of Jane and Rosa to be but one of many such "low niggers" (219). Stowe herself does not use the word in her descriptions, but further investigations might be made into the use of the word by characters both black and white to determine the weight of its usage here. In any case, Aunt Chloe is able to use it in polite company to her children, and its use is, arguably, even part of the verbal performance of respectability that attends her expert housekeeping.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

religious training of him.¹⁹ In contrast, Mose and Pete are the “young sinners” of the scene, rolling about on the ground, screaming and roaring like animals, begging scraps, and, in their ignorance, desiring to attend the religious meetin’ because it is “so curis,” not mentioning the opportunity for salvation or the religious teaching it might afford them.²⁰

This first scene in Uncle Tom’s cabin features him side by side with a young white child in the service of religion: Mas’r George reading and teaching, and Tom praying. Tom is looked up to by the other slaves as a “sort of minister among them,” and one can imagine how, if he should learn to read the Bible, his natural ministerial skills would bring an even greater blessing to his community. His lessons are going, but they are going slowly—“How easy white folks al’us does things!” exclaims Aunt Chloe when Mas’r George takes care in correcting Tom’s errors²¹—and one gets the impression that the relationship between the young master and Tom as teacher and student will be a long one. Nonetheless, Tom already preaches and excels in the spiritual art of prayer:

[H]e was looked up to with great respect, as a sort of minister among them; and the simple, hearty, sincere style of his exhortations might have edified even better educated persons. But it was in prayer that he especially excelled. Nothing could exceed the touching simplicity, the child-like earnestness, of his prayer, enriched with the language of Scripture, which seemed so entirely to have wrought itself into his being, as to have become a part of

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁰ Later in the text, the term “curis” comes up again, this time used by slaves to describe Miss Ophelia: “Miss Ophelia still persevered in her labors in the house-keeping line. It was universally agreed, among all the household, from Dinah down to the youngest urchin, that Miss Ophelia was decidedly “curis,”—a term by which a southern servant implies that his or her betters don’t exactly suit them” (217).

The word here is used to describe something that can be seen by the reader, and indeed by Stowe if her Northern Puritanical roots are any indication, as laudable — diligence in industry, worship service, the hearing of sermons, the reading of Scriptures, and prayer. That the slave calls these virtues “curis” when he or she encounters them is a sign of difference, which takes on a moral content; it is, at best, a sign of ignorance and need of (white) Christian education.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

himself, and to drop from his lips unconsciously; in the language of a pious old negro, he “prayed right up.”²²

Tom is a spiritual leader, yet his spirituality, deeply connected with the language of the Christian Bible, is unconsciously poured forth from his lips. One wonders whether Tom, a child himself by nature, would be able to give to Mose and Pete the religious education Mas’r George’s mother gave to him. Aunt Chloe it seems may not have allowed them to attend meetin’ without Mas’r George’s insistence, and it is certain that the more difficult teachings of Scripture—Mas’r George reads from the book of Revelation to a collection of avid, astounded listeners—would not be available to Tom or his children in any conscious way. In short, “The negro mind, impassioned and imaginative, always attaches itself to hymns and expressions of a vivid and pictorial nature.”²³

As a result, whether the black child can, when *not* separated from his parents, develop and grow under their teachings alone toward salvation and into an understanding of God’s word is uncertain. The close interaction between white child and black family in this early scene proposes an origin for black religiosity—by which I mean conscious knowledge and profession of the Christian faith—in the teachings of benevolent masters and the fulfillment of white responsibility, viz. to introduce their impressionable natures to the Christian message.

Enter Topsy

Topsy is an interesting case in this regard, as she like so many children whose mothers are depicted in the book, was separated from her mother at an early age. Her extreme physical blackness betrays her parentage as being every bit as dark as Aunt Chloe (“a round, black, shining

²² *Ibid.*, 27.

²³ *Ibid.*, 26.

face is hers, so glossy as to suggest the idea that she might have been washed over with white of eggs, like one of her own tea rusks”) and Uncle Tom (“of a full glossy black and a face [with] truly African features”).²⁴ But we do not get an opportunity to see her as an example of a black child brought up by her own family before being stripped away and sold. Thus Topsy is unlike Mose and Pete, whose ignorance and wildness are set in a home where Christian and domestic values are upheld; who knows but that if they were sold away from their parents they might yet retain some of the faith of their father and the care and admonitions of their mother.

When we encounter them, Mose and Pete are in the process of being trained up in the ways of their mother’s home, playing with their little sister in a corner, waiting patiently for their turn to eat, being sent out of doors to wash up in the spring when they make a mess, having their bed made up for them, and making protestations of “O mother, we don’t wanter” when told to go to bed.²⁵ They call Aunt Chloe by her name, “mother”; they both obey and tease her, and they share (amusingly conflicting) memories of events that took place in her domestic sphere:

“Mother’s bar’ls is like dat ar widder’s, Mas’r George was reading ‘bout, in de good book,—dey never fails,” said Mose, aside to Pete.

“I sure one on ‘em caved in last week,” said Pete, “and let ‘em all down in de middle of de singin’; dat ar was failin’, warnt it?”²⁶

Significantly, Mose and Pete’s use of “the good book” is in conversation with the experiences of the domestic—the “widder’s [bar’ls]” become “Mother’s bar’ls,” which are readily available as references. The impression is of a domestic life shot through with religious teaching; even the boys

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

own names have Scriptural significance.²⁷ Being raised by a loving and attentive Aunt Chloe and devout Uncle Tom gives Mose and Pete an advantage over many orphaned slave children. Notably, it seems white children do not all require the same quality of domestic attention and supplementation in order to be pious. Eva is the main example of this irony: having been brought up by an inattentive and self-absorbed mother and a father who cannot set an example for her in faith, she nevertheless becomes the devout vehicle for the uplifting and further Scriptural education of Uncle Tom and the dramatic and seemingly impossible conversion of Topsy.

In sad contrast to Uncle Tom's sons, Topsy has no memory *at all* of her mother. She is so far divorced from anything like a family/domestic sphere that she believes her origins to be different than other humans':

"Don't know how old you are? Didn't anybody ever tell you? Who was your mother?"

"Never had none!" said the child, with another grin.

"Never had any mother? What do you mean? Where were you born?"

"Never was born!" persisted Topsy, with another grin, that looked so goblin-like, that, if Miss Ophelia had been at all nervous, she might have fancied that she had got hold of some sooty gnome from the land of Diablerie; but Miss Ophelia was not nervous, but plain and business-like, and she said, with some sternness,

"You mustn't answer me in that way, child; I'm not playing with you. Tell me where you were born, and who your father and mother were."

"Never was born," reiterated the creature, more emphatically; "never had no father nor mother, nor nothin'. I was raised by a speculator, with lots of others. Old Aunt Sue used to take care on us."

The child was evidently sincere; and Jane, breaking into a short laugh, said,

"Laws, Missis, there's heaps of 'em. Speculators buys 'em up cheap, when they's little, and gets 'em raised for market."²⁸

²⁷ The fact that the biblical names "Moses" and "Peter" are shortened to "Mose" and "Pete" is perhaps not done merely to enhance the casual, warm feel of the slaves' household. The choice might also be read as mirroring the earthy, partial, though not insincere way in which they receive religious training.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 220-221.

Topsy insists that she was never born; rather, she was *raised* for market, like any other kind of livestock, and cared for by a general dam, Aunt Sue. Aunt Sue Topsy remembers, but it seems from the dialogue that follows that this Aunt Sue did nothing to teach the children about God, and presumably there was nothing of the kind of exposure to religious feeling or example that a camp meetin' might have provided, even as an entertaining diversion as in Mose and Pete's case. Given the argument for the innate religiosity of black peoples, it is curious that this Aunt Sue who raised Topsy did nothing even by example to acquaint the many children under her care with even the most basic of pietistic acts, e.g., prayer, or the singing of spirituals.

One possible explanation is that Aunt Sue was religious, but not Christian. Both Stowe's descriptions of Topsy's uncanny skills and appearance, and her reflections in the *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* on the natural (religious) susceptibility of the peoples of Africa, for whom magic was not a thing of the past, go to support this idea. Moreover, in this line, we would have in Aunt Sue a possible source for Topsy's exposure to the kind of "wild, grotesque," "unmeaning songs, common among the slaves."²⁹ Another possibility is that Aunt Sue did work to teach the children Christian faith and piety, but that Topsy, being singularly incorrigible, could not or would not benefit from her labors. This view resonates with Stowe's characterization of Topsy in the superlative—"one of the blackest of her race"—as well as with her more charitable descriptions of light-skinned female slaves throughout the book, which further set Topsy apart. The question in that case is whether Topsy's exceptionality is due to her being the only character of her hue, gender, and station that Stowe introduces, or if she is exceptional *within* the group she occupies.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3, 157.

Seeing Miss Ophelia's bewilderment at Topsy's account of her own history, Jane laughs, assuring her that Topsy is one of many "heaps of 'em . . . raised for market." Given the commonness of a black child finding herself in Topsy's condition, the potential for Topsy to act as a stand-in for a type—the (forcefully) abandoned, neglected black slave child—is great. Moreover, the description of Topsy that Stowe gives us comes after Jane's placement of her as one of a multitude of cheap slave children for sale, a good number of whom, as we shall see later, are already in residence at the St. Clare's.³⁰ Thus, while Topsy is surely among the dark-skinned of those motherless children, she is not the only one. I do not wish to suggest that Stowe does not allow for differences in individuals despite that they share circumstances and body type—though in the world of the novel, appearance is a very strong indicator of behavior and spiritual state/potential. Topsy is exceptional in that she is Topsy: she responds to the degradations of her environment and to the challenges of conversion in her own way; but her distinctiveness, I would argue, is only the distinctiveness each character enjoys *within* the confines of their particular type. Further, Topsy's distinctiveness extends to her situation at the end of the novel, fully converted and ready for mission; she is only one of the countless children raised like her, each waiting for their own Miss Ophelia and Eva to help them on the way to God and righteousness.

It is highly significant that Topsy's unorthodox adoption into a material and spiritual family is solely a product of white interest in her betterment. Topsy is raised without a mother and father, but is nevertheless ripe for conversion via white intervention. The reverse of this situation—that of the (Christian) black family sans white intervention and oversight—is not one envisioned by Stowe. Even when the black domestic sphere is in its ideal state, as with Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe and the

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.

two boys Mose and Pete, it is not sufficient without the educating and involvement of white benefactors. Mas'r George, Uncle Tom's and thus Mose and Pete's benefactor, is the necessary white actor twice mirrored in Topsy's case: first, by a Speculator who is only looking to make money off the sale of the same children whose spiritual education, not profit from their young bodies, ought to be his interest, and second, by Miss Ophelia and little Eva, who put aside, particularly in the case of Miss Ophelia, their revulsion in order to give Christian love and teaching to Topsy. The missing black domestic unit is lamentable, but it is not integral to black children's salvation.

Once Topsy's knowledge of her parentage is clearly exhausted, Miss Ophelia leaves the question of Topsy's birth behind in favor of questions about God:

"Have you ever heard anything about God, Topsy?"
The child looked bewildered, but grinned as usual.
"Do you know who made you?"
"Nobody as I knows on," said the child, with a short laugh.
The idea appeared to amuse her considerably; for her eyes twinkled, and she added,
"I spect I grow'd. Don't think nobody never made me."³¹

Topsy's responses are both startling and fun; Stowe's descriptions of her expressions and her quick responses to Miss Ophelia's bewildering questions to her betray a spirit both ignorant and seemingly indomitable. St. Clare, who bought Topsy both to rescue her from further abuse and to play a practical joke on his righteous Yankee sister, calls Topsy's mind "virgin soil," and encourages Miss Ophelia to "put in your own ideas,—you won't find many to pull up."³² But change, we shall soon discover, is not a one-way street with Topsy at the receiving end. Miss Ophelia too is altered

³¹ *Ibid.*, 221.

³² *Ibid.*

by the encounter with the child, whose spirit and cunning disrupt the order of her life, like a “kind of chronic plague.”³³

Topsy, like Mose and Pete, is ignorant of the significance of Christian religious expression, but in Topsy’s case the trouble is far more pronounced—she cannot answer when asked about God, the word itself bewilders her, though it does not encroach on her signature diabolic grin. Mose and Pete display a number of animalistic traits, but they do not, unlike Topsy in Stowe’s descriptions, call to mind anything beyond the natural realm. For all their roaring and capering, and their “woolly heads,” Mose and Pete are still a pair of “boys.” In contrast, Topsy does more than exhibit animal-like traits, which, as in Mose and Pete’s case might be explained away by their having been born into slavery and unschooled ignorance. Stowe describes Topsy using not only the language of the “creature” but also the language of the supernatural and of the aberrant:

She was one of the blackest of her race; and her round, shining eyes, glittering as glass beads, moved with quick and restless glances over everything in the room. Her mouth, half open with astonishment at the wonders of the new Mas’r’s parlor, displayed a white and brilliant set of teeth. Her woolly hair was braided in sundry little tails, which stuck out in every direction. The expression on her face was an odd mixture of shrewdness and cunning, over which was oddly drawn, like a kind of veil, an expression of the most doleful gravity and solemnity. She was dressed in a single, filthy, ragged garment, made of bagging; and stood with her hands demurely folded before her. Altogether, there was something odd and goblin-like about her appearance,—something, as Miss Ophelia afterwards said, “so heathenish,” as to inspire that good lady with utter dismay; and, turning to St. Clare, she said,

“Augustine, what in the world have you brought that thing here for?”³⁴

Topsy’s dark black color, her eyes like “glass beads,” her bright grin, and her head of “woolly” tails, combined with her “ragged garment” and the shrewd and cunning face, which the deceitful veil of “gravity and solemnity” cannot quite conceal, are not mapped onto an animal at first. Stowe uses

³³ *Ibid.*, 230.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 217-218.

the word “odd” several times in describing the girl, here and elsewhere; she is not merely a dog, though St. Clare whistles at her like she is one. She is “goblin-like,” an imp and a heathen. Topsy does not know her origins, suspecting that she must have just grown up out of the ground, but Stowe gives the reader cues to an origin more sinister. Only Miss Ophelia’s steadiness and plainness prevent her from seeing in Topsy “some sooty gnome from the land of Diablerie,” but the reader is given the option, arguably the only option for visualizing the child, who, even after many ministrations is only said to look “more Christian-like than she did.”³⁵

Topsy’s appearance is thus put on a sliding scale between her “heathenish” looks when she first arrived at the St. Clare plantation and some degree closer to “Christian-like.” In order to get Topsy even this small space toward respectability, she must first pass “the first toilet of a neglected, abused child.”³⁶ She is stripped, scrubbed, shorn, and clothed in a white dress. The details of Topsy’s toilet Stowe keeps from our “polite ears,” but we get an idea of the child’s condition by means of Miss Ophelia’s reaction: “She went through all the disgusting details with heroic thoroughness, though, it must be confessed, with no very gracious air,—for endurance was the utmost to which her principles could bring her.”³⁷ Using the story of Topsy’s outer transformation, one may use the measure of Topsy’s improvement to make a basic thematic connection: That which is heathenish is in Topsy’s case also dirty and disgusting; when Topsy is cleaned she is moved closer to that which is Christian-like. But in Topsy’s case, the problem is more than skin deep—though her skin retains permanent marks of her abuse and her hair must be chopped away wholesale. Even after Miss Ophelia’s labors, Topsy, scrubbed and covered by a whole piece of clothing, still has the appearance

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

of a goblin—it is her uncanny grin and her wayward behavior that continue to link her with the unchristian, with wickedness and witchcraft, for those around her. But Topsy is not said to be so “full of tickle” and fun that she cannot behave. Rather, her misbehavior is understood, even by her, in spiritual and absolute terms.

In a particularly moving exhibition of this problem, Topsy, having stolen a pair of gloves and a ribbon from Miss Ophelia is caught red-handed:

“Now, Topsy,” said Miss Ophelia, “if you’ll confess all about it, I won’t whip you this time.” Thus adjured, Topsy confessed to the ribbon and gloves, with woful [*sic*] protestations of penitence.

“Well, now, tell me. I know you must have taken other things since you have been in the house, for I let you run about all day yesterday. Now, tell me if you took anything, and I shan’t whip you.”

“Laws, Missis! I took Miss Eva’s red thing she wars on her neck.”

“You did, you naughty child!—Well, what else?”

“I took Rosa’s yer-rings,—them red ones.”

“Go bring them to me this minute, both of ‘em.”

“Laws, Missis! I can’t,—they’s burnt up!”

Topsy, with loud protestations, and tears, and groans, declared that she *could* not. “They’s burnt up,—they was.”

“What did you burn ‘em up for?” said Miss Ophelia.

“Cause I’s wicked,—I is. I’s mighty wicked, any how. I can’t help it.”³⁸

When Miss Ophelia discovers that the child had, in fact, not taken Rosa’s earrings or Eva’s necklace she is bewildered and despairs of teaching Topsy good behavior. When she questions the child, Topsy replies, wiping her eyes, “Why Missis said I must ‘fess; and I couldn’t think of nothin’ else to ‘fess.”³⁹ Topsy’s attempts to do right end up muddled both by her own cunning and by other’s (and her own) perception of her as wicked by nature. It worth noting that when describing Topsy’s protests, Stowe does not use the same pattern of language as she does with other characters of the novel. Topsy does not cry truly—e.g., in this scene, her tears are employed to cover the lie she is in

³⁸ Ibid., 224.

³⁹ Ibid.

the process of telling Miss Ophelia; once the truth is out, rather than being said to wipe her tears, she is described as “rubbing her eyes.”⁴⁰

As we shall see later, the interaction with Miss Eva alone has the power to touch Topsy enough for tears, and the possibility for those tears is Eva’s love, which facilitates the move toward conversion. Prior to conversion, however, little black Topsy, even in Eva’s presence, gives us only the “sparkle of something like a tear . . . followed by the short laugh and habitual grin.”⁴¹ Until little white Eva begins working on her, the wicked grin, the heathen state, the goblin-like appearance, and easy lies and cunning mischief are Topsy’s lot. Moreover, it is hard not to unite these characteristics to Topsy’s physiological characteristics, especially her deep blackness, her “glittering” eyes and grin, traits that occur naturally, and yet signal the supernatural dark side for those beholding them.

These Little Plagues

Interestingly, in spite of her singularity of type in the novel, which St. Clare discloses as “rather a funny specimen in the Jim Crow line,” Topsy is apparently not the only “thing” of this type Miss Ophelia has encountered in the St. Clare household: “Your house is so full of these little plagues, now,” she tells her cousin,

“that a body can’t set down their foot without treading on ‘em. I get up in the morning, and find one asleep behind the door, and see one black head poking out from under the table,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* The use of “rubbing her eyes” instead of “drying her tears” or a similarly sympathetic formulation calls attention to the suspect nature of Topsy’s tears. Beside the depths of sensitive feeling and thought Stowe attributes to those around Topsy, in particular little Miss Eva, Topsy’s tears appear untoward and even crass.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

one lying on the door-mat,—and they are mopping and moving and grinning between all the railings, and tumbling over the kitchen floor!”⁴²

Topsy is special in that she is a special gift to Miss Ophelia, meant to test her Christian words with a practical opportunity to do “a real missionary work,” but she is one of many such children, raised as she was by speculators for market.⁴³ Topsy herself is unique in the narrative, although it would seem that to Stowe’s mind, she is one of many of her type. Moreover, in describing her song and dance, Stowe provides a few normative connections to help us better envision the scene. She writes,

The black, glassy eyes glittered with a kind of wicked drollery, and the thing struck up, in a clear shrill voice, an odd negro melody, to which she kept time with her hands and feet, spinning round, clapping her hands, knocking her knees together, in a wild, fantastic sort of time, and producing in her throat all those odd guttural sounds which distinguish the native music of her race; and finally, turning a summerset or two, and giving a prolonged closing note, as odd and unearthly as that of a steam-whistle, she came suddenly down on the carpet, and stood with her hands folded, and a most sanctimonious expression of meekness and solemnity over her face, only broken by the cunning glances which she shot askance from the corners of her eyes.⁴⁴

In this passage, Topsy is both the “thing,” wickedly droll, with a voice “odd and unearthly,” and the inheritor of her race’s “native music” and its trademark “guttural sounds.” Topsy is “odd,” but, notably, so is the “negro music” she knows. As we saw above in speculating about Aunt Sue’s role in her training, Christian or otherwise, it is significant that Topsy should have such a memory for this native song and dance and no memory of God or of being told about how she was born and then came to be without a mother.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 218.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

Stowe's essentialist understanding of the races is noticeable in moments like these — Topsy, as empty of ideas as virgin soil, is fully capable of producing the odd and unearthly sounds and movements for which her race is known. Stowe's essentialist vision of the negro race fits nicely with that of scholars like Alexander Kinmont, whose writings and lectures would have been available to her:

Kinmont did not accept the notion that black constituted a lower order of beings. . . . Negroes, even in their present unfulfilled state, possessed some very desirable traits sadly lacking in Caucasians—"light-heartedness," a "natural talent for music" and, above all, "willingness to *serve*, the most beautiful trait of humanity."⁴⁵

On Fredrickson's account, Kinmont, like Stowe, viewed blacks and whites as distinct races within a single species—humanity—each having its own role to play in God's divine plan for the whole. Moreover, the interaction of the races, albeit brought about by the deplorable slave economy, was necessary to bring Christian salvation to the African, whose natural impressionability made him the best suited of all races to fulfill the demands of the Christian gospel.

In his discussion of Stowe's depiction of black religion, historian Curtis Evans explores the ways in which the romantic racialism of Stowe and others allowed them to "combin[e] humanitarian sympathies with strongly held beliefs about permanent racial differences."⁴⁶ These permanent differences between races also became the means of revealing the potentiality of the African and of his contribution to American society. In Stowe's case, what was identified as the "innate religiosity" of blacks allowed her to paint a picture of a decidedly religio-spiritual

⁴⁵ George M. Fredrickson, "Uncle Tom and the Anglo-Saxons: Romantic Racialism in the North," *The Black Image in the White Mind: the Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Harper & Row, 1971) [e-book; Ann Arbor: MPublishing, University of Michigan Library; accessed 17 Jun 2013], 105.

⁴⁶ Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 38.

contribution to the nation, with black slaves as the exemplars of Christian faith, piety, and moral fortitude:

To be sure, Stowe did not cease using blacks as religious exemplars to shame literate whites about the alleged patience, meekness, and Christian gentleness that a despised and lowly African people had been capable of demonstrating under great suffering. . . . We may sum up the central features of the naturally religious slave as imagined by Stowe and other romantic racialists as follows: docility, receptiveness to the divine, unquestioning faith, and an intuitive sense of the transcendent. The creation of this religious temperament served several functions. It evoked sympathy; it was presented as a moral alternative to the cultivated, domineering, and refined Anglo-Saxon's alleged racial temperament; and it suggested that only in Africa could a Negro religious temperament truly flourish.⁴⁷

In light of the optimistic romantic racialist views Stowe's novel displays, Topsy presents us with an interpretive problem. Although one can argue that Topsy serves a religious/moral function in the novel—in particular as providing an avenue for Miss Ophelia to do her Christian duty and as an object of little Eva's love that proves its Christ-like blindness—she does not function in the same way that Uncle Tom does. Tom is, as St. Clare wryly puts it in response to Haley's sales pitch: "All the moral and Christian virtues bound in black morocco, complete!"⁴⁸ St. Clare utters the words mockingly, with a mind to the price he will be asked to pay for "*this* kind of pious"; yet, by this point in the narrative, the reader has had many proofs of Tom's piety and self-sacrificial faith. Topsy, on the other hand, disappears from the text before we can see her reach her spiritual potential. Although at the book's end Stowe does give us a brief update on her development into a missionary in Africa, we are deprived of an intimate vision of Topsy as Tom's female counterpart.⁴⁹ As a result, one can only speculate about the changes in her character and appearance based upon Stowe's brief final update: "We have heard that the same activity and ingenuity which, when a child, made her so

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 39, 41.

⁴⁸ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 135.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 396.

multiform and restless in her developments, is now employed, in a safer and wholesomer manner, in teaching the children of her own country."⁵⁰ Topsy is finally rehabilitated in Vermont to become the vehicle of the Christian message as a result of Miss Ophelia's having "done her duty," but compared with her character's earlier vibrancy, the Topsy of the summary paragraph she occupies in the book's last pages is a far fainter presence than her very vocal younger incarnation.⁵¹

Granted, it is Tom's religious ecstasies and martyrdom that comprise the book's central spiritual focus; moreover, Topsy's role as a comedic player working to enable and enliven the heavy debates sparked by her presence on the St. Clare plantation is a central function of her character, the more serious conforming spiritual themes having already been already covered by little Eva and Uncle Tom. It makes reasonable sense, then, that the completion of Topsy's spiritual formation would be of less importance to Stowe in the context of the full narrative than was her condition as the ignorant and vivacious abused slave at the start of that process. However, its omission no doubt contributes to the problem of fleshing out in the imagination a fully grown, spiritually realized and authoritative dark-skinned black woman character based on scenes from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or even from the sketches provided in the *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which, like those in the novel, tend to feature fair-skinned women. This passage from the *Key* gives a fair example of Stowe's

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ When the novel was adapted for the stage, Topsy's final transformation was not featured—Topsy the imp was often placed into extra scenes specially added for the stage or screen. While some have seen these added moments as signs of Topsy's allure and even as activations of her power as a role model, others have seen the omission of Topsy's maturation as necessary to the success of her character on the stage—as the perennial imp and mischief maker, as the eternal, irrepressible black pickaninny. This way, Topsy is never conquered by the pious Christian tone of the story, she does not participate in the "serious-minded" aims of the others (or even those of Stowe herself), and thus she is free to remain a disruptively fun character for the audience's pleasure. See Reynolds, 248; and Sophia Cantave, "Who Gets to Create Lasting Images?" *Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, a Casebook*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 198.

concern for lighter-skinned slave women and a hint of her views on female beauty and character as given along racial lines:

From the church and from the communion-table the Christian brother and sister are taken to make up the slave-coffle. And woman, with her tenderness, her gentleness, her beauty,-- woman, to whom mixed blood of the black and the white have given graces perilous for a slave,--what is her accursed lot, in this dreadful commerce?⁵²

If Stowe's description of Topsy as a child is any indication, Topsy as a grown woman would not possess any of these perilous natural feminine graces that so worry Stowe in her exploration of the costs of the auction block. Stowe does tell us that Topsy "grew in grace," and though Topsy the woman is characterized by the same "activity and ingenuity" of her childhood days, they have been tamed and focused by her time in Vermont. However, there are no physical descriptions of Topsy as grown woman – her wild hair, her deep black skin, and her glittering eyes are not mentioned at all. Her improvements in temperament and in spiritual development are perhaps seen as sufficient to obscure or subdue the uncanny-ness or ugliness of her natural physical traits. Accordingly, the grace that Topsy gains may be understood as a product of her natural religiosity, which is the characteristic gift of her black blood. Whatever the source of Stowe's sparse last description, in the end, Topsy the woman remains far more mysterious than Topsy the child, notwithstanding the child having been described by Stowe as "odd," as the product of hell, as a plague, etc.

In her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe devotes a full section to the origins of the character of Topsy, which is dominated by a discussion of the problem of education. It is possible that one reason we do not see a more detailed projection of Topsy's transformation and future full of

⁵² Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co.; Cleveland, OH: Jewett, Proctor & Worthington; London: Low and Company, 1853), 144.

missional promise is that Stowe herself was uncertain of the possibility of successfully educating black children born under slavery's degrading power. She writes,

In conducting the education of the negro, mulatto and quadroon children, the writer has often observed this fact: — that, for a certain time, and up to a certain age, they kept equal pace with, and were often superior to, the white children with whom they were associated; but that there came a time when they became indifferent to learning and made no further progress. This was invariably at the age when they were old enough to reflect upon life, and then perceive that society had no place to offer them for which anything more would be required than the rudest and most elementary knowledge. . . . Does any one wish to know what is inscribed on the seal which keeps the great stone over the sepulchre of African mind? It is this,—which was so truly said by poor Topsy,—“NOTHING BUT A NIGGER!”

It is this, burnt into the soul by the branding-iron of cruel and unchristian scorn, that is a sorer and deeper wound than all the physical evils of slavery together.⁵³

It would seem that what Stowe calls “Miss Ophelia’s conscientious but unsuccessful effort in the education of Topsy”—this strikingly negative description persists in spite of her own neat happy ending to the Topsy/Miss Ophelia pairing in the novel—is meant to illustrate for readers the extent of the problem of educating the benighted.⁵⁴ Stowe’s introduction of tenderness in the narrative as the central part of the effort in Miss Ophelia’s case is no accident. She rejects the idea that “with brutal and degraded natures only coarse and brutal measures could avail,” and counsels Christ-like kindness and compassion as essential to the restoration of the humanity of the “degraded lower classes.”⁵⁵ Miss Ophelia learns this lesson well with Topsy, for whom severe whippings are so commonplace that their effectiveness as a disciplinary measure is greatly reduced. In desperation, Miss Ophelia shuts Topsy up in a dark closet “till she had arranged her ideas further on the

⁵³ Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 50-51.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

subject.”⁵⁶ Discussing the problem with St. Clare, Miss Ophelia wonders whatever can be done with Topsy if she can’t be managed by whipping:

“You have started a serious question,” said St. Clare; “I wish you’d answer it. What is to be done with a human being that can be governed only by the lash,—*that* fails,—it’s a very common state of things down here! . . . You have talked a great deal about our responsibilities in educating, Cousin. I really wanted you to *try* with one child, who is a specimen of thousands among us.”

“It is your system that makes such children,” said Miss Ophelia.

“I know it; but they are *made*,—they exist,—and what *is* to be done with them?”

“Well, I can’t say I thank you for the experiment. But, then, as it appears to be a duty, I shall persevere and try, and do the best I can,” said Miss Ophelia[.]⁵⁷

It is significant, I think, that in the *Key*, Stowe uses as a parallel example some “unfortunate females in some of the worst districts of New York.” These “fallen women” and Topsy need the same tender approach, and, one can easily imagine that the one who must “touch gently the shattered harp” of these “human soul[s],” must brave their disgust and natural revulsion to do so. Miss Ophelia is among those “Christian people” of whom Stowe speaks and to whom she appeals, who are called to attempt this daunting task, albeit with results unknown. Further, she understands that power for the reform of young minds lies not only with the teacher and caregiver, but also with the society that must provide opportunities for black children to have a use for the knowledge they acquire.

Although Stowe surely did not mean to suggest a practical connection between them, the association of the condition of little Topsy with New York prostitutes is troubling. The woman defiled by a life of prostitution and the dark-skinned black child are inheritors of the same scars; given the hyper-sexualization of dark-skinned black women and the objectification of nude black

⁵⁶ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 225.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 225-226.

child bodies in other representations of the period, it is possible to read deviant sexual tendencies as one of the marks of Topsy's blackness, despite her youth.

Although Stowe herself would never have made the assertion, she does bring Topsy and the prostitute together in her pleas to her readers—"we who have received so much of Jesus Christ"—to act tenderly, as Christ did in touching those "fallen and wandering."⁵⁸ At the least, the revulsion one feels in beholding and touching a little dark-skinned child is the same revulsion one feels in beholding and touching a prostitute of the "worst districts." As a by-product of the comparison, all the type traits of the prostitute—that she is (by the sale of her body for sex) defiled, degraded, unclean, belligerent—rebound onto the black child, whose innocence is belied by her sooty, diabolical appearance.

Finally, it is possible that Miss Ophelia has more to deal with in Topsy than the effects of slavery and her own revulsion to the child's blackness and goblin-like appearance. If one applies Stowe's ideas about the African temperament to Topsy, she cannot be so blank a slate as St. Clare believes her to be. In her *Key*, she explains the characteristics of the race at length, culminating in a summary of the extra-Christian, magical, native leanings that can be seen even in the belief patterns and spiritual experiences of black peoples:

Mesmerists have found that the negroes are singularly susceptible to all that class of influences which produce catalepsy, mesmeric sleep, and partial clairvoyant phenomena.

The African race, in their own climate, are believers in spells, in "fetish and obi," in the evil eye," and other singular influences, for which probably there is an origin in this peculiarity of constitution. The magicians in scriptural history were Africans; and the so-called magical arts are still practised in Egypt, and other parts of Africa, with a degree of skill and success which can only be quite different from those of the whites. Considering those distinctive traits of the race, it is no matter of surprise to find in their religious histories, which acted upon by the powerful stimulant of the Christian religion, very peculiar features. We are not surprised to find almost constantly, in the narrations of their religious histories, accounts of visions, of heavenly voices, of mysterious sympathies and

⁵⁸ Ibid.

transmissions of knowledge from heart to heart without the intervention of the senses, or what the Quakers call being “baptized into the spirit” of those who are distant.⁵⁹

Topsy’s oddness, her other-worldliness—which must be subdued straightaway, so much as it is possible, first by the application of soap, water, and scissors—can be seen as part of a family of natural tendencies of the African. Even without the practice or learning of the magic arts, to which she may have had access in Africa or via African tendencies latent in Aunt Sue or other slave acquaintances, Topsy’s body is itself a sign of this potentiality, as is her knowledge of the “negro arts” of song, dance, tumbling, etc. When she learns to read, she does so with such speed it was “as if by magic,” and when she slyly inhibited Miss Ophelia’s progress in teaching her to sew, “Her motions were almost as quick as those of a practiced conjurer.”⁶⁰ The many instances of regression to her original state—which Stowe describes at one point as Topsy “hold[ing] a perfect carnival of confusion” and about which St. Clare asks “What new witchcraft has Topsy been brewing?”—despite Miss Ophelia’s training may also be seen as a sign of some innate preference for that which is counter to (white) civilization.⁶¹

Not only Topsy’s carrying out of her daily chores, but also her Christian education is marked by (humorous) difference. Topsy’s developing theology has its own “very peculiar features,” but they are of a more fundamental sort than Tom’s. Tom’s Christianity is marked by visions, tears, and a particular physicality, it’s true, but Stowe clearly wishes the reader to grasp that, unlike Topsy, Uncle Tom possesses a knowledge of God that is superior to many of the lettered whites in the novel. He strives at length to read the Bible, but Stowe assures us quite early in the text that in

⁵⁹ Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 28.

⁶⁰ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 226.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 228, 256.

Tom's case, Scripture was a *part* of himself.⁶² Topsy, on the other hand, disrupts the narrative of Scripture as she recites it; she memorizes very well, but in remembering, Topsy applies her own understanding to the task of interpretation:

Topsy, who had stood like a black statue during this discussion, with hands decently folded, now, at a signal from Miss Ophelia, went on:

"Our first parents, being left to the freedom of their own will, fell from the state wherein they were created."

Topsy's eyes twinkled, and she looked inquiringly.

"What is it, Topsy?" said Miss Ophelia.

"Please, Missis, was dat ar state Kintuck?"

"What state, Topsy?"

"Dat state dey fell out of. I used to hear Mas'r tell how we came down from Kintuck." St. Clare laughed.

"You'll have to give her a meaning, or she'll make one," said he. "There seems to be a theory of emigration suggested here."⁶³

Topsy's is a hard case; it seems that no matter how much she learns from Miss Ophelia, she is impervious to her training—she will give the outward impression of compliance, but beneath she remains as she is. Her body is different from Tom's, most obviously in gender and age, but it would seem also in the natural imprint in Tom of a spirituality that leans Christian. Only the intervention of little Miss Eva can do anything to touch her soul.

The Child in Blackface

In her chapter on Topsy, Sarah Meer notes the danger of Topsy's incorrigibility in its political appropriation:

Despite the power Stowe invested in the ambiguities of Topsy's characterization, it was not difficult for later readers to convert Stowe's character into a sign of irrepressible black childishness, especially for proslavery propaganda. Like many blackface figures, Topsy was

⁶² *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 229.

a fantasy projection for those afflicted by bourgeois repressions, but although this role complicated her relation to race, it did not negate it.⁶⁴

Meer's analysis of Topsy's and other character's indebtedness and contribution to the minstrel tradition reveals the precarious balance between recognizable race-based humor and the sentimental pathos Stowe's novel invites. Meer provides a comparative reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with minstrel shows of the period, identifying the ways in which Stowe "draws not only on minstrel conventions of characterization but also on comic routines from the blackface tradition."⁶⁵ In her historical analysis of the genre, Meer points out that Stowe's novel was not the only work of the period to use the conventions of minstrelsy to further social justice in behalf of slaves. As the minstrel show bloomed outward from its original working class, male audiences, its content began to shift, though it kept its core tropes and routines. Meer traces the increasing respectability of the minstrel show to the 1840s and 1850s, by which time "gentlemen and even sometimes ladies were appearing in minstrel hall audiences . . . and some showmen arranged promotions especially directed at women and children."⁶⁶ The history of blackface music too was broader than the minstrel shows themselves, and was not only used in the service of comedy routines. Meer identifies stylistic and melodic reiterations of blackface music in antislavery music: "Throughout the 1840s and 1850s abolitionists themselves frequently put antislavery lyrics to minstrel show tunes. . . . and antislavery collections appeared with what Sam Dennison calls 'parodies, copies, and flagrant borrowings from the minstrel repertoire.'"⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy & Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens; London: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 40-41.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Stowe's book coincided with this trend of minstrelsy toward respectability, and although Stowe herself likely never attended a minstrel show (though she did attend a showing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which included blackface performances and song and dance routines), the influence of minstrelsy on the novel is clear, perhaps most conspicuously in the figure of Topsy, who was a major hit in blackface once the novel reached the stage.⁶⁸ In his book on the novel's legacy, John W. Frick suggests that Stowe, having provided her readers both with a more peaceful vision of the slave plantation (St. Clare's) and a violent, extremely oppressive one (Legree's), left open space for those adapting her novel for the stage to plug Tom's story into the stock "minstrel 'fantasy' plantation" familiar on the stage.⁶⁹ Frick specifically notes the character of Topsy in these selective readings of the novel's long narrative:

[W]hile the character of Topsy may have been originally based by Stowe upon a minstrel personation and then appropriated from minstrelsy by the playwrights who adapted her work to the stage, in the hands of skilled actresses like Mrs. George Howard, she became a clear "departure from the minstrel shows' typical female types, whose ridicule depended upon their overripe aptitude or special inaptness for courtship and love."⁷⁰

Frick (via Eric Lott) identifies Topsy as a departure from the minstrel show's blackfaced female types, crediting the skill of the actresses who played her with facilitating this departure. However minstrel portrayals of Topsy have also been likened to the character "Jim Crow," who pre-exists Stowe's portrayal, and who bears similarities to Topsy. Meer identifies both her connection with Jim Crow, as his feminized image, and the deviations of Topsy's performances from that of other female blackface characters like "Lucy Long":

⁶⁸ John W. Frick, *Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Stage and Screen* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 18, 54-55.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Though the wench danced, it was probably another (“male”) performer who sang about her. Topsy, on the other hand, does her own singing, as well as dancing, somersaults, and whistling. . . . Whereas songs like “Lucy Long” presume that the signs of blackness are physically repulsive, Topsy’s function is to demonstrate the irrationality and inhumanity of such a feeling: her need for love teaches Miss Ophelia to overcome her fear of black bodies.⁷¹

The adult blackface female “wench” described here is played by adult male performers, and the content of the performance raunchy and explicit. Topsy by contrast, is a child character, like Jim Crow, but unlike Jim Crow, was eventually played by adult white actresses.

While her playmate and savior Miss Eva was first played by a white female child younger even than Stowe’s Eva—Cordelia Howard was four years old when she took the stage as Eva and retired from the role at age thirteen⁷²—Topsy was typically portrayed by an adult white actress in blackface. The heretofore-unusual role of Topsy—a dark-skinned black female child—posed problems for casting in the 1852 Troy Museum production of the play:

Offered the opportunity to play Topsy, Germon’s wife, like her husband, refused the role, citing the fact that no woman had ever blacked up for the stage; but, unlike her husband, she remained steadfast in her decision, ultimately playing the light-skinned slaves, Cassy and Eliza. Lacking another actress to play Topsy, Aiken and Howard considered rewriting the part for a boy; but fortunately . . . Caddy Howard, in addition to playing Chloe (in padding and a grey wig), volunteered to impersonate the irrepressible Topsy. Immediately, her performance became a tour-de-force representation—one that she continued until her retirement from the theatre 35 years after her debut in the role.⁷³

One can only imagine the contrast between Eva and Topsy in their scenes together on the Troy stage; one a middle-aged white woman in blackface, delivering a show-stopping comedic portrayal of the little black girl, the other a small white female child playing a character her own age, capturing the hearts of the audience and bringing them to tears.

⁷¹ Meer, 37.

⁷² Frick, 39.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 43.

In both Meer's and Frick's texts one can see the ways in which Stowe's work lends itself to its afterlife in the minstrel show; her characters are her own, but they draw heavily on the blackface tradition, and it is likely the strong connection with pre-existing forms that allowed the novel its rapid entry into the popular cultural arena of black representations. Meer's example of the insertion of antislavery lyrics into blackface minstrel songs is a helpful comparison to the hybrid nature of Stowe's novel; though she changes the usual aim of the tropes of minstrelsy, the form and its (black) types cannot ever be fully stripped of their representative power, which is precisely what makes them so accessible to audiences. Moreover, the comparative lack of narrated interpretive guidance around Stowe's scenes drawn more heavily from the comic blackface tradition serves to leave them open for the readers'/audiences' interpretations of them⁷⁴:

[I]f, like a blackface show, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could be read with multiple and even competing sympathies, it could also be read as straightforward racial portraiture. . . . [N]ineteenth-century celebrations of minstrelsy often claimed it was derived from specific black musicians and dancers. . . . Such assertions distracted from the facts that historians have since emphasized: that many early minstrels and their music had white and Northern origins, that minstrelsy was "shaped by white expectations and desires and not by black realities," and that white working-class rivalry lay behind blackface, making stage blacks the objects both of envy and of contempt. . . . Like the minstrel show spectators who turned Jim Crow into a "representative of the negro," some contemporaries took Stowe's characters to be the definitive *literary* representations.⁷⁵

Although we do not have firsthand evidence of Stowe's acceptance of Topsy as portrayed by middle-aged actresses in blackface as "true to life," the testimony of Francis Underwood, who accompanied a reluctant Stowe to a showing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at Boston's National Theatre describes her reaction to Mrs. Howard's portrayal of Topsy thusly:

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

I never saw such delight upon a human face as she displayed when she first comprehended the full power of Mrs. Howard's *Topsy*. She scarcely spoke during the evening; but her expression was eloquent—smiles and tears succeeding each other through the whole.⁷⁶

Given Stowe's aims to present the truth of slavery in her novel and her *Key*, it is possible to read in this testimony the likelihood of Stowe's acceptance of the character Topsy and her minstrel roots, fleshed out on the Boston stage, as true to life.

Child Angels and Demons

I have compared Topsy with Mose and Pete, Tom's dark-skinned children, but she is also easily paired with Harry, the young son of George and Eliza Harris, a light-skinned slave boy who is the darling of his master and who at the beginning of the novel performs a routine much like the one St. Clare demands of Topsy when she first arrives. Harry, "a small quadroon boy," is called "Jim Crow" by his master and the slave-trader with him, and is paid with bits of orange for his performances:

"Now, Jim, show these gentlemen how you can dance and sing." The boy commenced one of those wild, grotesque songs common among the negroes, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body, all in perfect time to the music.⁷⁷

Harry, like Topsy performs those "wild, grotesque songs common among the negroes" with energetic dancing, but unlike Topsy's, Harry's appearance is never compared with the other-worldly. When Harry performs imitations of "old Uncle Cudjoe" and "old Elder Robbins" for Mr. Shelby and Mr. Haley, he is putting on their likenesses, and the humor is drawn both from the

⁷⁶ Quote taken from Frick, 55.

⁷⁷ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 3.

accuracy of his portrayals and from the incongruity of his slight, fair child's body assuming the necessary "appearance of deformity and distortion."⁷⁸

Although Harry is Jim Crow, he is no goblin of Diablerie. Stowe's description of him borders on the rapturous:

There was something in his appearance remarkably beautiful and engaging. His black hair, fine as floss silk, hung in glossy curls about his round, dimpled face, while a pair of large dark eyes, full of fire and softness, looked out from beneath the rich, long lashes, as he peered curiously into the apartment. A gay robe of scarlet and yellow plaid, carefully made and neatly fitted, set off to advantage the dark and rich style of his beauty; and a certain comic air of assurance, blended with bashfulness, showed that he had been not unused to being petted and noticed by his master.⁷⁹

Gone are the dirty sack dress, the wooly hair, the blackest skin, the wicked, glittering glass bead eyes, the grin, and the shrewdness and cunning of Topsy. Though Harry too is clever, and surely likes to laugh and make others laugh, he has a "comic air of assurance," to Topsy's roving eye and unnerving grin. He is said to be "remarkably beautiful and engaging," and his dress sets off this fact to a tee; although Topsy is filthy when we first see her, she loses none of her goblin-like qualities after being scrubbed and shorn. Harry gives us the grotesque culture of the negroes, but he is not subject to the same aesthetic and interpretive handicaps as Topsy, whose physiognomy participates with her, and often in spite of her, in making meaning for others.

The child who is most easily placed together with Topsy, however, is not Harry but Eva, her companion, mistress, faithful friend, and evangelist. As such, little Eva adds weight to the description of Topsy's difference—viewed alongside the saintly white Eva, Topsy's blackness and wickedness are brought into stark relief; the contrast their relationship provides the reader a feel

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

for the gulf between Topsy and salvation/Christian goodness (i.e., obedience and compliance), as embodied by Eva.

Like Harry, Eva is described as a beautiful child, but her beauty is of an order beyond this world. When first we meet her, watched over by the “rough, sooty hands” of the furnace crew, Stowe tells us that Uncle Tom, whose spiritual senses are keen, “half believed that he saw one of the angels stepped out of his New Testament.”⁸⁰ Later, after her death, Eva visits Tom in a dream, and “as he looked, she seemed to rise from the ground; her cheeks wore a paler hue,--her eyes had a deep, divine radiance, a golden halo seemed around her head.”⁸¹ If Topsy is the earthly representative of hell (“Diablerie”), then Eva is the earthly representative of heaven. Stowe delves into the visual contrast between the two children in the scene just after Topsy has lied in order to fulfill Miss Ophelia’s command to confess her sins. Little Eva has just defended Topsy against Rosa, who recommended giving Topsy a vicious beating for her lies; as she stands looking at the black girl, Stowe pulls back to give a description of both children together:

Eva stood looking at Topsy.

There stood the two children, representatives of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brow, and prince-like movements; and her black, keen, subtle, cringing, yet acute neighbor. They stood the representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, command, education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil, and vice!⁸²

The children are the representatives of their races, indeed, and upon each race is further inscribed the transcendent categories implied by their appearances, i.e., Topsy looks like a goblin and her

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 224-225.

behavior is “naughty [and] wicked”; Eva looks like an angel, and she is literally too good, too angelic, to remain on earth.⁸³

Eva is the first to reach Topsy’s heart. Where threats and reasoning and whippings fall short, Eva’s kind words—much like the kind words Stowe recommends in her *Key*—we are told, “struck strangely on the wild, rude heart, and a sparkle of something like a tear shone in the keen, round, glittering eye.”⁸⁴ What begins as “something like a tear,” turns later into many real tears—not Topsy’s usual tears for show—at Eva’s profession of love for her:

The round, keen eyes of the black child were overcast with tears;--large, bright drops rolled heavily down, one by one, and fell on the little white hand. Yes, in that moment, a ray of real belief, a ray of heavenly love, had penetrated the darkness of her heathen soul! She laid her head down between her knees, and wept and sobbed,--while the beautiful child, bending over her, looked like the picture of some bright angel stooping to reclaim a sinner.

“Poor Topsy!” said Eva, “don’t you know that Jesus loves all alike? He is just as willing to love you, as me. He loves you just as I do,--only more, because he is better. He will help you to be good; and you can go to Heaven at last, and be an angel forever, just as much as if you were white. Only think of it, Topsy!—*you* can be one of those spirits bright, Uncle Tom sings about.”⁸⁵

The message that Topsy hears from Eva, and which makes her care enough to try to be good, is that Jesus has a love great enough to love a lowly dark-skinned, spirited slave. Eva is unafraid to get close to Topsy, and her Christ-like love puts Topsy’s sad declaration to the test: “Couldn’t never be nothin’ but a nigger, if I was ever so good . . . If I could be skinned, and come white, I’d try then.”⁸⁶

The lesson learned is that it takes an earthly expression of a truly divine love to reach a black child like Topsy. Little Eva emphasizes that “*you*”—i.e., even *you*—can be an angel and go to Heaven, “*just as much as if you were white.*”

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 225, 240.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

It is easy to imagine fair-skinned folks in Heaven; it is easy too for us to imagine Uncle Tom, into whose very being and body Scripture is imprinted, being attended by angels; indeed, the story's earthly angel attends him even after her death in the form of visions.⁸⁷ But seeing Topsy in the same spiritualized way is difficult, unless one envisions her as the counter-type, the imp/goblin from hell. It takes divine strength and love even to make the attempt, thus, only Eva's heavenly spirit is able to succeed in it. It is not until Eva's transformative death that Miss Ophelia gains the ability to see in Topsy a creature of God:

Miss Ophelia felt the loss; but, in her good and honest heart, it bore fruit unto everlasting life. . . . She viewed her now through the softened medium that Eva's hand had first held before her eyes, and saw in her only an immortal creature, whom God had sent to be led by her to glory and virtue.⁸⁸

Miss Ophelia needs the special help of a divine creature like Eva to hold up the glass through which she views Topsy's earthly body in order to allow her to see her as a creature with an immortal soul. Notably, Miss Ophelia is seeing *through* Topsy's outer form to the soul within her. Topsy's immortal soul is seen *in spite* of her body's form, which works against the possibility of being seen, of being loved.

It is as though Miss Ophelia is learning to see behind the Dark Mask that obscures Topsy's soul from view—however, her now revised gaze is complicit in the creation of another equally dark iteration of the Mask for Topsy: that of charge, responsibility, and measure of Miss Ophelia's faith and goodness. In this way, the Dark Mask continues to obscure Topsy's personhood, as she becomes a vehicle for white sanctification. As Stowe puts it, Topsy was sent by God to Miss Ophelia to be led by her to glory and virtue. Moreover, any failures in bringing Topsy or any other of "these little

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 280.

plagues” successfully to the heights of Christian salvation and as near as possible to its aesthetic expression as their dark bodies will allow will not reflect badly on white piety. The white benefactress will be safeguarded against any tarnishing of her own identity by anti-black prejudice and by the title “experiment,” which colors the whole endeavor.

The Spectre of the Pickaninny

That for contemporary audiences Stowe’s Topsy, in all her “drollery, grimace, and mimicry . . . dancing, tumbling, climbing, singing, whistling, [and] imitating every sound that hit her fancy,” was a believable representation of a black child is not surprising.⁸⁹ Minstrel shows and heavily stereotyped representations of black bodies, black culture, and black dialects now considered exaggerated and appalling were then reliable and authoritative characterizations of black people. Of Stowe’s characters, Sarah Meer has suggested that Tom alone is without a blackface minstrel counterpart,⁹⁰ a significant observation given the novel’s claim to contain true-to-life representations of slaves.

We have seen Topsy as compared with the blackface character of Jim Crow, whose antics she mirrors in female form, but she is also, by Stowe’s assertion, a true-to-life example of a neglected dark-skinned slave child. Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes devotes a chapter to Topsy as pickaninny in her book *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. She writes,

All in all it is difficult, though not impossible, to find public images of Black children other than the pickaninny until the mid-1960s. However, for at least 100 years, U.S. Society

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁹⁰ Sarah Meer, “Topsy and the End Man,” *Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a Casebook*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 139.

suffered platoons of plucky little pickaninnies as the dominant image of Black children. . . . Topsy became the first famous pickaninny.⁹¹

The pickaninny is given a name and fame in *Topsy*, but the type predates and grounds Stowe's depiction. Townes' analysis gives a more sinister bent to Stowe's use of the pickaninny type in her narrative. One of the functions of the imagined type is to "allow . . . many White folks to rest easier in the (mis)belief that Black parents were inherently indifferent to their children's welfare."⁹² Stowe's call to progressive minded white people (and more specifically white women) to take up their Christian duty and educate the benighted black children of slaves is indicative of a belief in the insufficiency of black parentage for the rearing of good Christian children. The source of the message of salvation and the means of sanctification is white (female) instruction, which must be benevolently and self-sacrificially given. The very real plight of thousands upon thousands of pickaninnies throughout the nation weighs on Stowe's mind, and the dilation on the problem of education in the *Key* is evidence of the open question of their future, dependent as it is on white compassion. Blackness, itself a physical sign of all that is not of God, is unable to produce Christian holiness and morality unaided.

For Townes, a good deal of the trouble with *Topsy* lies in the perpetuation of her as authoritative type. In spite of Stowe's emphasis on *Topsy's* conversion, "It was the preconversion *Topsy* who captured the public imagination."⁹³ Townes directs our attention to the way that *Topsy's* indomitable (pre-conversion) spirit lent itself to more generalized characterizations of slavery:

This racist memorabilia crafted by the fantastic hegemonic imagination is the remnant of the process that makes structural evils such as slavery and racism benign through

⁹¹ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 144.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 143.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 140.

comforting artifacts that suggest that Black children prospered under the abuses of slavery.⁹⁴

The problem with Stowe's Topsy is that she walks a very fine line between being a good deal of irreverent fun and being a sign of the depraved system of which she is a product. The trouble is, everything that makes Topsy loveable and fun in her afterlife as a stock character is a product of the abuse and neglect she suffered under slavery.

Moreover, Topsy's physical repulsiveness is a constant; in fact, the fact that one (whether white or black) cannot touch her without recoiling naturally in disgust is an integral feature of her character, both before and after conversion. Without her repulsiveness, she cannot be the sign of Christian love and the expansiveness of God's vision for the world that she is for Stowe. Without the "lowly," there is no "life among the lowly." One needs the proverbial "least of these" in order to understand God's plan for the Kingdom, which will be characterized by wholesale reversals. Thus, conversion does not take away the physical (and cultural, social, and economic) markers of the "lowly"—to do so would be to frustrate the white believer's attempts to minister to and uplift those beneath her in accordance with God's will. Topsy's repulsiveness is, thus, a necessary part of her value as a theological commodity, dark instrument of the faith- and identity-building of white Christians.

Stowe's Christian vision for the future of America without the sin and scourge of slavery was clearly one that had traction with those who read it. She proposed black characters that were steeped enough in the dominant stereotypes of the day to be believable to general audiences, and modified enough by her own research to present a different possibility for black peoples' usefulness to the nation. The cost of this balance is the tightly intertwined movements of the text, at one time

⁹⁴ Ibid., 143.

typologically progressive and constrictive, which work to solve the problem of black peoples' presence in America. However, once the issue of black peoples' presence is solved by the assertion that black religiosity will be a boon to the African heathen and an example to the Saxon, the problem of (dark-skinned) blackness itself, in its (female) physical manifestation remains in the spectre of Topsy. Her words to Eva--"Couldn't never be nothin' but a nigger, if I was ever so good"—ring true; the condition of her goodness and indeed her salvation is that white eyes look upon her ugliness, her blackness, her "nigger"-ness, and love her anyhow. This love is the love of God, whose eyes are aligned with white female eyes in the text, and whose divine gaze is compassionate enough to envelop even dark-skinned heathens. The vision makes the pickaninny, encapsulated in Topsy, the fortunate object of the pious Christian white feminine gaze, which is the locus for the earthly realization of God's grace for black children.

Opposite Goodness . . .

In opening the way to white-approved goodness for darker bodies, Stowe relies heavily on the Dark Mask to make her case. If there is to be such a thing as goodness, there must be a point of comparison with its opposite; we see this need in dismaying relief in the white application of blackface. Though black actors eventually also wore blackface paint in performance, they were the only ones whose perceived moral predicament did not change by the act of removing it. Simon Legree does not make Eva an impossibility. Stowe is seeking, as was Mather, for an avenue of making the moral interpretive act work the other way, toward, to put it deceptively crudely, whiteface. Uncle Tom is the messiah for just such a moment. Blacks *can* have access to divine goodness, Stowe's pages scream, and she invites, in this archetypal way, a revised content and interpretation for the Dark Mask. The Dark Mask thus only "appears evil," but should one have the

benefit, as did Miss Ophelia, of a “softened medium” with which to look upon it, through which one can see the spiritual gifting and/or potential to the same, which is unique to the African.

It is on this point that Reynolds’ argument about Uncle Tom as a positive role model for black people loses credibility as an antidote to anti-black prejudice and demonization. The replacement of innate demonic nature with innate religiosity does nothing to solve for the problem of the invisibility of the millions of discrete and diverse souls who wear the Dark Mask. Moreover, both of these modes serve not the building of personal identity or even the ever elusive black identity; rather, they function as an assurance that the relationship between the stereotyping of a darker other and the maintenance of a white identity firmly affiliated with moral goodness continues to thrive.

Chapter Four

Up to now we have been considering the Dark Mask in its conceptual and embodied forms, that is to say, in words and in skin. As our look at the representational work of blackface in adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* signals, the Dark Mask has also its artistic representations, which are significant in developing an understanding of the ways that the content of the Dark Mask is neither accidental nor culturally stationary. As a continuation of the brief look at Topsy in blackface, this chapter provides an opportunity to examine the work of the Dark Mask and its white counterpart: The White Mask. The reality of darker skinned bodies, coded as wild, savage, agents of chaos in need of policing, controlling, and protecting against, is the occasion for the Dark Mask's opposing representational power: a mask of whiteness that codes and interprets the behavior of fair-skinned members of society. Much like the anxious, admonitive passages of Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*, artistic representations of the White Mask serve to encapsulate desired meanings of whiteness—aligned with light, goodness, reason, and civilizing ability and chosenness—for American audiences. Like the Dark Mask, the White Mask too can be disassociated from the skin of a particular wearer, its meanings funneled into behavior (like the modern ironically applied disparaging expression, “acting white”), or, significantly more dramatically, into a literal mask, like the iconic Ku Klux white sheet hoods.

The lifting of the designated (and socially desired) qualities of whiteness from mere material representation by the body politic, which can only produce heterodox readings of whiteness, as is only human—Cotton Mather's and Harriet Beecher Stowe's projects are both written into a space not only of black threat, but also of white transgression with regards to dark

bodies (material and invisible)—provides a means of *showing* what whiteness *ought* to be, and encouraging, if not frightening and thrilling, fair-skinned Americans into adherence to the social, political, and behavioral demands of whiteness. The representational means of this exhortative project is the solidification of the White Mask, that there may be a counter representation around which to rally and behind which to battle the vilified bodies under the Dark Mask. The White Mask represents a pathological insistence on moral difference— “I am not black, because I am white,” which can easily be distilled to “I cannot be bad, I am not black.”

I have chosen to examine the generation of the White Mask in two works in particular, first, Thomas Dixon’s 1905 novel *The Clansman*, the second book of Dixon’s Reconstruction Trilogy, written in response to the outrageous claims about the South and slavery in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a staged version of which incensed Dixon in 1901 and drove him to write no fewer than three books in response, “quite consciously to supplant the images in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with impressions of his own.”¹

The second work, D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, is descended directly from Dixon’s popular *The Clansman*, and introduces a new medium and new representational powers to our consideration of both the Dark Mask and its counter-balancing White Mask. First released in 1915, Griffith’s masterpiece has been the object of much admiration and revilement. As Paul McEwan puts it, “*The Birth of a Nation* is, in the simplest terms, one of our culture’s greatest artistic achievements and one of its most racist artefacts.”²

The aim of this chapter is to sketch the Dark Mask as it complements the White Mask, at a moment in our nation’s history in which the black slave was in the process of being replaced by the

¹ Stokes, 41.

² McEwan, 8.

black criminal. Goodness was not out of the representational reach of black Americans, but it the goodness of the darker bodied, imagined lesser blooded, American is adjudicated based upon whether or not that darker body is in or out of its designated place. The source of the horror and terror experienced by the protagonists of Dixon's *Clansman* and Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* is a black populace suddenly encouraged to leave their (wisely and divinely) appointed place, and those whites in power who seek to protect this out-of-place-ness, to the terror and potential destruction of the noble South and potentially the whole white race.

As ludicrous as the authors' claims (by no means unique in the period) are, the bloody result of this evolution in hysterical claims of the kind, to white supremacy and fragility, was very real. The point of view espoused by both *The Clansman* and Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* participates, normalizes, and propels the creation and maintenance of the myth of inevitable and widespread black male rape of white female victim, "belief" in which led to the deaths of thousands of black men by lynching. In her introduction to a collection of Ida B. Wells' anti-lynching writings, Mia Bay re-voices Wells' role in presenting the first explicit printed challenges to the myth:

[S]he expanded on the accusations in her editorial, exposing the rape myth that white Southerners used to justify lynching by challenging the connection between the two. Naming specific white women, and specific cases, she documented the consensual nature of interracial liaisons for which black men had been lynched, concluding "white men lynch the offending Afro-American, not because he is a despoiler of women, but because he succumbs to the smiles of white women." She also presented evidence on the many lynchings for which rape was not even invoked as justification and underscored that Southern whites victimized black women as well as men by imposing no punishment whatsoever on white men who assaulted black women.³

³ This viewpoint represented a change in Wells' thinking on the subject. Bay recounts, "She had thought that 'although lynching was irregular and contrary to law and order,' the motives behind it were defensible—'unreasoning anger over the terrible crime of rape led to lynching . . . perhaps the brute deserved death anyhow and the mob was justified in taking his life.' But events in Memphis opened her 'eyes to what lynching really was.'" That the foremost early opponent of the lynching of black people had to undergo such a critical transition in order to see behind the Dark Mask is telling of its power, not merely to obscure, but also to damn the wearer to invisibility without the express

The disconnect between the rape myth expounded by Dixon and later Griffith and the reality of the rarity of actual confirmed commissions of rape of white women by black men during the period (lynchings were perhaps most judicially notable for their usurpation of the courts' power to determine guilt or innocence) is the space that the Dark Mask fills.

Both *The Clansman* and *The Birth of a Nation* provide many poignant moments of ventriloquism, in which the white author or the white filmmaker controls black bodies or bodies painted black in order to produce performances of blackness that justify the violent response of whites to black independence. In both iterations of Dixon's tale, the innate lawlessness and savagery of black people is assumed, so it is only natural that the genre that best describes Griffith's epic is horror or disaster film. And, as James Snead notes, "by all measures, one must call blackness, in all its shades, the dark nightmare at the center of this disaster fantasy, one which must be removed for order to be restored."⁴ This chapter is dedicated to exploring the virulent evolution of Dark Mask mythology and violent responses to it, which found the heroic White Mask, iconically worn by the Klan in Dixon and Griffith's epic, and made available to every white person viewer by means of the personal and intimate portrayal of a love story. The reappearance of the Klan shortly after the film's success is a testament to the way that white viewers self-identified with those dealing death to Gus, the supreme black savage in the film. To identify with Gus' killers is to identify with law and order, with exclusive possession of white women, and with a vision for the nation (its rebirth in 1866 now called its true *Birth*) that is for whites only at all (moral) costs.

critical work of his/her viewer. Ida B. Wells, *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader*, edited and with an introduction and notes by Mia Bay, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., general ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), xxvi, xxiv.

⁴ James Snead, *White Screens Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*, Colin MacCabe and Cornel West, eds. (New York; London: Routledge, 1994), 39-40.

The Clansman

In his introduction to the 1970 reprint of Dixon's *The Clansman*, Thomas D. Clark notes that in spite of its great popular success, then-contemporary reviewers of the novel and, in his words, "no person of critical judgment thinks of it as having artistic conception or literary craftsmanship." However, the novel's significance was not in its critical literary appeal. While some reviewers did acknowledge that Dixon's novel served "only to arouse the worst unworthy feelings in the nation at a time when harmony between North and South was most vital," Clark notes a major omission in contemporary analyses of the book: "What they did not say was that the novel opened wider a vein of racial hatred which was to poison further an age already in a social and political upheaval."⁵ Clark gives Dixon's novel (the reach and effect on public opinion of which he admits cannot be accurately gaged, except to show its strength in sales) credit for opening this vein of racial hatred and for "renew[ing] in bruising, raw fiction the old hurts and animosities suffered after the war by a generation of Southerners then disappearing."⁶ Seen in this way, Dixon's novel is a prominent participant in the work of preserving old, white supremacist anxieties.

The Clansman is Dixon's third novel and the second in the trilogy begun after his fierce reaction to viewing a production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Written after *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), which "treated the political redemption of the South from the viewpoint of white radicals," in writing *The Clansman*, as Clark describes it, Dixon "turned to the fount of the evil."⁷ "The evil," in Dixon's novel may be classified as the horrors that arise from the improper socio-political relations

⁵ Clark, introduction to *The Clansman*, v.

⁶ Clark, xv.

⁷ Clark, xv.

between the races, his characterizations of which make clear the necessity of keeping white and black safely apart and in their proper roles, of which Reconstruction had made a mockery. In summarizing Dixon's views on the dangers of race-mixing, Melvin Stokes also shows the evolution in typology between Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Dixon's trilogy, and observes the personal connection with the first Ku Klux Klan:

Increasingly obsessed, by the early twentieth century, with what he saw as the dangers of interracial relationships and the threat they supposedly posed to the future of the Anglo-Saxon race, Dixon wrote several novels set in the South that warned against such racial admixture. Deliberately, in fact, Dixon set out to create a master narrative of Southern history and race relations that would challenge and replace that associated with Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Whereas Mrs. Stowe had focused attention on the sufferings of black slaves at the hands of antebellum whites, Dixon depicted the "anguish" of Southern whites at the hands of free postwar blacks. The Ku Klux Klan (in which several members of Dixon's family had once been involved) provided the main heroes of his fiction.⁸

These anxieties about the pollution of the white race, and by means of that pollution, the failure of America's civilizing project, are everywhere in *The Clansman* portrayed, perhaps nowhere more clearly than in his characterizations of his white and black protagonists, who would be easily seen as angels and demons, humans and "brute" animals. In Clark's words, "Every [white] Southerner who had worn the Confederate gray was a knight wrapped in the armor of virtue, and every Southern woman was the epitome of gentility, humanitarianism, and feminine charm."⁹ We will return to this characterization again in discussing the White Mask as deployed in *The Clansman* and on screen in *The Birth of a Nation*. Of Dixon's black characters, Clark already draws the connection between aesthetic and narratological portrayal and material experience that interests us here:

There is no comedy . . . in Dixon's characterizations of the Negro. . . . He recited every scurrilous thing that had been said about the race. In one passage after another he portrayed the Negro as a sensuous brute whose every physical feature was the mark of the jungle and the untamed animal. He gave wide publicity to the images which the

⁸ Melvin Stokes, 54.

⁹ Clark, xvi.

contemporary country editors, Tillman and Vardaman, and even the Mississippi author Harris Dickson had created. Howling mobs of lynchers were doubtless placated by these same images when they attempted to rationalize their bloody acts.¹⁰

While I emphatically agree with the details of Clark's characterization of Dixon's treatment of the black characters in his novel, there is in fact comedy present in Dixon's novel (and certainly in Griffith's film) that involves dark-skinned peoples, just not a good natured or respectful comedy. For instance, in one scene, Aleck, the Camerons' drunken, illiterate and, perhaps most importantly, unfaithful ex-slave, is featured in a debate with a voting freedman over the legitimacy of the ballot he was given, which featured a dead rat on the paper:

"Is you voted to-day?" "Yessah; vote in all de boxes 'cept'n dis one. Look at dat ticket. Is dat de straight ticket?"

Aleck, who couldn't read the twelve-inch letters of his favourite bar-room sign, took the rat label and examined it critically.

"What ail it?" he asked at length. The boy pointed at the picture of the rat. "What dat rat doin', lyin' dar on his back, wid his heels cocked up in de air—'pear ter me lak a rat otter be standin' on his feet!" Aleck reexamined it carefully, and then smiled benignly on the youth. "De ignorance er dese folks. What ud yer do widout er man lak me enjued wid de sperit en de power ter splain tings?"

"You sho' got de sperits," said the boy impudently, touching a canteen.

Aleck ignored the remark and looked at the rat label smilingly.

"Ain't we er votin', ter-day, on de Constertooshun what's ter take de ballot away f'um de white folks en gib all de power ter de cullud gemmen—I axes yer dat?"

The boy stuck his thumbs under his arms and walled his eyes. "Yessah!" "Den dat means de ratification ob de Constertooshun!"

Phil laughed, followed, and watched them fold their tickets, get in line, and vote the rat labels.

The stereotypes are rabid in their display for the reader, aided by Dixon's use of near-indecipherable dialect spellings. The joke rests on the assumed ignorance of the speakers, Aleck's misplaced self-importance, and his utter unqualification for the job that he has been wrongheadedly given by those carpetbaggers in power. Phil's laughter cues the reader into the

¹⁰ Clark, xvi-xvii.

proper (white) response to such shenanigans, even though they signal, in Dixon's universe, the potential doom of the white race and the whole country. This is humor designed to work a political point—the exclusion of the Negro from citizenship is a necessary measure, for otherwise one is left with Aleck's brand of buffoonery. Even the voting young man whose English is no less broken – he pronounces Constitution "Constertooshun" after all – is able to smell a rat in the marked ballot, while Aleck uses the mystery (for a mystery it remains to him, not knowing even how to read the "letters of his favourite bar-room sign") to puff himself up comically, ultimately, intentionally or not, for the amusement of the educated white soldier looking on.

Before going further into close readings of the text, an overview of the summary of the novel and its claims to historicity may be useful.

Dixon begins with a preface that reassures the reader that, though a romance in form, the contents of *The Clansmen* are a true and faithful history:

"The Clansman" develops the true story of the "Ku Klux Klan conspiracy," which overturned the reconstruction regime. . . .

The chaos of blind passion that follows Lincoln's assassination is inconceivable to-day. The revolution produced in our government, and the bold attempt of Thaddeus Stevens to Africanise ten great state of the American Union, read now like tales from "the Arabian Nights."

I have sought to preserve in this romance both the letter and the spirit of this remarkable period. The men who enact the drama of fierce revenge into which I have woven a double love story are historical figures. I have merely changed their names without taking a liberty with any essential historic fact.¹¹

These claims to historicity are present not only in Dixon's novel but also in DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. The claim clues us in to both a quarrel over historiographical record (especially of the imaginative and affective kind produced in literature like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and to the particularity of the solution, namely, a retelling (reimagining) of history that recenters the Aryan

¹¹ Dixon, 1.

race. Dixon sees himself as righting a wrong that has been done to history; his is an historiographical exercise designed both to set the record straight and to warn against future disasters that might imperil the nation should it make any attempt at achieving equality between the races. As such, *The Clansman* is valuable for our consideration as a highly imaginative and generative text helpful in producing an understanding of the roles, appearances, and performances that are expected of Americans and “other Persons”¹² on the basis of the color their skin.

Dixon is obsessed with the old Scotch ancestry of those living in the southern states of the United States of America. He counts himself as one of their stock and uses this racial and ethnic bloodline to draw a connection between the power of blood, in this case a particular strain of European blood, to produce the kind of boldness, bravery, and unapologetic defense of ideals, to their descendants, whom he names as the first Clansmen:

[I]n the darkest hour of the life of the South, when hardwood people lay helpless amid rags and ashes under the Beacon talon of the vulture, suddenly from the mists of the mountains appeared a white cloud the size of a man's hand. It grew until its mantle of mystery enfolded the stricken earth and sky. An “Invisible Empire” had risen from the field of death and challenged the Visible to mortal combat.

How the young South, led by the reincarnated souls of the Clansman of Old Scotland, went forth under this cover and against overwhelming odds, daring exile, imprisonment, and a felon's death, and saved the life of a people, forms one of the most dramatic chapters in the history of the Aryan race.¹³

Dixon, then, is using the novel form to write a chapter in the history of the Aryan race—rewrite it, actually. It is this *rewriting* of history that has power to introduce ferocious ideologies and genealogies to the narrative, and it is this rewritten history that is expertly visualized and sensationalized in Griffith's magnum opus. It is significant that for Dixon, the history of the Aryan race is also the history and future of the United States of America. Everything turns on the purity,

¹² US Constitution, Article 1.

¹³ Dixon, 2.

safety, and moral superiority of the Aryan race, special and chosen out of all the races of the earth to rule and found a perfect society. This is why the reunion of the North and the South is so essential after the War, and this is why the welfare of former black slaves is insignificant compared to the reunion of those who alone can call one another brothers.

Dixon's novel takes place in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, and begins in Washington DC just before Lincoln's assassination, which is a major event and inciting incident in the narrative. The story turns on two couples, two sister and brother pairs, one set from the North and the other from the South, who meet one another through the kindness of Elsie Stoneman, the exceptional daughter of Austin Stoneman, a powerful legislator and leader of the House whom Dixon dubs the "Old Commoner." Stoneman, the main white villain of the book, is based upon Thaddeus Stevens, whose vision of Reconstruction Dixon calls a "bold attempt . . . to Africanise ten great states of the American Union." As we shall see, Dixon puts Stoneman side by side with Abraham Lincoln as opposites – the one dignified elder statesman full of compassion for the South, living in the White House, and the other a corrupt and corrupted politician bent on destroying the union in revenge for the ravages of the war, and living in the Black House just down the street.¹⁴

Ben Cameron, the hero of the story, and the father of the nation saving Ku Klux Klan conspiracy, falls in love with the lovely and musical Elsie Stoneman while lying in the hospital awaiting execution. When Elsie pleads with President Lincoln to spare his life, her success in saving Ben from hanging endears her to the Camerons, who accept her and her brother Phil Stoneman as family. Phil promptly falls deeply in love with Margaret Cameron, Ben's sister, creating the double

¹⁴ Dixon, 156.

love story of Dixon's introduction, with young love and marriage envisioned as the ideal unifier between whites North and South.

After Lincoln's assassination, both families travel to the South – the Camerons heading home and the Stonemans headed south as their guests since the elder Stoneman has taken ill and must go south to convalesce. They return to Piedmont to find it utterly topsy turvy, overrun by carpetbaggers, scalawags, a corrupt and corrupting Union League, insolent and lascivious Negro troops, and freed Negroes who no longer know their place and are seeking, at the League's twisted instruction, "equality" with white men. Barns are being burned, white people's homes looted, and cotton planters unable to make harvest with no laborers to tend to the picking. Dixon encapsulates his view of the state of the nation after the war in his description of the new Washington D. C.: after the descent of "the vulture army of the base, venal, unpatriotic, and corrupt, which had swept down, a black cloud, in war-time to take advantage of the misfortunes of the Nation, . . . settled in Washington and gave new tone to its life."¹⁵ This new tone is a dark tone, reminiscent of Cotton Mather's "Black Night,"¹⁶ in keeping with this "darkest hour of the life of the South, when her wounded people lay helpless amid rags and ashes under the beak and talon of the Vulture."¹⁷ These Vultures make necessary what comes next in Dixon's narrative: the rise and ride of the Ku Klux Klan in the South, the site of salvation for the nation. For Dixon, it is absolute that this "Invisible Empire" which "had risen from the field of Death and challenged the Visible to mortal combat," must arise

¹⁵ Dixon, 155.

¹⁶ *WW*, 91.

¹⁷ Dixon, 2.

from the South, the Southern states possessing the people the most fit for the task, “the reincarnated souls of the Clansmen of Old Scotland.”¹⁸

The narrative climax of *The Clansman* comes as a restatement and pathetic, graphic depiction of the brutal rape of a young, admired, and precious white girl Marion, while her mother watches, helpless, tied to the bedpost by “four black brutes,” including the iconic Gus, the ringleader. It is this event that brings about the first ride of the Klan, featured in a chapter titled “The Hunt for the Animal.”¹⁹ Gus is an animal, or worse, “an imp of perdition,”²⁰ who never should have been given the rights of a citizen (never mind that freedmen never did fully achieve them), and the next step—the rape of white women—that Dixon has been predicting the whole novel comes vividly true in the tragic death of Marion and her mother, who commit suicide rather than have their forced entry into impurity known:

It was three o’clock before Marion regained consciousness, crawled to her mother, and crouched in dumb convulsions in her arms.

“What can we do, my darling?” the mother asked at last.

“Die!—thank God, we have the strength left!”

“Yes, my love,” was the faint answer.

“No one must ever know. We will hide quickly every trace of crime. They will think we strolled to Lover’s Leap and fell over the cliff, and my name will always be sweet and clean—you understand—come, we must hurry—“

With swift hands, her blue eyes shining with a strange light, the girl removed the shreds of torn clothes, bathed, and put on the dress of spotless white she wore the night Ben Cameron kissed her and called her a heroine.²¹

Dixon is in full participation in the creation and recreation of the myth of the black rapist of white women, which is seen as the inevitable outcome of black freedom apart from white control—

¹⁸ Dixon, 2.

¹⁹ Dixon, 309.

²⁰ Dixon, 228.

²¹ Dixon, 305.

something must replace the bonds of slavery to keep this disaster from repeating itself ad infinitum in the black chaos of Reconstruction. Dixon's answer is the birth of the Ku Klux Klan, who secure justice for the dead girl and her mother, an answer to the savage animals let loose among civilized society, and in the case of white women, delicate creatures.

I will speak more about the kinship with animals ascribed to white women in discussing Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, which is at play in Dixon's novel as well. However, in the instance of the rape of white women, it is the black man who is a natural animal brute, and freedom for him is the freedom for his passions to run amok and wreak havoc on civilization via violating the mythological sanctity of white women. In the moment of describing the rape, which takes place between chapters and is immediately followed by a suicide pact between Marion and her mother, Dixon describes Gus' forced entry into the sanctity of the women's new home thusly:

Gus stepped closer, with an ugly leer, his flat nose dilated, his sinister bead-eyes wide apart gleaming ape-like, as he laughed:

"We ain't atter money!"

The girl uttered a cry, long, tremulous, heart-rending, piteous.

A single tiger-spring, and the black claws of the beast sank into the soft white throat and she was still.²²

Gus is not a human figure here by any means. He is the worst kind of threatening beast, "ape-like," beady-eyed, clawed, and patently ugly, and bent on taking something (white virginity) that can never be repaired, an abominable deed which renders the girl's life, heretofore full of promise by her own word, dreaming of the stories of old romances she'll tell her children someday, not worth the living. The girl's cry, "long, tremulous, heart-rending, piteous," is heard and answered by the ride of the Klan, which culminates in the capture of Gus, who, in a trance, recalls every word of the attack and reenacts it for the Klan's trial. In this final scene of Gus' life, Dixon's prior description

²² Dixon, 304.

comes alive with added spiritual emphasis. Now Gus' eyes are not only beady, but they are "yellow-splotched" and showing "the light of hell" plainly; his features are not only ugly, they are "sinister." Witnessing Gus reenact his crime is almost too much for the Klansmen to bear – their response is nothing like the quiet determination of the two traumatized women who go pragmatically to their death. In a descriptive move that mirrors Mather's tales of the "Good and Wise" men who are terrified by "*Sooty Devils*,"²³ Dixon tell us, "Strong men began to cry like children," and "Some of the white figures had fallen prostrate on the ground, sobbing in a frenzy of uncontrollable emotion," one crying out, "God have mercy on my people!"²⁴

What follows is a religious ritual of trial and death, enacted by the leaders of the Klan, or the Terrors, as they will later be called in the *Kloran*, written by William J. Simmons in the wake of *The Birth of a Nation* for the second coming of the "Invisible Empire,"²⁵ the first coming of which Dixon eulogizes in *The Clansman*. Gus is executed by the "Grand Turk" and his body "[flung] on the lawn of the black Lieutenant-Governor of the state" as a sign of a new order: an order that is, and will be kept by, the white knights of the Klan. It is significant that Gus' body is left wearing a military uniform. His death signifies more than the death of one guilty man, his body is a sign meant to terrorize the institutions that have given him the pretense of power. We are told that "the discovery of the Captain of the African Guards lying in his full uniform in Lynch's yard sent a thrill of terror to the triumphant leagues."²⁶ And perhaps most strikingly, the Klan's first bloody act immediately reinstates deference to white bodies in the streets. Upon reading the Klan's notice on the court-

²³ *WTW*, 90-92.

²⁴ Dixon, 323-324.

²⁵ William J. Simmons, *Kloran of the Ku Klux Klan, Illustrated Edition* (Lexington, KY: Ku Klux Press, 2017), 11.

²⁶ Dixon, 327.

house door and in “every newspaper not under Negro influence,” whites in Piedmont regain a posture that speaks of pride of rightful place:

It read as follows:

“HEADQUARTERS OF REALM NO. 4.

“DREADFUL ERA, BLACK EPOCH,

“HIDEOUS HOUR.

“GENERAL ORDER NO. 1.

“The Negro Militia now organised in this State threatens the extinction of civilisation. They have avowed their purpose to make war upon and exterminate the Ku Klux Klan, an organisation which is now the sole guardian of Society. All negroes are hereby given forty-eight hours from the publication of this notice in their respective counties to surrender their arm at the court-house door. Those who refuse must take the consequences.

“By order of the G. D. of Realm No. 4.

“By the Grand Scribe.”

The white people of Piedmont read this notice with a thrill of exultant joy. Men walked the streets with an erect bearing which said without words:

“Stand out of the way.”

For the first time since the dawn of Black Rule negroes began to yield to white men and women the right of way on the streets.²⁷

Dixon’s use in this passage of “Black Rule” corresponds with phrases of its kind, which are spread throughout the novel, for instance the use of “chaos,” “black barbarians,” “ghastly tragedy,” “this black broth,” “the minstrel farce,” “the black abyss of animalism,” “strangling civilisation by brute force,” “a cloud darker than the dust . . . the Black Plague of Reconstruction,” and “the Negro reign of terror,” among many similar examples.²⁸ Black people, once freed become an unreasoning, destabilizing horde, capable of nothing good and destined to bring down the entire nation as a civilized entity. And, as this black horde gained its power through “brute force,” in his words, force must be its answer.²⁹

²⁷ Dixon, 327-328.

²⁸ Dixon, 328, 329, 267, 184, 371, 179, 362.

²⁹ Dixon, 267.

In describing the reaction of white gentlemen to the installation of “Black Rule,” Dixon laments, together with Dr. Cameron, the paralysis and feelings of powerlessness of white men before these dark foes:

Most of them were old men, who sat in grim silence with nothing to do or say as they watched the rising black tide, their dignity, reserve, and decorum at once the wonder and the shame of the modern world.

At least they knew that the minstrel farce being enacted on that floor was a tragedy as deep and dark as was ever woven of the blood and tears of a conquered people. Beneath those loud guffaws they could hear the death rattle in the throat of their beloved State, barbarism strangling civilization by brute force.³⁰

Dixon’s narrative presses the need for the Klan so relentlessly—accentuating the dark chaos in dark bodies run amok that has descended upon the land once so orderly and free (for whites)—that even the main white villain of the novel, Austin Stoneman, realizes the necessity for salvation by its hand. we will look at Stoneman’s redemption shortly, but, as the above example shows, he is not the only white person in need of redemption by means of the Klan’s efforts. By the novel’s end, Ben Cameron, Grand Dragon of the first Klan and the savior of the South emerges victorious, his efforts having saved Stoneman’s son Phil from execution, returning Elsie’s loving favor to him but in a very different fashion, i.e., by militarized vigilante force, rather than diplomacy (which would be impossible given black enfranchisement). He stands tall, Elsie in his arms, having received news that the “enormous power of a suppressed Negro vote,” the Klan’s work, had succeeded in catapulting him and other Klan members in six states to seats in the United States Congress:

Look at our lights on the mountains! They are ablaze—range on range our signals gleam until the Fiery Cross is lost among the stars!”

“What does it mean?” she whispered. “That I am a successful revolutionist—that Civilization has been saved, and the South redeemed from shame.”³¹

³⁰ Dixon, 267.

³¹ Dixon, 374.

Blackness Depicted

Dixon's novel, which is based on historical events, and which he insists includes no embellishments save the addition of the twin love stories and the changing of names, is primarily concerned with the domestic, naturally transformative (viz. decivilizing) threat posed by the millions of freed black people to white civilization:

The chaos of blind passion that followed Lincoln's assassination is inconceivable to-day. The Revolution it produced in our Government, and the bold attempt of Thaddeus Stevens to Africanise ten great states of the American Union, read now like tales from "The Arabian Nights."³²

It is no accident that Dixon uses "The Arabian Nights" to describe the "blind passion" that he sees behind Reconstruction; it is not the reconstruction of the South, and thus the nation, that he objects to, but rather the darkening of the American citizenry and electorate. In other words, it is a time not to be believed to have been true. Writing by the time Southern Redemption and the Black Codes had begun to take damning effect, Dixon nevertheless finds it necessary to produce instructive works that show affectively and through the horror/adventure genre, the dangers of race-mixing, and the ongoing threat to the nation that black people yet present, should they move beyond their designated proper place in the social order.

Dixon refers to the period of black Reconstruction as "the darkest hour of the life of the South," and we need not, in this case, attempt to make the distinction between conceptual and material meanings, given the fact that his book teems with scenes of horror at the sight of ubiquitous dark bodies in the halls of power, loose on the streets, ironically, terrifyingly, and disgracefully in military uniform, and in previously whites-only spaces interacting with white

³² Dixon, 1.

people as “equals.” That Dixon calls the process of Reconstruction an attempt to “Africanise” is telling in its absoluteness – an inevitable shift in the very structures of society must follow any amount of race mixing, and certainly any enjoyment of political power by a corrupted and corrupting race.

That the Civil War was fought to displace Southern patriarchy and replace it with freedom for the Negro is for Dixon a deeply disturbing tragedy. His writing exhibits the common nostalgia for days gone by in which slavery kept black people in their ideal and natural social position, maintaining white power and wealth and gaining control and enlightenment through white supervision. These days are gone forever, and what replaces them, before the arrival of the Klan to institute a new order, is a hell on earth: one that makes a mockery of the noble sacrifice of Southern men’s lives on the battlefield:

Your brother sprang forward and caught him in his arms, and as we bent over the unconscious form, he exclaimed: ‘My god, doctor, look at him! He is so much like me I feel as if I had been shot myself!’ They were as much alike as twins—only his hair was darker. I tell you, miss Elsie, it’s a sin to kill men like that. One such man is worth more to this Nation than every Negro that ever set his flat foot on this continent!³³

Note the comparison between the worthiness of the dead soldier and every Negro that “ever set his flat foot on this continent.” Dixon is here dividing murder into killings that are a sin and killings that are not sinful, done out of love of country and in the interest of preserving the (white) Nation. He is also channeling the South’s anger, and perhaps that of the North too, at the deaths of so many fine white men in defense of or over the cause of those who cannot even reliably be called human.

Black death looms everywhere in Dixon’s novel. In no way is it a sin to kill a black freedman, who is by his very nature, that is, both black and free, categorically out of his place and necessary to

³³ Dixon, 8.

subdue. Far from being a sin to kill a man like that, murdering him, even in cold blood, presumably even as a result of false accusations, is to do a service to one's country, removing one more out of place nigger who might otherwise have done some mischief or worse, brought about amoral chaos, contaminating the white race by sexual force and violation, destroying the dreams of, and causing an unforgivable, irreparable violation to the divinely ordained white state. For Dixon there is no move, as there is in Cotton Mather's *The Negro Christianized*, to a program of education and catechism. Dixon's black protagonists and chorus are incapable of being redeemed, their natural tendencies as a race being too strong for the addition of any reasoned teaching. The South knows this best of all. Having had the closest contact with the African, they know the dangers of black freedom best. The nation's best hope is to subdue and cow every African by force into their proper place, permanent and absolute subjugation.

The demonic association, while not as explicit as we saw in Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* and *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, is yet at play in *The Clansman*, achieved through rhetoric that invokes hell and perdition. The vengefulness of the North, for Dixon, is seen in their imposition of black rule in the South and their initial support of the black vote is a deep betrayal of the unity that ought to exist between Aryan brothers over and against black brutes. In his colorful mourning of Lincoln's assassination, which opened the door for Northern vengeance, curses, and blame, Dixon paints a picture that foreshadows the black chaos in Piedmont that he will soon depict:

Never in all the history of man had such a conjunction of events befallen a nation. From the heights of heaven's rejoicing to be suddenly hurled to the depths of hell in piteous, helpless grief! Noon to midnight without a moment between. A pall of voiceless horror spread its shadows over the land. Nothing short of an earthquake or the sound of the archangel's trumpet could have produced the sense of helpless consternation, the black and speechless despair. . . . By no other single feat could Death have carried such peculiar horror to every home. . . .

Above all, in just this moment he was the incarnation of the Triumphant Union on the

altar of whose life every house had laid the offering of its first-born. The tragedy was stupefying—it was unthinkable—it was the mockery of Fate!³⁴

Dixon goes on to describe the “madness” that grips the North, including its pulpits, which begin to hurl curses at their Southern brethren: “The Easter sermon was laid aside. Fifty thousand Christian ministers, stunned and crazed by insane passion, standing before the altars of God, hurled into the broken hearts before them the wildest cries of vengeance—cries incoherent, chaotic, unreasoning, blind in their awful fury!”³⁵ The resurrection of the South and healing of the Union is interrupted, as a result of Lincoln’s assassination, by a madness that enables Northern whites to attempt to take revenge by turning the South into an African nation, that is to say, they attempt to satisfy their grief, notably shared by Dixon’s Southerners, by destroying the white race and the true American citizenry. Only madness can produce such an aim, and this madness is stoked and encouraged, not only by Lincoln’s death, but also by the interference of prominent mulatto figures, who possess spellbinding holds over those with whom they come into contact. Witchcraft is not present by name, but it is certainly present in the action. For example, Austin Stoneman’s scheming wickedness toward the South is largely the result of his fraternization with Lydia Brown, “the strange brown woman who held the keys of his house as the first lady of the land.”³⁶ As we shall see, like Salem’s witches, who dabbled in black magic and fraternized with the forces of darkness, Stoneman is unable to hold onto his humanity while under the spell of this “brown woman,” keeper of the keys to the “Black House” just down the street from the White House.

³⁴ Dixon, 82.

³⁵ Dixon, 83.

³⁶ Dixon, 91.

Lydia Brown, who, like Mather's material devils, is called "tawny,"³⁷ is a mysterious, sensuous, and sinister figure at the center of power in Dixon's illustration of the nation's capital. Even Senators who come calling at the Black House must pass through her first, Stoneman having taken her into his complete confidence. Lydia Brown, who is rarely called by her name in the narrative, instead appearing as the "brown woman," the "mulatto woman," the "tawny woman," or the "negress," is also the means by which Stoneman makes his most sinister contacts, the chief of whom is Silas Lynch, who eventually becomes Lieutenant Governor of the South Carolina, and on whose lawn the Klan deposits Gus the rapist's dead body. The descriptions of these two mixed race characters, Brown and Lynch, are far more detailed and even obsessive than the descriptions of full African raced characters, which points to Dixon's obsession with the spectre of race mixing. These two powerful mulatto villains are the result of interracial unions that ought never to have been, particularly not now that the ability of the Southern states to keep the races apart has been utterly compromised as a result of the efforts of Stoneman, the (now black) Union League, and other vengeful civil servants.

In his descriptions of both Brown and Lynch, we see emphasis on magical power, animality, mesmerizing speech/wiles, terrifying ambition, and clearly sensible visions of the African continent and the not-to-far savagery of the African blood flowing within them:

No more curious or sinister figure ever cast a shadow across the history of a great nation than did this mulatto woman in the most corrupt hour of American life. The grim old man who looked into her sleek tawny face and followed her catlike eyes was steadily gripping the Nation by the throat. Did he aim to make this woman the arbiter of its social life, and her ethics the limit of its moral laws?³⁸

³⁷ Dixon, 91.

³⁸ Dixon, 94.

Lydia Brown's effect on those white people who come into contact with her is eerily palpable. Even those in favor of black enfranchisement shudder to have to treat with her as with an equal. Dixon describes Senator Charles Sumner's visit to the Black House thusly:

The Senator from Massachusetts had just made a speech in Boston expounding the "Equality of Man," yet he could not endure personal contact with a negro. He would go secretly miles out of the way to avoid it.

Stoneman watched him slowly and daintily approach this negress and touch her jeweled hand gingerly with the tips of his classic fingers as if she were a toad.³⁹

In these two excerpts, we have Brown referred to as a "toad," as "catlike" and "sleek," and as a "sinister figure" casting a "shadow" over the nation. The jewels that cover her hands are rendered grotesque by her animal features and manner, and are a sign of ambitions to elevate herself, and others like her, to positions of power in the nation, worming her way in through Stoneman, who is shown to be a source of evil for the South out of weakness and post-war trauma that leads him to allow his house and personal business to be infiltrated by such a creature.

Lynch, who is in cahoots with Brown behind Stoneman's back, is described as having inherited more white physical characteristics, which, ironically, has the effect of making him even uncannier to behold than Lydia Brown. He is described as

a negro of perhaps forty years, a man of charming features for a mulatto, who had evidently inherited the full physical characteristics of the Aryan race, while his dark yellowish eyes beneath his heavy brows glowed with the brightness of the African jungle. It was impossible to look at his superb face, with its large, finely chiselled [*sic.*] lips and massive nose, his big neck and broad shoulders, and watch his eyes gleam beneath the projecting forehead, without seeing pictures of the primeval forest. "The head of a Caesar and the eyes of the jungle" was the phrase coined by an artist who painted his portrait.

His hair was black and glossy and stood in dishevelled [*sic.*] profusion on his head between a kink and a curl. He was an orator of great power, and stirred a Negro audience as by magic.⁴⁰

³⁹ Dixon, 92.

⁴⁰ Dixon, 93.

Lynch is full of the white blood that means capability, beauty, and ambition – we have seen the same appraisal of mulatto characters by Harriet Beecher Stowe, perhaps most strikingly in George Harris, whose white blood will not allow him to be content with a slave’s lot. What for Stowe is an ambition that must be given a suitable outlet (e.g., colonizing and missionary efforts in Africa, far from white American society, yet still of divine use), is for Dixon an ambition that is utterly corrupted and corrupting. Lynch can do nothing but bring the jungle and the jungle’s magic with him everywhere he goes, using his regal features to dark purposes, i.e., the uplift of the Negro to social equality with whites.

Nell Painter discusses the historical meaning of “social equality” in the postbellum period, which meant not the positive goal of a society based on individual freedom and access, but the destruction of that society by means of race mixing. “Social equality,” for white men like Dixon, meant “associating as equals, which according to the logic of the slogan, would lead inexorably to black men’s marrying white women.”⁴¹ This inexorability is fulfilled by Silas Lynch, who, before being too long in the South, sets his sights on marrying Elsie Stoneman. In Dixon’s universe, his white blood serves to makes him *think* himself good enough to win the hand of a white woman as a white man would, meanwhile his black blood makes him not only an anathema, but also too much a savage, too close to the wild forest to be anything other than a black brute. Painter maps Dixon’s racial hierarchy with mulattoes between whites and blacks, “middling people, middling in refinement, middling in beauty, middling in intelligence.

They are interested in attaining the accoutrements of whiteness—political influence and white mates—but they are not prepared to use anything more efficient than cunning. Dixon

⁴¹ Nell Painter, “‘Social Equality’ and ‘Rape’ in the Fin-de-Siècle South,” *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 112.

associates his mulattoes closely with sex, and it is they who introduce the issue of “social equality.”⁴²

It is in the case of Dixon’s mulatto (and failing white) characters that the Dark Mask hangs the most thinly, and is in the greatest need of being sought out by the thinnest of material means. In Lynch’s and Brown’s cases, one must look for the yellow eyes, for the skin that is not quite white but “tawny,” for the magic of a manner/voice, for the hair that has too much kink in it to be truly white, etc. It is in the case of these characters, in particular Silas Lynch, that one can see the author working hard to apply the dark/light binary to a middling person. One can also see the extreme usefulness of the Dark Mask here, as even when faint, it gives one advance cues to the heart of a character, instructing in fiction for practice in reality.

The scene in the cotton warehouse to endorse the candidacy of a black judge is a particularly rich application of the Dark Mask by Dixon that provides us with an opportunity to see a broad range of qualities of blackness. Dr. Cameron, white doctor and father of Ben Cameron, savior of the race, is a witness to the goings on at the warehouse and is scandalized and disgusted by what he sees. Two Dark Masked characters in particular stand out, the Negro idol, Silas Lynch, and the Negro judge, Pinchback. Their elevation to positions of political power signal the rapidly nearing end of white supremacy and thus the impending doom of America:

Every inch of space in the big cotton warehouse was jammed--a black living cloud, pungent and piercing. . . .

Dr. Cameron watched the movements of the black judge, already notorious for the sale of his opinions, with a sense of sickening horror. This man was but yesterday a slave, his father a medicine-man in an African jungle who decided the guilt or innocence of the accused by the test of administering poison. If the poison killed the man, he was guilty; if he survived, he was innocent. For four thousand years his land had stood a solid bulwark of unbroken

⁴² Painter, 125.

barbarism. Out of its darkness he had been thrust upon the seat of judgment of the laws of the proudest and highest type of man evolved in time. It seemed a hideous dream.⁴³

The jungle reverberates throughout Dixon's color-full descriptions of the Negro and mulatto characters of his novel. Shortly after Dr. Cameron subjects himself to the shock of seeing the "black living cloud" and smelling its fulsome odors, Silas Lynch, the ring leader, puts in a shattering appearance, taking his seat with "the easy assurance of conscious power" -- itself a horror to the "palefaces" looking on, since his negro blood makes Lynch utterly unfit to have any authority over American citizens. We are told extravagantly of Lynch's magnetic physicality: "His broad shoulders, superb head, and gleaming jungle-eyes held every man in the audience before he had spoken a word."⁴⁴ The word is not the thing in Dixon's treatment. Lynch's magnetism (one imagines the word "animal" whispered beforehand), makes words (and, one may extrapolate, rationality) secondary. His speech is described first and most lengthily in sensual terms: Dr. Cameron catches "the ring of . . . savage metal" in the "masterful tones" of Lynch's voice right away. From this opening, we are to consider Lynch as possessed of "sleek animal vivacity," "a child of Mystery, moved by Voices and inspired by a Fetish."⁴⁵ There is admiration here, but it is voiced as the admiration one might have for something utterly alien, frighteningly powerful, and innately dangerous.

Though Lynch is not compared to the Devil here, the line, "inspired by a Fetish," among others its like, connect Lynch to a savage motherland, whose heathenish, and civilization polluting, if not killing, ways come through despite the application of any admixture of white blood. Lynch's speech begins with a sustained lie:

⁴³ Dixon, 273.

⁴⁴ Dixon, 273.

⁴⁵ Dixon, 274.

Now he painted in burning words the imaginary horrors of slavery until the tears rolled down his cheeks and he wept at the sound of his own voice. Every dusky hearer burst into tears and moans.

He stopped, suddenly brushed the tears from his eyes, sprang to the edge of the platform, threw both arms above his head and shouted:

"Hosannah to the Lord God Almighty for Emancipation!"⁴⁶

This cry of praise to God contains the first words that Lynch is recorded as saying in his magical mystery oration to the "surging crowd." Lynch's explicitly Judeo-Christian cry of praise is heavily suspect, of course, precluded as it is by Dixon's discussion of the ways that Lynch, the freedmen's "idol" brings to life the superstitions, savagery, and fearful power of the jungle.⁴⁷ The juxtaposition here suggests that black religiosity, outside of white supervision and careful instruction, viz. permanent subservience to whites, is at best suspect, and at worst the source of complete devilish chaos, threatening the destruction of an entire nation.

The shared ancestry of the jungle is readily visible in Lynch, and it fully animates the crowd he entralls. This black mass of bodies emote and vocalize together as one in response to Lynch's magical call, "shouting and screaming," "burst[ing] into tears and moans," they "yelled, laughed, howled, or wept as he willed."⁴⁸ We can see the unifying work of the Dark Mask in Dixon's description of the singular, thundering voice of the Negroes in the courthouse, Lynch's words of race war having "melted every voice into a single frenzied shout."⁴⁹ In this case, the single shout is Lynch's -- the flow of unified voice moves both ways: Lynch's words produce the singular responses of the crowd, and that crowd's voice is in turn reproduced in him at the end of the scene. Their voices, which rise "in unison, swelled into a thunder peal, and died away as one voice," create a

⁴⁶ Dixon, 274.

⁴⁷ Dixon, 273.

⁴⁸ Dixon, 274.

⁴⁹ Dixon, 275.

vacuum of voicelessness that Silas Lynch, Dark Masked by Dixon's words, fills with revolting terrors:

"Within five years," he cried, "the intelligence and the wealth of this mighty state will be transferred to the Negro race. Lift up your heads. The world is yours. Take it. Here and now I serve notice on every white man who breathes that I am as good as he is. I demand, and I am going to have, the privilege of going to see him in his house or his hotel, eating with him and sleeping with him, and when I see fit, to take his daughter in marriage!"⁵⁰

Lynch's declaration thus becomes the declaration of every black voice in the place. And we see in the content of his speech (at last recorded in spoken words) the contours of the Dark Mask that Dixon's narrative and others like it create. This is the content of the Dark Mask: it means white degradation and extinction. This is the Dark Mask that makes one black person represent a maleficent horde. It demands an equally vast and unified white resistance. This is the Dark Mask that calls for an exorcism.

Whiteness Depicted

In Dixon's description of Ben Cameron and Elsie Stoneman's first meeting, the blooming contours of the White Mask are readily visible. When Ben, the wounded soldier, finally awakens after a long time lying insensible in a hospital bed in the capital, he awakens to find Elsie leaning near to him, listening to his feverish talk and watching over him tenderly:

At length he opened his eyes, great dark-brown eyes, unnaturally bright, with a strange yearning look in their depths as they rested on Elsie. He tried to smile and feebly said:

"Here's—a—fly—on—my—left—ear—my—guns—can't—somehow—reach—him—won't—you—"

She sprang forward and brushed the fly away.

Again he opened his eyes.

"Excuse—me—for—asking—but am I alive?"

"Yes, indeed," was the cheerful answer.

"Well, now, then, is this me, or is it not me, or has a cannon shot me, or has the Devil got

⁵⁰ Dixon, 275.

me?”

“It’s you. The cannon didn’t shoot you, but three muskets did. The Devil hasn’t got you yet, but he will, unless you’re good.”

“I’ll be good if you won’t leave me—“

Elsie turned her head away smiling, and he went on slowly:

“But I’m dead, I know. I’m sleeping on a cot with a canopy over it. I ain’t hungry any more, and an angel has been hovering over me playing on a harp of gold—“

“Only a little Yankee girl playing the banjo.”

“Can’t fool me—I’m in heaven.”

“You’re in the hospital.”⁵¹

The couple’s playful banter over Ben’s refusal to give up the idea that he is in heaven because he is face to face with an angel plays into the central assumption of the *White Mask*: innocence. And beyond the innate innocence and goodness Dixon gives to Elsie, she enjoys an alignment with the divine—even singing negro camp songs she is as an angel “playing on a harp of gold.” Her innocence and goodness are as durable as her physiognomy—she is described in the first line of the first chapter as “The fair girl,” and she earns that title in look and deed. In Ben’s words, “I’ll be good if you won’t leave me—“ signal Elsie’s power, not only to be a good and innocent woman, but also to inspire goodness in those around her, particularly in the men nearest her. Dixon puts Elsie’s goodness to the test immediately following this tender scene, when she has to make a choice: whether she will defy her father and appeal to the president directly for a pardon for Ben.

As Elsie apprehensively carries the pardon she wins for Ben back to the Camerons, Dixon gives us an entrée into Elsie’s good and innocent thoughts about her father, the white villain of the novel, and the man she worries may even be responsible for execution orders like the one on Ben:

She had implicit faith in her father’s patriotism and pride in his giant intellect. She knew that he was a king among men by divine right of inherent power. His sensitive spirit, brooding over a pitiful lameness, had hidden from the world behind a frowning brow like a wounded animal. Yet her hand in hours of love, when no eye save God’s could see, had led his great soul out of its dark lair. She loved him with brooding tenderness, knowing that she

⁵¹ Dixon, 11.

had gotten closer to his inner life than any other human being . . . Yet there were times when he was a stranger even to her. Some secret, dark and cold, stood between them.⁵²

A major part of, if not the whole, of this dark, cold secret between her father and herself was the unwelcome presence of Lydia Brown, Stoneman's "tawny" live-in housekeeper, about whom "all sorts of gossip could be heard in Washington . . . her jewels, her dresses, her airs, her assumption of the dignity of the presiding genius of National legislation and her domination of the old Commoner and his life."⁵³ Elsie herself had sought to make her father "close this house" with its "black shutters" to no avail. Dixon wedges Elsie between loyalty to her father, and her knowledge that Ben and his family were the "innocent victims of a great tragedy!"⁵⁴ Elsie feels shame at her disloyalty to her father, but her goodness demands that she follow what is right and do what she can to prevent injustice, which puts her at the center of Dixon's reunification vision for the nation.

For his part, Austin Stoneman has reserved to him a sliver of (white) humanity in the love that he has for his children. It is this love that finally converts him to the South's cause and helps him see the error of his vengeful ways. When Elsie bravely confronts him to get a letter of access to the new president for Mrs. Cameron, whose husband is languishing in jail through no fault of his own, Stoneman's tenderness toward her is palpable:

She bent and kissed him.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to know that you have no part in such injustice."

"You should not have believed me such a fool, but I'll forgive you for the kiss. Run now with this letter to your rebel friends, you little traitor! Wait a minute—"

He shuffled to his feet, placed his hand tenderly on her head, and stooped and kissed the shining hair.

"I wonder if you know how I love you? How I've dreamed of your future? I may not see

⁵² Dixon, 57.

⁵³ Dixon, 57-58.

⁵⁴ Dixon, 59.

you every day as I wish; I'm absorbed in great affairs. But more and more I think of you and Phil. . . ."⁵⁵

Though Elsie is participating in the moving of great men to favor her friends and walking and operating in the highest halls of Washington, we are encouraged, via Stoneman's words and gesture—a tender hand on the top of her head and a kiss to the hair—to see her as a sweet, “little,” woman, whose traitorous requests can be forgiven with a kiss.

It is significant that Elsie's political actions are taken in defense of the family of her soon to be beloved man and that her trepidation at confronting her father is accompanied by a loving concern for his absolute wellbeing. We see Elsie overwhelmingly in positions of caregiving toward or because of men, first in the hospital as she plays the banjo, then in the White and Black Houses as brave, loving emissary, later in the novel as Ben Cameron's conscience, and finally as his ideal helpmeet, standing at the gate with him in the final lines of the novel after his successful “revolution,” promising, “I'll share [your fate] with you, success or failure, life or death.”⁵⁶ Elsie's is not a purposeless goodness – as a representative of perfectly achieved white femininity, her moral quality and sweet and lovely appearance in the novel are of crucial importance to the maintenance of white patriarchy.

Elsie is not the only young white woman in the narrative whom Dixon raises up as a paragon of successful white femininity. Margaret Cameron, the love interest of Elsie's brother Phil, is described in differing, yet no less rapturous tones, through Phil Stoneman's eyes:

He saw that her dress was of coarse, unbleached cotton, dyed with the juice of walnut hulls and set with wooden hand-made buttons. The story these things told of war and want was eloquent, yet she wore them with unconscious dignity. She had not a pin or brooch or piece of jewelry. Everything about her was plain and smooth, graceful and gracious. Her face was large—the lovely oval type—and her luxuriant hair, parted in the middle, fell downward in

⁵⁵ Dixon, 106.

⁵⁶ Dixon, 374.

two great waves. Tall, stately, handsome, her dark rare Southern beauty full of subtle languor and indolent grace, she was to Phil a revelation.

The coarse black dress that clung closely to her figure seemed alive when she moved, vital with her beauty. The musical cadences of her voice were vibrant with feeling, sweet, tender, and homelike. And the odor of the rose she wore pinned low on her breast he could swear was the perfume of her breath.

Lingering in her eyes and echoing in the tones of her voice, he caught the shadowy memory of tears for the loved and lost that gave a strange pathos and haunting charm to her youth.⁵⁷

Margaret is described as a “revelation” – the perfect southern belle, in deep and faithful mourning for her lost brothers. Everything about her is “graceful and gracious,” and her voice is “sweet, tender, and homelike.” She has an allure for Phil that includes mystery – perhaps the mysteriousness felt by a Northerner encountering the raw racial charm of the Southern white woman – but does not leave out the all-important image of the home, which is to be Margaret’s divinely ordained place. Dixon goes to great lengths to show the innocence, beauty, and delicacy of the white women in his novel, but does not leave out a natural inclination and desire for the limits of the home.

The time that Dixon takes with these introductions of young white women, North and South, presents white femininity as a precious thing to be guarded, protected, and defended at all costs. In another such description, young Marion, the Cameron’s cousin, overtaken by pity for the fate of the family’s livestock, trapped in a barn presumably burned by a roving black mob, rushes in to save two cows and her own terrified horse:

As the girl ran toward the burning building, her thin white dress clinging close to her exquisite form, she looked like the marble figure of a sylph by the hand of some great master into which God had suddenly breathed the breath of life.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Dixon, 62-63.

⁵⁸ Dixon, 260.

Characteristic of Dixon's treatments of Marion, who, in keeping with the type, wants nothing better than "to fill the world with flowers, laughter, and music—especially my own home,"⁵⁹ is her natural affinity for nature and animals – including the black animal Gus -- and her burning compassion and saving/nurturing actions on behalf of living things. We will see this affiliation of white women with animals intensely in D. W. Griffith's film adaptation, where the natural gentleness (and lesser status) of white women is on brilliant display.

Dixon's is a world in which white women (in their proper place) may ascend to the heights of the angels, making divine purpose and beauty readily visible in their bodies and actions, in this case, saving actions. As Ben Cameron is the savior of "Civilization," and redeemer of the South "from shame," white women like Elsie, Marion, and Margaret are angelic keepers of the divine promise to the nation, sharing in revolutionary success, showing grace and tender love to all God's helpless and gentle creatures, and properly mourning the glorious dead.

The White Mask that Elsie, Marion, and Margaret wear is rapaciously gendered in its application, as the control of the meaning of white women as the carriers of racial purity was paramount to the white recivilizing project after the Civil War and in response to Reconstruction and increasing blurring of the lines of white identity. Elizabeth Hayes Turner puts this problem in terms of competition and fear of black success after Emancipation, writing of the problem of a growing black middle-class and black professionals making "economic, cultural, and sexual competitors" out of former slaves.⁶⁰ In Turner's analysis, the radicalization of racism after the war had gender at its center:

⁵⁹ Dixon, 226.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Women and Gender in the New South 1865-1945*, The American History Series, John Hope Franklin and A. S. Eisenstadt, eds. (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2009), 54.

White supremacists made “whiteness” the qualification for membership in the civilized community, and white women were the cornerstone of the community since they bore children who could inherit their patrimony only if they were completely white. Underlying the concept of separation based on the superiority of the white race was the notion that black men were bestial in nature, possessed uncontrollable sexual drives, and wanted above all else social equality so as to be able to marry, cohabit with, or sexually molest white women. The protection of white women, then, became one of the justifications for the worst sort of interracial violence—lynching. There was great power in this racist ideology.⁶¹

This newly possible competition across racial lines put pressure on the role of white women as the carriers of whiteness in its purest state, and made both control and protection of white women paramount to the maintenance of white supremacy and the white race itself. The threat of miscegenation was dire, with the fate of the race riding on its prevention. As such, both white men and conforming white women were committed to demonizing those who committed this gross racial sin. As Victoria Bynum relates in *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*,

Miscegenation, a common crime among wayward poor whites, was even more unacceptable when it occurred between white women and black men. . . .

A white woman who willingly entered a miscegenous relationship forfeited the respect of her community and was shunned by respectable women, who fear the contact with her might also taint them. . . . Although the status of white women in society was never as precarious as that of free African American women, White women without wealth or proper family connections were unlikely to gain entry into respectable social circles.⁶²

Bynum’s research shows that the ideal of the southern lady of leisure, was falling out of fashion by the mid-nineteenth century. She was to be replaced by an ideal of the farm wife, who was idealized not only by southern leaders in Piedmont, but also by “northern leaders.” This ideal, however, proved equally strengthening to the feminine White Mask, and was no less confining and weighty to the fate of the race than the previous ideal of the southern lady of leisure. Bynum summarizes the

⁶¹ Turner, 55.

⁶² Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill; London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 41, 45.

farm wife ideal, describing her as “a true woman [who] transformed her lowly tasks of housekeeping into acts of love through constant devotion to others . . . thereby earn[ing] the honor of her society.”⁶³ Though her labors were many, the farm wife was no less able to set down the racial responsibility she held.

We can see both ideals at play in Dixon’s and Griffith’s characterizations of white women, for instance, Elsie wants to spend her life singing, but she puts that talent to men’s use by working and singing at the hospital, the healing angel. In Griffith’s film, we are presented with Marion, recast as Flora, the pet sister of Ben Cameron, scampering about the property like a child, hunting for flowers, an innocent, and charmingly untamed, young lady of leisure, played to great effect by Mae Marsh. Both relegations insist on the purity of white women and elevate their social and sexual lives to civilization-making or civilization-breaking power.

As there is a role for women under the White Mask, there is an equally gendered role for white men in Dixon and Griffith’s constructions. The type is clearly seen in the example of Dr. Cameron, Ben’s father, representative of paternal southern nobility and honor. When awaiting a then-certain death on the gallows, Dr. Cameron is the image of selfless care for the people (and values) of the South, insisting that his “peril is nothing . . . At home the horrors of a servile reign of terror have become a reality. These prison walls do not interest me. My heart is with our stricken people.”⁶⁴ Dr. Cameron is full of tender love and care for his people and his family, but he is by no means made weak by emotion. To his hardiness and stoic face before the spectre of death in a Northern jail, Dixon later adds a regal ferocity. When Dr. Cameron is cornered by a gang of negro troops seeking to arrest him for “obstructing the execution of Reconstruction Acts,” he springs up in

⁶³ Bynum, 48.

⁶⁴ Dixon, 110.

a counterattack that gives Dixon the opportunity to showcase his almost God-like potential to strike fear in black hearts:

A sudden leap, as the spring of a panther, and he stood before his former slave, his slender frame erect, his face a livid spot in its snow-white hair, his brilliant eyes flashing with fury.

Gus suddenly lost control of his knees.

His old master transfixed him with his eyes, and in a voice, whose tones gripped him by the throat said:

“How dare you?”

The gun fell from the negro’s hand, and he dropped to the floor on his face.

His companion uttered a yell and sprang through the door, rallying the men as he went:

“Fall back! Fall back! He’s killed Gus! Shot him dead wid his eye. He’s conjured him! Git de whole army quick.”

They fled to the Commandant.⁶⁵

That such a (white) being is later successfully confined in irons by black hands gives weight to the doctor’s exclamations, “This is monstrous! . . . Kill me, and my last breath will be a blessing. But while I have life to resist, for myself and for my people, this thing shall not be done!”⁶⁶ The horror that the doctor feels is not only the horror at being trapped and chained, but also that he, a white man, should be imprisoned by black brutes out of their rightful place and white accomplices in the destruction of their own people is too much for him to bear. His words are telling: “No such outrage has even been recorded in the history of the American people.” Dr. Cameron, exemplar of the White Mask, appeals to the preferential treatment afforded to those who cannot be imprisoned or “deprived of his own household . . . unless by the legal judgment of his peers or by the law of the land!” The word “peers” weighs heavily here, as do Dr. Cameron’s objections to the sight of a negro judge in power. White men are the only possible peers for Dr. Cameron; moreover, the judgment of all, whether white or black or otherwise, must fall to white men to officiate, never the other way around. There is a stubbornness to Dr. Cameron that is, in Dixon’s narrative, to be admired. He

⁶⁵ Dixon, 229.

⁶⁶ Dixon, 229, 231.

holds his beliefs so strongly, and ties them so tightly to the ideals of the united nation—"The war is over; the South is conquered; I have no country save America"⁶⁷—that he would choose death before violating them or being violated by those who do not share them.

White in the Wrong Mask

The White Mask worn by laudable white men in Dixon's tale is brave, principled, deeply nationalist, and not afraid of a fight or of death when it means the protection of family or the nation as they see it. As we saw in the case of the blackened witches in chapter one, one of the best indicators of the contours of expected white behavior are cited examples of failures to achieve the ideals of white goodness. In Dixon's novel, Elsie Stoneman's father, Austin Stoneman, is a perfect example of one man's failure to embody the White Mask expected of one of his color and status.

In a dramatic scene in the first part of the novel, Dixon compares Austin Stoneman, representative of the North, dubbed "the Great Commoner," to President Lincoln, chosen representative of the best of the South:

The two men were face to face at last,—the two men above all others who had built and were to build the foundations of the New Nation,—Lincoln's in love and wisdom to endure forever, the Great Commoner's in hate and madness, to bear its harvest of tragedy and death for generations yet unborn.⁶⁸

The comparison is black and white in the case of Stoneman and Lincoln, whom Dixon credits with laying the foundations of the "New Nation." One might use these characterizations to sketch the shorthand confines of the White and Dark Masks when worn by white men: Lincoln, White Masked and splendid, is possessed of "love and wisdom," while Stoneman is possessed of "hate and

⁶⁷ Dixon, 230.

⁶⁸ Dixon, 41.

madness," harbinger of "tragedy and death." That promise of tragedy and death are color-fully brought to life with Lincoln's assassination, which, "From the heights of heaven's rejoicing . . . suddenly hurled [the nation] to the depths of hell in piteous, helpless grief!"⁶⁹ Dixon continues:

Noon to midnight without a moment between. A pall of voiceless horror spread its shadows over the land. Nothing short of an earthquake or the sound of the archangel's trumpet could have produced the sense of helpless consternation, the black and speechless despair. . . . By no other single feat could Death have carried such peculiar horror to every home.⁷⁰

This black atmosphere of horror and death are natural for Dark Masked Austin Stoneman, whose bloodthirstiness and vengefulness were well known in the Capital.

Dixon takes his time in describing Austin Stoneman's character, whom he based on the historical figure Thaddeus Stevens. Born to a father, "a worthless character," and a mother "of vigorous intellect and indomitable will," Stoneman's dreams of wealth were crushed by the devastation left by Robert E. Lee's army. He was a gambler, a man of "extravagant habits, tastes, and inevitable debts"; though lame footed and often infirm, which infirmity drove him to Piedmont to coalesce, Stoneman was a man of "enormous power," contemptuous of public opinion and "scornful of advice": "the incarnate soul of revolution, he despised convention and ridiculed respectability." Stoneman's corruption runs deep and its signs show not only in his deformed body and but also in his speech, which "was curt, his humor sardonic his wit biting, cruel and coarse."⁷¹ Elsewhere Dixon notes that Stoneman rarely smiles, and that "when he did it was the smile of the cynic and misanthrope."⁷²

⁶⁹ Dixon, 81.

⁷⁰ Dixon, 81.

⁷¹ Dixon, 95-96.

⁷² Dixon, 40.

By allying himself with those of darker skin, Stoneman has deformed himself, mutilating his own God given whiteness, which ought, when well-performed produce goodness, grace, and unity. Nevertheless, there is hope for Stoneman in his love for his successfully White Masked children, and it is this love that eventually produces a confession and dramatic conversion moment at the end of the novel. Fittingly, Stoneman delivers his confession to Dr. Cameron, his sworn enemy, yet, in Stoneman's own words "a pious man."⁷³

In his confession, fearfully given, Stoneman uses the metaphor of the mask, which he removes for Dr. Cameron and the reader to reveal the true selfish reasons for his hatred toward the South. But most important for our purposes is the assignation of blame to Lydia Brown, Stoneman's housekeeper, the "wil[y] yellow vampire" whom Stoneman "dreamed of lifting . . . to my level." Instead of being the lifter, Stoneman, through his close contact with his half-black blooded servant, "felt myself sinking into the black abyss of animalism, I, whose soul had learned the pathway of the stars and held high converse with the great spirits of the ages."⁷⁴ It is not through any inherent defect that Stoneman's descent into darkness begins, but through his choice of companions. By daring to call black people equals and seeking to elevate them to fellow citizen status, Stoneman unintentionally lowers himself to their base level. This lowering, the spark of which is pain and loss, is put in terms of a loss of sanity. Reflecting on General Lee's invasion, Stoneman confesses that revenge is the true cause of his racial disloyalty and hatred of the South:

"I stood on the hill in the darkness, cried, raved, cursed, while I watched his troops lay those mills in ashes. Then and there I swore that I'd live until I ground the South beneath my heel!"⁷⁵

⁷³ Dixon, 371.

⁷⁴ Dixon, 371.

⁷⁵ Dixon, 372.

Upon returning to his house, in this dark madness Stoneman exhumed the body of a Confederate soldier—"somebody's boy . . . who was loved even as I love"--that had been buried in his field, "carted it to the woods, and threw it into a ditch."⁷⁶ Stoneman sees the irony of the deed, confessing as he does in mortal fear of his own son's life being taken. Dr. Cameron, though sorely tempted to strangle Stoneman, relents and instead gives us the mercy (to white enemies) and graciousness expected of the White Mask:

The Southerner slipped his arm around the old man's shoulders and began a tender and reverent prayer.⁷⁷

By this time a Klansman himself, the Doctor acts in the way the best Christian ought (toward a white brother) and chooses understanding and forgiveness even for Stoneman, the novel's inveterate villain.

Just before the triumphant reveal of his living son in full Klan regalia, saved by the actions of the growing brotherhood, Stoneman despairs; his words give us a glimpse of the fate expected for a white man remaining too long outside the boundaries of his race:

"It's no use," he groaned, "—they've come with his body—I'm slipping down—the lights are going out—I haven't a friend! It's dark and cold—I'm alone, and lost—God—has—hidden—His—face—from—me!"⁷⁸

Extreme alienation in darkness is the fate that rears up behind Stoneman's eyes. This is the final destination of those whites failing whiteness by donning the Dark Mask through fraternization and sympathizing with black people. By extraction, one might consider that this same dark and cold place alienated from the divine is where Dixon's Dark Masked characters reside always, by rights.

⁷⁶ Dixon, 372.

⁷⁷ Dixon, 373.

⁷⁸ Dixon, 373.

The connection between darkness and the demonic—that which is forever alienated from God and from the providential vision for the nation—is on display in Stoneman’s fears, but also in his rejoicings:

“The Klan!—The Klan! No? Yes! It’s true—glory to God, they’ve saved my boy!—Phil—Phil!”⁷⁹

The Klan redeems Stoneman’s first-born, and in so doing effect the redemption of Stoneman, whose conversion moment signals the potential reunification of the nation, white North and South, and the restoration of providential possibility for the country.

Austin Stoneman is not the only white character who is given access to the Dark Mask by Dixon. Surprisingly, Elsie Stoneman, Old Stoneman’s angelically white daughter wears the Dark Mask briefly at the novel’s beginning, appropriating slave camp songs and musical style to sing songs to the white wounded. But unlike Stoneman, Elsie is successful in retaining her White Mask while dabbling in black culture:

Elsie Stoneman took her seat beside the cot of the wounded Confederate and began softly to sing and play. . . . At the first soft note from the singer, the games ceased, and the reader put down his book.

The banjo had come to Washington with the negroes following the wake of the army. She had laid aside her guitar and learned to play all the stirring camp-songs of the South. Her voice was low, soothing, and tender. It held every silent listener in a spell.”⁸⁰

When Ben Cameron, in the Washington hospital recovering from his war wounds, insists he must have died since, among other lesser comforts, “an angel has been hovering over me playing on a harp of gold,” Elsie Stoneman answers him simply, “Only a little Yankee girl playing the banjo.” This “little Yankee girl” whom the men in the hospital experience as an angel singing is able to sing the songs of black negroes seamlessly. Dixon adds after she successfully completes four of Ben’s

⁷⁹ Dixon, 373.

⁸⁰ Dixon, 11-12.

musical requests, that “with deft, sure touch and soft negro dialect she sang it through.”⁸¹ It is Elsie’s deft application of the Dark Mask—unbelievably accurate in her delivery of black music, particularly as no honorable white woman in Dixon’s universe would have sufficient contact to learn anything but an approximation, if that—that leads Ben to insist again that he is in heaven and she is an angel.

That Elsie remains an angel in spite of this dabbling in black culture, and that with exceeding depth, even changing her instrument to complete the illusion, is significant in our exploration of the mobility of the Dark Mask. Unlike in Cotton Mather’s analysis of the Salem witches, forever tainted by too close encounters with darkness, in Dixon’s universe there is an avenue of participation in darkness that does not damn the participant. Elsie is performing, firstly, for a group of white men in need, fulfilling Ben’s requests and making him feel like home, providing the comforts of black culture without the trouble of black people. Moreover, Elsie is not performing these songs for a white and not black male audience, which makes all the difference in how we read her performance. In front of a group of white men who are charmed by her double spell, beauty and angelic songbird talent, Elsie’s foray into black culture is entertaining, soothing, innocent, and even healing — Ben recovers his lucidity after she “played and sang the songs the wounded man loved.”⁸² But perhaps most significant here is the bounded nature of Elsie’s donning of the Dark Mask. When she puts the banjo down, this isolated playing in the dark is not read as a decivilizing act — she retains angelic status, and is not, like her father, altered in mind, body, and soul by too close fraternization with darker-skinned people. What outlasts the moment of banjo playing is Elsie’s appearance, which marks her as angelic.

⁸¹ Dixon, 12.

⁸² Dixon, 10.

Black Disruptions to Civilization

As we have seen, central to Dixon's worldview is the idea that the fate of the Aryan/white race is the fate of all of the United States of America, and in *The Clansman*, the first key to securing a bright and divinely ordained future is the reunification of all white people within the United States against all others, who are cast as dire threats.

In her book *The Color of Sex*, Mason Stokes explores the possibilities unleashed by this worldview in which white patriarchy is to be preserved at all costs over and against all other races, which depends desperately on the purity of white women, the holders of the next generation of pure Aryans (more specifically pure Aryan *men*), which virulently suspects and excludes "lesser races," and in which white men are left with only each other to love. In her explanation of the implications of the gender roles in Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots*, the first book in Dixon's Ku Klux Klan trilogy, Stokes unpacks the black male/white female rape myth looming large in Dixon's work to discover the ways that Dixon's brand of paranoid white patriarchy leads, not only to an obsession with the black man's sexuality as, "absent . . . white female desire, . . . the only avenue available for the contamination of whiteness" (via rape), but also to the connection of blackness itself with heterosexuality:⁸³

In Dixon's novel it's not whiteness that stands in for heterosexuality but blackness, which becomes, through the black troopers and black Dick, the transcendent sign of men who desire women. Blackness, as heterosexuality writ large, disrupts the homosocial kinship economy among white men. It stands as a too visible reminder of the reproductive possibilities that so threaten Dixon's white state. And so, the secret marriage between Charlie and Sallie can't withstand the public gaze until it is removed from the haunting presence of blackness, which is to say, from the haunting presence of heterosexual desire.

⁸³ Mason Stokes, *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2001), 148, 152.

With the expulsion of blackness and its attendants (reproduction, miscegenation, the body), whiteness can reign supreme as a homosocial economy of racial power.⁸⁴

Dixon put all of his artistic and intellectual energies into proselytizing against the erosion of white male supremacy and the homosociality that was its marker.

I close my discussion of color-full representation in *The Clansman* by looking briefly at the exchange between two white men in the novel, one in the White Mask, and the other in the Dark. This conversation between Abraham Lincoln and Austin Stoneman makes the main, abiding problem facing the nation the problem of Emancipation. In response to Stoneman's question, "You are determined to oppose Negro suffrage?" Lincoln offers his arguments, conveniently allied with Dixon's in this "true story" that takes no "liberty with any essential historic fact,"⁸⁵ saying,

"I believe that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which will forever forfeit their living together on terms of political and social equality. If such be attempted, one must go to the wall."

"Very well, pin the Southern white man to the wall. Our party and the nation will then be safe."

"That is to say, destroy African slavery and establish white slavery under Negro Masters! That would be progress with a vengeance."

A grim smile twitched the old man's lips as he said:

"Yes, your prim conservative snobs and male waiting-maids in Congress went into hysterics when I armed the negroes. Yet the heavens have not fallen."

"True. Yet no more insane blunder could not be made than any further attempts to use these Negro troops. There can be no such thing as restoring this union to its basis of fraternal peace with armed Negroes, wearing the uniform of this nation, tramping over the South, and rousing the basest passions of the freedmen and their former masters. Gen. Butler, old commander, is now making plans for their removal, at my request. He expects to dig the Panama Canal with these black troops.["]

"Fine scheme that—on a par with your messages to Congress asking for the colonisation of the whole Negro race!"

"It will come to that ultimately," said the president, firmly. "The Negro has cost us \$5,000,000,000, the desolation of ten great states, and rivers of blood. We can well afford a few million dollars more to effect a permanent settlement of the issue. This is the only policy on which Seward and I have differed—"

"Then Seward was not an utterly hopeless fool. I'm glad to hear something to his credit,"

⁸⁴ Dixon, 152.

⁸⁵ Dixon, 1, 2.

growled the old Commoner.

"I have urged the colonization of the negroes, and I shall continue until it is accomplished. My emancipation proclamation was linked with this plan. Thousands of them have lived in the North for a hundred years, yet no one is the pastor of a white church, a judge, a governor, a mayor, or a college president. There is no room for two distinct races of white men in America, much less for two distinct races of whites and blacks. We can have no inferior servile class peon or peasant. We must assimilate or expel. The American is a Citizen King or nothing. A mulatto citizenship would be too dear a price to pay even for emancipation.

"Words have no power to express my loathing for such twaddle! Cried Stoneman, snapping his great jaws together and pursing his lips with contempt.

"If the Negro were not here would we allow him to land?" The president went on, as if talking to himself. "The duty to exclude carries the right to expel. Within twenty years, we can peacefully colonise the Negro in the tropics and give him our language, literature, religion, and system of government under conditions in which he can rise to the full measure of manhood. This he can never do here. It was fear of the black tragedy behind emancipation that led the south into the insanity of secession. We can never attain the ideal union our fathers dreamed, with millions of an alien, inferior race among us, whose assimilation is neither possible nor desirable. The nation cannot now exist half white and half black, anymore than it could exist half slave and half free."

"Yet 'God has made of one blood all races,'" quoted the cynic with a sneer.

"Yes – but finish the sentence– 'and fix the bounds of their habitation.' God never meant that the Negro should leave his habitat or the white man invade his home and the tragedy will not be closed until the black man is restored to his home."⁸⁶

I would like to call our attention to two details from this passage, the first of which is Dixon's Lincoln's argument against the possibility of black integration into American life as free people. It is an argument based on capacity, ability, and on the lack of evidence of black successes in long-established white institutions. His colonization scheme, much like that of Harriet Beecher Stowe, is seen as a benefit to the Negro. Dixon's Lincoln anticipates recolonizing Negroes, providing "our language, literature, religion, and system of government under conditions in which he can rise to the full measure of manhood." Lincoln speaks of the duty to exclude and the right to expel, and the Dark Mask is the means of identifying the offending population.

⁸⁶ Dixon, 45-47.

Eric Foner's *The Fiery Trial* attests to Lincoln's initial embrace of wholesale colonization of former slaves after emancipation, which, after a colossal failure of a first attempt (Île de Vache off the coast of Haiti), continued to develop into a more laissez-faire approach:

By 1864, although Lincoln still saw voluntary emigration as a kind of safety valve for individual blacks dissatisfied with their condition in the United States, he no longer envisioned large-scale colonization. In a message to the ambassador to the Netherlands that coyly absolved Lincoln of responsibility for his previous advocacy of the idea, Secretary of State Seward explained why: "The American people have advanced to a new position in regard to slavery and the African race since the President, in obedience to their prevailing wishes, accepted the policy of colonization. Now, not only their free labor but their military service also is appreciated and accepted." When Congress that spring debated the constitutional amendment abolishing slavery, almost everyone supporting the proposal assumed that the emancipated slaves would remain in the United States.⁸⁷

It is significant, then, that Dixon's and Griffith's Lincoln is prevented from removing the Negro as a result of his assassination. If unity between whites, North and South, is the end goal, at the grave expense of black freed men and women, Lincoln provides a common hero around which to rally. The issue then becomes one of interpretation — the claim being that Lincoln never intended for the mixing of the races, particularly not in positions of power, to be an outcome of emancipation, however much his administration is responsible for the mobilizing of black troops. In his recent history of the Ku Klux Klan's second coming, William Rawlings takes a similar view:

One of the seeming paradoxes of history is the reverence often expressed by Southerners toward Abraham Lincoln in the years following the Civil War. Lincoln, above all, was the Union commander-in-chief, the ultimate leader of the military forces that crushed the Confederacy. Political feelings aside, much of this adoration can be traced to his stated hopes for a relatively benign postwar reunion between North and South. With Lincoln's assassination in April 1865 and the assumption of the office by the staunch unionist Andrew Johnson, it was assumed that the reintegration of the states of the former Confederacy would be far more arduous. Initially, to the surprise of many, this turned out not to be the case.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial* (), 260.

⁸⁸ Rawlings, 11.

The second theme I would like to draw out is the foundation of the first, namely that the races are unequal by blood, exemplified in every way possible — intellect, drive, sexuality, and perhaps most importantly for our purposes *morally*. The moral impairment of black people is a given in both Dixon's and Griffith's formulation of the history of the Civil War and its aftermath. It is also a given for those who crafted the black codes and for those who upheld those codes through Jim Crow and deep into the 20th century and beyond. We will not need to delve too deeply into this assumption for it is everywhere at hand in the text under consideration, however, we will look at the ways that this inferiority is portrayed as a threat, and the ways in which that threat is depicted, sensationalized, and dispatched to the valorization of its dispatchers, saviors of white society, preservers of a white future.

This future, as Mason Stokes' *The Color of Sex* shows, hangs on the control of white women's procreative and social possibilities. Fear of miscegenation as the herald, not only of the end of the white race's blood purity (a myth that would be hilarious if it were not made so by its blindness to the rampant sexual violation of black female slaves), but also as the end of civilization.

The Birth of a Nation

The disastrous end that racial amalgamation is sure to bring about is heralded in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* at a genre-defining pitch. The grandness and necessariness of the film are touted for audiences in color-full language before it begins, with "A Plea for the Art of the Motion Picture," which reads as follows:

We do not fear censorship, for we have no wish to offend with improprieties or obscenities, but we do demand, as a right, the liberty to show the dark side of wrong, that we may

illuminate the bright side of virtue—the same liberty that is conceded to the art of the written word—that art to which we owe the Bible and the works of Shakespeare.⁸⁹

The card brims with thematic language that invokes free speech—“we do not fear censorship”—and situates the film as a *moral* artifact, one that delves into sordid realities—“the dark side of wrong”—in order to instruct the viewer by showing the “bright side of virtue.” The film’s contents make it possible to read this title card literally, as black bodied liberty is itself a grievous wrong in the film, which, like Dixon’s novel, shows the dangers of uncensored black speech.

Unlike Dixon’s novel, which begins in the postbellum period, just before the assassination of the president, Griffith’s epic begins by introducing the audience to an idyllic South just before the devastation and disunity brought by the Civil War. Black Americans are placed squarely in the middle of this transition from peace and harmony to disruption, violence, and ungodly chaos. Blame is apportioned almost immediately, as the film’s second opening intertitle reads, “The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion” (7). This title is followed by the first scene of the film, a representation of slaves arriving on American soil. The black actors in the scene stand in a line, bent over or looking about lost, while receiving a blessing from a religious authority who is flanked by slave traders, one of whom is dressed in what seems to be an approximation of period middle eastern/Indian dress. (Fig 4.1) The film score accentuates the moment, including a stop and change in the piano part to a leading scale upwards and then a shift to an ominous cello. The aim seems the planting of an emotional seed in the minds of the audience: we will see more trouble from these dark bodies before the show is over.

⁸⁹ All shot numbers (in parentheses) sourced from Robert Lang, ed., *The Birth of a Nation: D. W. Griffith, director* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 43-156.

The Birth of a Nation is a landmark achievement in cinema, not only because of its groundbreaking use of the close-up, cross-cut editing, special effects (e.g., the iris and split screen), and its unparalleled scale, but also for its ability to appeal to the racial anxieties of white viewers. In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, his impressive “interpretive history of blacks in American films,” Donald Bogle identifies five black character types originating during slavery before the dawn of the art form, that appear with regularity throughout the history of American cinema up to the present moment: “the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy, and the brutal black buck,” each of which were “used for the same effect: to entertain by stressing Negro inferiority.”⁹⁰ Bogle likens these types to boxes on a shelf waiting for an actor to take them up:

In the early days when most important black characters were still portrayed by white actors in blackface, there was nothing but the old character types. They sat like square boxes on a shelf. A white actor walked by, selected a box, and used it as a base for a very square, rigidly defined performance. Later, when real black actors played the roles and found themselves wedged into these categories, the history became one of actors battling against the types to create rich, stimulating, diverse characters.⁹¹

If we add the concept of the Dark Mask to Bogle’s depiction of five major stereotypes that sit “like square boxes on a shelf,” the struggle of black actors against the Dark Mask is perhaps its most obvious application—in the playing of a demanded stereotyped stage role.

There is a shrinking here, stereotypes reaching such a fever pitch that the Dark Mask is neatly quantifiable, as in Bogle’s five basic types. There is a ventriloquism at play, as the actor, himself or herself White Masked or Dark Masked before casting, becomes the dummy, White Masked *and* whitefaced, White Masked *and* blackfaced, or Dark Masked *and* blackfaced, where an adherence to the types, Bogle’s boxes on the shelf, is its own kind of paint. Moreover, because of the

⁹⁰ Douglas Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2016), 1-2.

⁹¹ Bogle, 1-2.

way these representations work themselves into our national imagination, it follows that this same behavior, these same fabricated traits, will be expected from those who, though not on any stage, find themselves performing beneath a mask. The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the wake of *The Birth of a Nation* is one sign of the strength of the relationship between representation and action.

That is not to say that the film, or even Thomas Dixon's novel, introduced the kind of apocalyptic racist feeling and desire for a solution in blood and resubjugation. Melvyn Stokes' analysis of the film's success locates its mass appeal in already brewing anxieties over the stability of white supremacy globally and perduring anti-nonwhite sentiment.

Both Dixon's *Clansman* and Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* reflected a febrile fear that the ascendancy of the white Anglo-Saxon race was under threat: its political dominance was in question and its racial purity was at stake. . . . [W]hat strikes the historian is the resonance such ideas had in the social world of early twentieth-century America. . . .

In retrospect, the expansionism of 1898-99 marked the peak of confidence in the notion of Anglo-Saxonism. . . . At home . . . the confident Anglo-Saxonism of the last years of the nineteenth century rapidly gave way to a gloomier sense that the continuing domination of the world by Anglo-Saxon stock was not assured. In a world ruled by the principles of Social Darwinism, dominant races could also decline. In a few short years, indeed, the conviction of effortless "Anglo-Saxon" racial superiority gave place to pronounced feelings of anxiety in America that "Anglo-Saxons" might lose their pole position on the evolutionary scale. . . .

Such anxieties and insecurities reached their height in the decade and a half before *Birth* was released. Many native-born, upper-class Americans of the early twentieth century became convinced that their own, superior white race was in danger of being displaced by "inferior" races.⁹²

Griffith's film, the realization on the big screen of both Dixon's novel and President Woodrow Wilson's fraught history, offered an answer to these anxieties in spectacular fashion, with black Americans portrayed as the main offenders—the least likely to ever achieve racial superiority in white supremacist terms, and the means of identifying all that is good and divinely ordered by negation. Bogle provides a helpful summary of Griffith's worldview as regards the Negro of his day:

⁹² Stokes, 211, 212-213.

For D. W. Griffith there was a moral order at work in the universe. If that order were ever thrown out of whack, he believed chaos would ensue. Griffith's thesis was sound, relatively exciting, and even classic in a purely Shakespearian sense. But in articulating his thesis, Griffith seemed to be saying that things were in order only when whites were in control and when the American Negro was kept in his place.⁹³

In Bogle's typology, *The Birth of a Nation* was the first to add the fifth type—the brutal black buck—to the mix of black types portrayed on screen, and it is this type that fueled the need for white unity.

In *Framing Blackness*, Ed Guerrero clocks Griffith's sympathetic portrayals of all whites in the film, “from worker, soldier, and craftsman to planter aristocrat,” as an integral part not only of the film's appeal, but also of its message of racist unity:

It was necessary to Griffith's racist appeal for all whites, regardless of class or occupational differences, to unite along the barrier of race against the insurgent free blacks. Griffith also depicted a broader class spectrum of blacks than did later plantation films, but the devoted servants of the Camerons, the “renegades” and free blacks of the Reconstruction legislature, and, at the top of the black class hierarchy, the nefarious mulatto politician Silas Lynch are all stereotypes or negative images.⁹⁴

One can see how white unity in strength would be an obvious dream when one considers the prevailing representations of blackness in *The Birth of a Nation*, which opens with several idyllic scenes from slavery that establish the premise that absolute white power is the way to peace and prosperity.

The film proper begins with a mission statement: “If in this work we have conveyed to the mind the ravages of war to the end that war may be held in abhorrence, this effort will not have been in vain” (6). The very first intertitle after the credits confirms the belief that the Civil War was the beginning of disorder and disaster for the nation. Throughout the film, Griffith uses intertitles featuring quotes taken from Woodrow Wilson's *A History of the American People*, participating in

⁹³ Bogle, 7-8.

⁹⁴ Guerrero, 24.

the same historical conceit as Dixon's novel does—to tell it like it really was and is. In one of the most famous legends about the film, the first ever to be screened at the White House, Woodrow Wilson is quoted as having said, "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."⁹⁵ Though this quotation cannot be firmly verified, in Stokes' words, "the film's view of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods was not too different from Wilson's own."⁹⁶ Moreover, President Wilson's America was one full of terrors for black Americans. As Guerrero puts it,

One of the film's most obvious dangers arose from the timing of its release; it appeared in the middle of a period, from 1890 to 1920 when Jim Crow segregation was on the rise; lynching was at its height; and in general mob violence, murder, and oppression against African Americans was rampant and intense throughout the land. This bloodthirsty climate, in combination with *Birth's* romantic depiction and glorification of the Ku Klux Klan, most certainly contributed to the public's tolerance of Klan criminality and its expansion to its greatest membership ever, about 5 million, by 1924.⁹⁷

What was an endorsement of terror to some was for others a welcome vision of good triumphing over evil. Robert Lang analyzes the film as a melodrama, which, like other iterations of the genre from the nineteenth century on, is "concerned with articulating a moral ideology and demonstrating that the world is, finally, a coherent (and potentially benevolent) place."⁹⁸ Lang identifies the problem with the melodrama in film as being "frequently unclear" and too simplistic in its explication of human suffering, seeking villains to blame:

The second intertitle of *The Birth of a Nation* declares that "the bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion." Already, even before the film's first image,

⁹⁵ Stokes, 111. Ed Guerrero points out the fact that this screening played a less innocent political role; Griffith and Dixon's screening at the White House and then before the Supreme Court and Congress also served to undercut the NAACP's efforts to get the film censored (Guerrero, 13).

⁹⁶ Stokes, 111.

⁹⁷ Guerrero, 13.

⁹⁸ Robert Lang, *The Birth of a Nation: D. W. Griffith, Director* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 8.

Griffith attempts to identify evil with “the African” by implying that an America without Africans was a harmonious Eden. . . . The narrative enigma launched by the film’s second intertitle . . . is resolved near the end of the film by asserting a way eliminating the African threat: images of an election in which we see black voters intimidated by mounted Clansmen (1594-1599). This image of blacks being intimidated is the true *telos* of Griffith’s vision—not the images of Margaret and Phil, and Ben and Elsie on their respective honeymoons . . . Rather than offer a discourse against war, Griffith proposes the idea that the unity of the country is the most important thing, and this is to be bought at the price of subordinating the blacks.⁹⁹

In the world of *The Birth of a Nation*, this unity is indeed bought, with the black vote suppressed by a squadron of Ku Klux Klan members mounted on horses in full regalia. (Fig 4.2) The white Edenic bliss that is alluded to at the start of the film is recreated in a scene of Phil and Margaret and Ben and Elsie’s double honeymoon, which foregrounds the two happy couples quietly being in one another’s presence with vistas of the wide ocean beyond them, as though to suggest the bright and untapped future of the white race after peace is won. (Fig. 4.3) This peace is not merely one of political rest after the suppression of black and pro-black influences in the public square, but also a divine peace, sanctioned by Jesus Christ (Fig. 4.4). In the film’s last moments, Jesus Christ appears in spectacular fashion, replacing a hellish tableau in red, full of bodies killed in war and a host of onlookers who lift pleading hands in an appeal to the god of war, who is depicted riding a horse and wielding a sword. (Fig 4.5) An equally large Christ presides over the “Hall of Brotherly Love,” finished in a cool, soothing blue, as suggested by the foregoing intertitle:

Dare we dream of a golden day when the bestial War shall rule no more?
But instead—the gentle Prince in the Hall of Brotherly Love in the City of Peace. (1603)

⁹⁹ Lang, 9, 10.

Michael Rogin's commentary on the film highlights the connections between the historical claims of the film and its connection to the United States' entry into World War I as a "war to end war."¹⁰⁰

Rogin explores the import of these two vistas and names the "bestial war god" in Griffith's film and imagination as being "of the sort Africans worshipped."¹⁰¹ One of the means to ending all war was to eliminate the black domestic threat to white supremacy, and Rogin's treatment points to the ways that the opposition of white and black became a stand in for other anxieties:

The Southern race war depicted in *Birth*, I have been suggesting, was not simply about itself; it was also a stand-in for sectional, ethnic, and class conflicts. It was a stand-in as well . . . for the conflicts between tradition and modernity and between men and women.¹⁰²

As the actors selected for a war that was a stand-in for the war to end all wars, those naturally under the Dark Mask (darker-skinned Americans) were at the losing end of many national battles. For instance, in the case of immigration, Rogin writes that "as blacks became a sign of the negative American identity, Progressives took immigrants to the national bosom."¹⁰³ This is a story of white unity bought on the exclusion of all black Americans, and it is a story about the power of the Dark Mask to unite not only white Americans in hatred and rejection of black people, but also to unite all black Americans as members of a group imagined to carry all the same characteristics.

In the brief analysis of the film's images that follows I will not seek to rehash the narrative, which stays fairly close to what we have already seen in Dixon's novel, but will focus on moments that show the appearance or content of the Dark Mask and the White Mask as they work together to

¹⁰⁰ Michael Rogin, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*," *The Birth of a Nation: D. W. Griffith, Director*, Robert Lang, ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 289.

¹⁰¹ Rogin, 289.

¹⁰² Rogin, 258.

¹⁰³ Rogin, 255.

show the necessity of the exclusion of black people from the national community except as a firmly subjugated, terrorized group.

Benevolent Masters, Wicked Freedmen

One of the results of Griffith's decision to begin the film narrative before the tragedy of the Civil War was the opportunity to showcase the happiness of slaves under planter rule. Bogle describes the film's portrayal of antebellum "order" (white order) thusly:

Dr. Cameron and his sons are gentle, benevolent "fathers" to their childlike servants. The slaves themselves could be no happier. In the fields they contentedly pick cotton. In their quarters they dance and perform for their master. In the Big House Mammy joyously goes about her chores. All is in order. Everyone knows his or her place. Then the Civil War breaks out, and the old order cracks.¹⁰⁴

Besides the very presence of African bodies on American shores, which tragedy opens the film, *Birth* presents the viewer with an insidious threat to the delicate balance of white power before the war in nineteenth-century abolitionists' aims. The second scene in the film depicts a meeting of abolitionists presided over by a smug looking white leader who stands before a portrait of George Washington, which is partly covered. This man lays a hand on the shoulder of a seated black man, presumably a slave or former slave, who is on display for the assembly, which is full of well-dressed white men and women. The engaged manner of the white protagonist in the scene is not matched by the black man under his hand whose freedom is under discussion. The black man sits looking insensible to what is going on about him, staring off into space, making one wonder at the contrast. He does not even look up when touched. (Fig. 4.6) The somber music begun in the previous scene of the African's arrival on American shores continues here, inviting us to consider the two scenes as a

¹⁰⁴ Bogle, 8.

pair—in this case, a pair of errors in white judgment. The black bodies in the scene are notably still unless moved, as in the case of the young black boy who is led down the aisle, a wide-eyed, stricken look on his face, to the tears and donations of the crowd. (Fig. 4.7) The effect is as that of a pageant: black actors having no need, desire, or ability to participate actively, the scene gives the effect of something forced. In short, there being no desire on the part of good/happy slaves to rebel or demand emancipation on their own, the abolitionists' dream, heartfelt though it may be, is based on white folly and endorsement of a cruel lie, viz., equality.

As the film's portrayals of what an intertitle announces as "the Southland . . . where life runs in a quaintly way that is to be no more" continue, we are introduced to the Camerons and their servants, the most prominent of whom are portrayed by white actors in blackface, with the more distant characters—literally, as in those filmed farther away from white actors, and figuratively, as in those with a lesser part to play in the narrative—portrayed by black actors. This early portion of the film takes us into the world of the "quaintly" ways of the "Southland," as they were before the advent of white betrayal and black chaos. We are assured of the gentleness of Dr. Cameron, the plantation master, in a lingering scene that shows him in the company of puppies and kittens, who sleep, and play at his feet. (Fig. 4.8) When Dr. Cameron, needing his hands free, deposits a kitten atop the two puppies, the kitten scratches at them playfully, and an intertitle announces "Hostilities," as though before the great war the kind of hostility that arose in the slave-holding South was between adorable baby pets. (53) The film adaptation also introduces a playful rivalry between the youngest sons of the Stoneman and Cameron families who are visiting with one another before the war. An intertitle reads "Chums—the younger sons. North and South," as the youngest brothers tease and wrestle each other playfully. (Fig. 4.9) There is foreshadowing in this fighting in fun, as the audience is aware that soon the playfulness will end tragically in a very deadly fight on the battlefield (296-307).

Play, and frequently, play with animals or in nature, is used to demonstrate the gentleness and internal purity of white characters in the film. This manipulation is often used by Griffith in connection with the young women of the film, as a way of putting white women's innate innocence center stage. Three scenes in particular display the childlike gentleness of white women using animals: the first is the first appearance of Elsie Stoneman, without her banjo, but in the company of a fluffy white cat, whom she carries about with her as she hops and jumps playfully in her front yard, like a child of a much younger age. Elsie emerges into the film from behind a curtain that is draped over the door to her house, our eyes drawn first to the cat, which she scoops up, and then to her dancing feet, which alone are visible. When Elsie emerges, we are treated to a medium shot of her and the cat, framed by the curtain and foliage outside the house, and enclosed in an iris vignette, which serves to accentuate the picturesqueness of the moment (Figs. 4.10, 4.11). In a second moment, also involving Elsie Stoneman, Ben Cameron, her beloved, is attempting to give her a kiss, and she shies away, preferring instead to kiss the beak of a white bird that is content to sit calmly in Ben's equally gentle hands. (Fig. 4.12) In a third example, young Flora, Ben Cameron's "pet sister," has gone down to the stream to draw water for the women of the Cameron house as they sew Ku Klux Klan uniforms. Unaware that she is being stalked by Gus, who has designs on her chastity, Flora bounces off into the wood, easily distracted from her task by a little squirrel: we are treated to a series of shots and countershots of Flora and the tiny creature, with whom she communes, and to whom she blows kisses, rocking back and forth on a log merrily, toes turned inward in a gesture that signals her tender age. (Fig. 4.13) Unsurprisingly, the kind of gentleness and playfulness exhibited by the white characters in the film is not mirrored by its black characters. In a disturbing short scene situated just after the announcement of the black franchise and the growing power of ambitious black men and women—Silas Lynch and Lydia Brown chief among them—Lynch attacks a local dog, wringing its neck roughly and throwing it at two waiting henchman who carry the

creature off. (Fig 4.14) This is a foreshadowing of the kind of roughness and wicked spirit that lies beneath any airs that the film's black characters assume, and serves to underscore the innate lack of the kind of gentleness that defines the White Mask.

In *Birth*, Griffith's brand of playful picturesqueness is not without significance for the moral aims of the film, which spotlight the need to protect white women from black dangers. The infantilization of the film's young white female characters, who skip, hop, hide, and giggle like small girls, goes a long way to achieve the effect of a group of sweet and pure souls in need of protecting. In particular the two attempted rape scenes of the film – the first of Flora by a renegade black captain, Gus; and the second of Elsie, by the mulatto Lieutenant Governor Silas Lynch – spotlight white female gentleness, determination to protect their white (sexual) purity, and vulnerability to black male advances, which inevitably reveal themselves to be attacks in disguise. Both attempted rapes begin with “proposals of marriage,” which disgust and appall the white female character, the suggestion of which assignation causes abject panic, faintness, and a determination to escape a fate worse than death.

In each scene of attempted rape, first by Gus, then by Silas Lynch, the black character is played by a white actor in blackface. This is a ventriloquizing of negative blackness, a donning of the Dark Mask to show the true, treacherous and lascivious nature of black character when uncontrolled by white power. Both scenes have an elegant movement to them, with the stakes rising and the shots becoming more and more frenetic and full of movement as the would-be victim realizes the nature of the danger she is in and attempts unsuccessfully to escape. At the moment of recognition in each scene, Griffith employs separate one-person close-up shots complete with circle vignettes to juxtapose black attacker and would-be white victim. (Figs. 4.15, 4.16, 4.17, 4.18) The effect is one of contrast and (necessary) separation, which is then broken by the return to long shots of the chase, black attacker hunting or man-handling white innocence embodied. In these two

iconic scenes, George Siegmann (Silas Lynch) and Walter Long (Gus) put in terrifying performances of black savagery and sexual rapaciousness that about the monstrous and/or animalistic, wide eyes rolling, bodies set in a crouch waiting to spring. In both scenes we are treated to iconic shots of Siegmann and Long that accentuate the intensity of their lust for white women and their intention to have their victims by hook or by crook, the basis of which impertinence is their belief that they are equal to white men, and therefore entitled to the prize of white women.

The Black Horde

Though Robert Lang's reading of *Birth of a Nation* as a melodrama is useful for this discussion, the film exhibits characteristics of the horror genre. There are certainly elements of horror in the attempted rape scenes, in which white female victims are chased, cornered, and abused by black attackers. The objects of horror in Griffith's film are black bodies. Specifically, black bodies seeking to enter and inhabit white spaces. In the film, these spaces include the Piedmont town square, the sidewalks and streets, drawing rooms, the legislature, and white women's bodies. Occupation of these spaces by black bodies induces a horror that demands white terror's answer in sheets and blood.

Upon first introducing "Bennie Cameron" to the audience, Griffith shows him behind a white picket fence that is a delineator of racial spaces that recurs throughout the film. (Fig. 4.19) Ben pauses before exiting through the gate into the street, seeing that there is a wagon of black slaves in the street. (Fig. 4.20) It is not until this wagon leaves—not without communicating to the audience the insensibility of black bodies as two children fall off into the dirt and are scooped up and beaten by the driver as Ben smiles, amused—that he sets foot into the street beyond the gate. In a second shot that mirrors the first of Ben Cameron, we meet Gus—would-be rapist of Ben's little sister—

pictured on the other side of the fence in an almost identical shot. (Fig. 4.21) The play of shadows at Gus' back and the red tinge of the shot give it an ominous feel; we notice at the right of the screen the fence has been damaged: weakened like the necessary separation of the races that keeps out black danger. Later in the film, we see Gus at the fence again, this time shot from the inside of the protected space. In a continued foreshadowing of his awful crimes, Gus lurks creepily behind the fence, spying on the two main white women characters at play, embracing each other tenderly, unaware of the danger looming. (Fig. 4.22) This is the same fence that Ben later emerges from after the war with confidence only to be overrun by a troop of black soldiers high on their newfound freedom. These men are armed, and there is no driver to scoop these men up and clear the way for white people—these soldiers do not walk in the street, but on the sidewalk freely, a newly contested space. In the brief altercation that follows, the troop sergeant gives Ben lip before marching on. (Fig. 4.23) The soldiers are immediately followed by Silas Lynch, who informs Ben, "This sidewalk belongs to us as much as it does to you, 'Colonel' Cameron" (692). Ben fixes him with a look that could, and eventually will, kill.

The newly shared ownership of previously white-only spaces is at issue repeatedly in the film, the only answer to this topsy-turvy and terrifying chaos brought in by black bodies is violence. Silas Lynch, whose arrival in Piedmont stoked the energies of the Freedmen's Bureau, Union League, and the "black party," is at the center of an initiative to "[induce] the negroes to quit work" and collect "free supplies" from the Freedmen's Bureau. Throughout the short scenes of encroaching chaos that follow, it is easy to separate the good black minority from the bad black majority. For instance, in "inducing the negroes to quit," Lynch meets only one worker who will not stop his work; Lynch attempts unsuccessfully to pry a pitchfork out of the man's loyal hands. But the remaining workers gladly join the throng moving away from the fields and in to the town for dancing and celebration, bordered by signs reading "Forty Acres and a Mule." One man plays a

banjo for the crowd to dance to, and two men eat watermelon, tapping their feet vigorously to the music. (Fig. 4.24) This dancing, unlike the dancing for white masters earlier in the film (Fig. 4.25), is more frenetic, signaling the downfall of order and a population that will not be easily subdued or removed. Further, the absence of white characters gives an impression of total takeover of previously white dominated space. Elsewhere in the county, we are assured by a series of scenes of “outrages,” things are no better, with a white father and his children being pushed bodily off the sidewalk by black military men (822) and entire white families being disposed and their lame patriarch physically abused by black troops (823).

This kind of unlooked-for and unnecessary violence is not limited to use on white characters: Jake, one the Cameron family’s faithful servants, is also caught up by black troops, tied to a tree, and whipped for “not voting with the Union League and Carpetbaggers” (824, 825-834). Notably, this whipping at the hands of black assailants, which is followed by the murder of another faithful servant who attempts to help Jake, is the only whipping depicted in the film. In spite of its claims to historicity, no whippings at the hands of overseers or at the orders of white masters are shown. In fact, when Jake returns to the scene of the crime with Dr. Cameron, the doctor is all gentleness, taking Jake in his arms to help him walk. We are told that “the faithful soul enlists Dr. Cameron’s sympathy,” and care that is shown to Jake showcases the vast difference between black and white masters—the one cruel and violent, the other understanding and gentle. This is the White Mask in action, generated by the film’s emphases on black depravity and brutality and white gentleness and, during Reconstruction, benightedness.

Another crucial set of scenes in which white space is being usurped comes after the election in which “all blacks are given the ballot, while the leading whites are disfranchised” (784). We are treated to a series of shots, which we are assured are “historical” from within the newly blackened legislature after “the negroes and carpetbaggers sweep the state” (839, 788). Griffith’s black

legislature is a panoply of classic stereotypes; one representative eats chicken outrageously, another surreptitiously drinks liquor from a bottle in his jacket, another removes his shoes and puts them on the table, forcing the speaker to “rule that all members must wear shoes” (852). (Figs. 4.26, 4.27, 4.28) Though a silent film, these scenes in *Birth* signal chaotic noise through the representatives’ waving and gesticulating wildly, standing and cheering or arguing heatedly, pageboys running up and down the aisles while “the helpless white minority” sits quietly, creating a behavioral contrast (859). (Figs. 4.29, 4.30)

What begins in unchecked black rejoicing in the town square ends in riotous violence that makes it necessary for the film’s white characters to remain indoors, sequestered and terrorized by black chaos. And in the end, even the shelter of one’s home is not enough to stem the tide of black violence and personal insult, as we learn from the scene recounting the arrest of Dr. Cameron. The gentle doctor finds strength to fight back against the troops that come to arrest him, but is overpowered and paraded before the black freedpeople in the street. The indignity of the doctor’s situation is amplified by the presence of a black woman in lace shawl who laughs in his face and is joined by a collection of black bodies, coded bad by their response to the doctor’s predicament. (Fig. 4.31) In the end, it is only the efforts of his faithful servants and Phil Stoneman, his soon-to-be son-in-law, that rescue the doctor. As they, faithful servants and kindly masters, ride away in the wagon originally hired to take the doctor to the jail we are presented with a vision for peace between the races—it is in the maintenance of the servant roles, even at grave personal risk, that the required (white) order makes room for black Americans.

By the time the newly born Ku Klux Klan is able to muster enough troops to engage the unruly and violent black horde threatening the white population, there is rioting, smoke, and mob violence in the street. The “black mobs,” we are told, have begun punishing “Ku Klux sympathizers” with impunity, and we are treated to images of white men being tarred and feathered and beaten

with sticks. (Figs. 4.32, 4.33) This is the Dark Mask on in full force. The conceit being that if those possessing any amount of Negro blood are given any power, they will proceed to destroy and pillage all that is good and orderly in the nation. In Griffith's epic, when not overseen by white power, black space is wicked space by default. In a moment of foreshadowing earlier in the film, Griffith shows Silas Lynch arriving at the Union League to give a speech and being greeted by a locked door with a peephole. Hearing a knock, a black eye is visible through the peephole, and Griffith uses partial light and shadow in a pointed, extreme close-up, accentuating not only the mystery of what lies behind the door, but also increasing the dread of the moment (729). (Fig. 4.34) What follows is Dixon's scene of Silas Lynch's hypnotic powers as he speaks to an all-black audience, waiting to receive their inspiration and maleficent orders.

In a final and pivotal example of black people claiming white space, even white children find themselves terrorized by the black horde, this time in black children's bodies. Devastated by the condition of his people who are being displaced and violated by the black horde, Ben Cameron sits alone atop a cliff by the sea. While he mourns, two white children come running up the path holding a white sheet, which they use to cover themselves, hiding beneath a tree. A group of black children comes up behind them, puzzling over the moving sheet, as though too simple-minded to understand what lies beneath. (Fig. 4.35) They stand for a time in the place where the white children are hiding. When the white children jump up and shake the sheet, assumedly threateningly, the black children take off running in terror. It is this white reclamation of space through the terrorizing of black children that is "The inspiration" for "the Ku Klux Klan, the organization that saved the South from the anarchy of black rule" (923, 925). Significantly, although the film purports to convey "to the mind the ravages of war to the end that war may be held in abhorrence," we are told that the Ku Klux Klan, saving organization, achieves its saving acts "not without the shedding of more blood than at Gettysburg" (6, 925). Though the estimation is attributed to "Judge Tourgee of the carpet-

baggers,” a radical Republican lawyer and politician, the point is made: nothing short of extreme and determined violence will answer for the outrages of the black mob and restore order and (white) peace.

Retaliatory Terror in the Mask

As the film careens toward its climax—the last battle between the Ku Klux Klan and the black militia and mobs—more and more black faces, painted and not, fill the screen, such that a critical mass and desperate need for the Ku Klux Klan as savior of white civilization and white women is palpable. Significantly, by the time we witness the first rituals of the newly formed Klan, which include the ritual slaying of Gus, the organization’s first victim, we have been subjected to a collection of images of white innocence, gentleness, and insult—paramount among them the attempted rape and tragic death of Flora, Ben’s baby sister. It is no wonder that violence and vigilantism are seen as a source of salvation, when the government is in the control of utter savages and innocent young white women are being hounded, even unto their deaths.

Once the Ku Klux Klan is officially in the picture, Griffith takes many opportunities to showcase white heroism, all centered in Klan activity. After Gus has attempted to rape Flora and she dies, he flees to a “white-arm’ Joe’s ginmill” and seeks the protection of the freedmen inside, which he receives. The Klan sends out spies to find Gus, “that he may be given a fair trial in the dim halls of the Invisible Empire” (1105). One of them, Jeff, happens upon the saloon where Gus is hiding under the bar, and proceeds to take on a handful of able-bodied black men on his own, with success. The battle is clearly set up as a battle between black and white, between black villains and lone white hero. In the tense pause before the violence begins, Griffith pauses for a moment for a shot of Jeff flexing his muscles and holding a closed fist in threat. (Fig. 4.36) Jeff is not a major

character, but is rather a kind of white everyman who answers the call of the Klan, which is a call to white unity, self-protection and dominance. The fight that ensues is one-sided, with Jeff making good on his threat and thrashing every visible black man in the place and getting his hands on Gus, the hunted, whom he carries out bodily. The operation seems a success until Jeff is shot twice, first by a man in the bar and then by Gus himself, who shakes a fist over Jeff's inert body. The message is two-fold: white heroes are strong, cunning, and not to be trifled with, and black opponents do not fight fair. The escalation to gun fire followed by Gus' gloating fist is both an indictment of black fighting, which is dirty and in defense of the most deplorable villain, and a celebration of white power, that even by himself and unarmed, Jeff was able to retrieve Gus and do damage to those who would protect this rapist. This too is a reclamation of space; though unsuccessful in bringing Gus to the Klan, Jeff, White Masked and powerful, exerts control and force within a thoroughly black coded space, spotlighting the physical superiority of the white race.

Griffith, as Dixon's novel dictates, takes us inside the secret activities and rituals of the Klan, most significantly in the scenes that follow the capture of Gus, who is apprehended on the road by the Klan's spies. In the scene of Gus' "trial," the Klan cuts an impressive figure, in full ceremonial garb, ringed around in a clearing, waiting for the accused to be brought in. (Fig. 4.37)

The trial takes place in a red filter reminiscent of the red of the scene of the god of war at the end of the film, with the blue ethereal blue filtered image of the dead girl intercut with shots of the Ku Klux Klan holding and finally killing Gus. (Fig. 4.38, 4.39) The offending black body is delivered to the steps of the Lieut. Governor's house (Lynch, the ambitious mulatto) with a note affixed featuring the letters "KKK" beneath a skull and crossbones. (Fig. 4.40) An intertitle announces to the audience, "The answer to the blacks and carpetbaggers" (1155). Gus' body is laid out in a similar blue filter, which is in contrast to his captured body, which is bathed in battle red at his "trial." This abrupt switch in chosen colors signals both Gus' death as a kind of peace and may

even suggest that his death at the hands of the Klan is a sanctioned and holy sacrifice, in addition to being a sign of white power.

The Klan will soon have plenty of armed black men to fight, as Lynch raises a small force of Negro militiamen to answer for the show of vigilante power via the body of Gus. In preparation for this broader fight, Ben gives a speech to the group of newly formed Klansmen: "Brethren, this flag bears the red stain of the life of a Southern woman, a priceless sacrifice on the altar of an outraged civilization" (1172, Fig. 4.41). The next intertitle, after a shot of Ben in Klan regalia holding up a small burning cross: "Here I'll raise the ancient symbol of an unconquered race of men, the fiery cross of old Scotland's hills . . . I quench its flames in the sweetest blood that ever stained the sands of Time!" (1174) He then hands the cross now extinguished for travel to a messenger who rides off into the woods to deliver "a summons . . . to the Titan of the adjoining county to disarm all blacks that night" (1178). The Klan's turn to violence, begun with the killing of Gus, is put into sacred terms: first through Griffith's intercuts between the "trial" and Flora's inert, angelic body, the blue color of the shot of the dead girl creating a drastic contrast between her innocence and the necessary violence of the Klan; second, by means of Gus' inert body; and third, in the use of the burning cross and the Confederate flag, war banner, quenched in a basin of water that represents the blood of the white female innocent, fuel for the fight.

Griffith provides the viewer with many chances to see the Klan in adventurous action as the stakes in the plot increase, with black characters becoming increasingly bold and impertinent/violent toward whites. The infamous mass ride of the Klan is given many minutes of film, intercut with scenes of white characters in need of rescue from the black horde. We see the Klan riding through the county, on a hilltop backlit by the sun, charging stirringly through the woods and over streams—Griffith's cinematic expertise visible in every rousing tracking shot. Intercut with the ride of the Klan are Elsie's attempted rape and kidnapping scene and scenes of the

Cameron family and their faithful servants (in blackface) under siege and fighting a losing battle against malicious black troops, which lends an additional urgency to the ride to the rescue. In each skirmish, Ben Cameron's inspiration works well, with blacks routed more easily than one might expect given the film's characterization of their brutality. The literal white mask, in the form of the Klansman's hood, adds an element of terror necessary to defeating black evil.

In her book *Performing Whiteness*, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster writes of the power of the cinema as the "garment center of white fabrication," working (successfully) to "impos[e] whiteness as a cultural norm" and to present audiences with "arguably artificial binaries [like] male/female, white/black, heterosexual/homosexual, classed/not classed."¹⁰⁵ Foster defines whiteface thusly:

It is worth noting that whites went to great lengths to foster the public's acceptance of the construct of whiteness, which is clearly an artificial and *performed* "norm." For the purpose of public performance, either live or on the screen, it seemed that white people themselves were not quite *white* enough. To create the illusion of whiteness, they needed to be covered with gluelike white face paint and perform in a sort of whiteface. The concept of whiteface, then, while significant, has largely been unexplored in recent critical theory, while blackface performativity justifiably has been the subject of intense cultural scrutiny. Whiteface not only includes, in my estimation, unnaturally white makeup but also careful lighting and an insistence on the binaries of black and white, especially notable in the early films of Lillian Gish and Mary Pickford, to use Dyer's examples. Actors in early cinema were not just pressed into service to construct genres, genders, sexualities, and classes; they faked and seemingly "normed" a look of whiteness that is itself a grotesque parody, a parody as bizarre, in a way, as that of blackface.¹⁰⁶

The Birth of a Nation is a supreme example of this work of the cinema, and, as we have seen, whiteness is no less artificially and energetically constructed than blackness in Griffith's epic. What, then, is the real time effect of this construction? In particular, what are the wages of the

¹⁰⁵ Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 2.

¹⁰⁶ Foster, 4.

every(white)man portrayal of the Klan in the film,¹⁰⁷ the popularity of which led to a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and bumper years of growth in its membership in the film's wake?

In a response to the film printed in the *New Republic* titled "Brotherly Love," Francis Hackett writes an objection to Dixon's racial philosophies, saying:

Having painted this insanely apprehensive picture of an unbridled, bestial, horrible race, relieved only by a few touches of low comedy, "the grim reaping begins." We see the operations of the Ku Klux Klan, "The organization that saved the South from the anarchy of black rule." We see Federals and Confederates uniting in a Holy War "in defence [sic] of their Aryan birthright," whatever that is. We see the Negroes driven back, beaten, killed. . . .

My objection to this drama is based partly on the tendency of the pictures but mainly on the animus of the printed lines I have quoted. The effect of these lines reinforced by adroit quotations from Woodrow Wilson and repeated assurances of impartiality and good will, is to arouse in the audience a strong sense of the evil possibilities of the Negro and the extreme propriety and godliness of the Ku Klux Klan. So strong is this impression that the audience invariably applauds the refusal of the white hero to shake hands with a Negro, and under the circumstances it cannot be blamed. Mr. Dixon has identified the Negro with cruelty, superstition, and lust.

Whatever happened during Reconstruction, this film is aggressively vicious and defamatory. It is spiritual assassination. It degrades the censors that passed it and the white race that endures it.¹⁰⁸

Hackett's concerns were not unfounded, and her objections to the film fall along the lines of Foster's critique of whiteness in representation as encouraging binary thinking and categorical exclusion.

The problem of the film for Hackett was its divisiveness, as evidenced by the audience's positive response to the scene in which Ben Cameron refuses to shake hands with Silas Lynch. (Fig. 4.42)

The divisions upon which the *Birth* insists and which, once restored in blood, resolve the great conflict of the film, bled easily out of the representational into the real. Alongside reviews of the film

¹⁰⁷ *The Birth of a Nation* is not the only filmic valorization of the Klan from the period. In his history of the "second coming" of the Ku Klux Klan in the years following the film, William Rawlings makes mention of "at least three 'photoplays,'" or silent films, featuring the Klan in "prominent and often novel roles." These films, like *The Birth of a Nation* contributed to the vision of the Ku Klux Klan and its ethos as "synonymous with patriotism and fearless loyalty." (Rawlings, 72)

¹⁰⁸ Francis Hackett, "Brotherly Love," *The Birth of a Nation: D. W. Griffith, Director*, Robert Lang, ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 162.

in the *Atlanta Constitution* was a recruitment ad for a newly forming Ku Klux Klan, which lifted its imagery directly from *The Birth of a Nation* poster. William Rawlings' study of the Klan's "Second Coming" notes the closeness with which Colonel William J. Simmons, "Founder & Imperial Wizard," followed the representations of the Klan portrayed in the film:

It should be emphasized that the Ku Klux Klan of the 1860s had no "uniform" per se, simply disguises designed to mask the identity of the wearer while intimidating its perceived enemies. Simmons's Klan, in contrast, had a formal series of robes, caps, and masks, similar but displaying minor variations indicating the rank and/or office of the Klansman. The basic design of these robes was lifted directly from the costumes of the actors in *The Birth of a Nation*. This meshed neatly with the public's then-current perception of the Klan, much of which had been shaped by the popular movie.¹⁰⁹

Rawlings notes elsewhere in his history, in analyzing the recruitment strategies of the different Klans popping up across the nation (in Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Mississippi, the Carolinas, and Florida as well as the District of Columbia, before finding its largest concentration points in Northern cities, e.g., Chicago, Indianapolis, Detroit, and Philadelphia), that "based largely on the success of *The Birth of a Nation*, the Ku Klux Klan had come to be synonymous with patriotism and fearless loyalty."¹¹⁰ In addition to the broad application of whiteface, as Foster's research shows, *Birth* made such heroes of the Ku Klux Klan that it provided the means of its reestablishment with prefabricated relevancy and (white) public sympathy and approval. Additionally, on the eve of the United States' involvement in the first World War, the Klan's resurgence could be put in global terms, as an answer to foreign infiltration, religious heterodoxy, and, naturally, as a means of managing black bodies and black labor.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ William Rawlings, *The Second Coming of the Invisible Empire: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2016), 68.

¹¹⁰ Rawlings, 71, 115, 71-72.

¹¹¹ Rawlings, 76.

Hackett's use of "spiritual assassination" in reviewing *The Birth of a Nation's* treatment of black Americans is a helpful designation for our exploration, as the Dark Mask attaches a negative moral import to the body that wears it. The work of representation that *Birth* does is not without a religious element, as we have seen from the inclusion of a larger-than-life Christ presiding over the (white) halls of peace at the hopeful close of the film. The battle with the wicked black horde that the film portrays was not without its material counterpart; the newly refounded Ku Klux Klan understood itself in deeply spiritual terms, as the research of Juan O. Sánchez shows. Sánchez tracks the speeches of Hiram Wesley Evans, the Klan's Imperial Wizard from 1922 to 1939, which make much of the spiritual holiness of the Klan's mission:

Evans asserted the Klan was pitted against forces that were immoral, unholy, and unethical: "For I solemnly assure you, my fellow Klansmen, that we have just entered into the great battle our God has commissioned us to wage against the hosts of unrighteousness." The Imperial Wizard was confident "that our Cause is right and that Divine approval has advanced it remarkably in this righteous warfare."¹¹²

Evans' "hosts of unrighteousness" were in different darker bodies than Cotton Mather's "children of the devil," but the move to religious language and theological concepts to understand the group's place in the world was the same. In Rawlings retelling of the event, at the first meeting of the newly formed Klan, William J. Simmons had his fifteen recruits assemble around a sixteen-foot wooden cross, a "makeshift altar on which Simmons laid an American flag, a Civil War sword, and a Bible open to the twelfth chapter of Romans."¹¹³ This ritual performance, repeated at Klan meetings and at the initiation of new recruits, serves to ally whiteness, as expressed in Klan membership and

¹¹² Juan O. Sánchez, *Religion and the Ku Klux Klan: Biblical Appropriation in Their Literature and Songs* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2016), 34.

¹¹³ Rawlings, 63.

support, with the divine good, and with Christ as the powerful expression of that good. The *Kloran*, the Klan's handbook, composed by Simmons, features a "Ku Klux Creed" at its beginning:

WE, the Order of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, reverentially acknowledge the majesty and supremacy of the Divine Being, and recognize the goodness and providence of the same.

WE recognize our relation to the government of the United States of America, the supremacy of its Constitution, the Union of States thereunder, and the Constitutional Laws thereof, and we shall be ever devoted to the sublime principles of a pure Americanism and valiant in the defense of its ideals and institutions.

WE avow the distinction between the races of mankind as same has been decreed by the Creator, and we shall ever be true in the faithful maintenance of White Supremacy and will strenuously oppose any compromise thereof in any and all things.

WE appreciate the intrinsic value of a real practical fraternal relationship among men of kindred thought, purpose and ideals and the infinite benefits accruable therefrom, and we shall faithfully devote ourselves to the practice of an honorable Klanishness that the life and living of each may be a constant blessing to others.

"NON SILBA SED ANTHAR"¹¹⁴

The Klan's motto, which translates from the Latin and Gothic amalgamation to "not self, but others," is a statement identifying a new division along racial and national lines. The Klan is eager to affiliate itself with the nation more broadly, and in particular with the specific political location of the nation state, pegging itself to the "Constitution" and "Constitutional Laws." One is reminded of the mispronunciation of "Constertooshun" in Dixon's comedic scene between Aleck and the young voting freedman; the Klan deploys language that links the laws of the land and the nation's founding document with the white supremacy "decreed by the Creator." The *Kloran* keeps to the same white and black representational unity that is on display in *The Clansman* and *The Birth of a Nation*, which demands a separation of the races and a committed group of White Masked everyday heroes to enforce that separation in God's name. Though the stated benefit of the "practice of an honorable

¹¹⁴ William J. Simmons, *Kloran of the Ku Klux Klan Illustrated Edition* (N.p.: Ku Klux Press, (n.d.)), 2.

Klanishness” may be seen as comparable to the benefits sought by members of other fraternal organizations on the rise in the period, the addition of a mission to “free the country from the ‘deadly clutches of un-American alien forces,” black, Catholic, and Jewish Americans at the top of the domestic list of aliens, serves to solidify a racialized unity against a host of others imagined as materially and morally threatening. Perceived threat and desperate self-preservation at all costs are the defining themes at play, which, too, in addition to natural gentleness, rational superiority, natural bravery, innocence, and divine chosenness, are a part of the White Mask. To be White Masked is to be under siege by alien unrighteousness and to emerge victorious through divinely sanctioned (violent) action.

In his famous study of the connection between lynching in the United States and ritual sacrifice, Orlando Patterson writes of the vilification of black Americans post-Reconstruction:

Even before the South’s defeat in war and its Reconstruction, the Afro-American had acquired a special role in its honorific culture of violence, as the “domestic enemy” who should be feared and watched, a view well expressed by a South Carolinian who wrote in 1822 that Afro-Americans “should be watched with an eye of stead and unremitting observation. . . . Let it never be forgotten, that our Negroes are freely the JACOBINS of the country; that they are the ANARCHISTS and the DOMESTIC ENEMY: the COMMON ENEMY OF CIVILIZED SOCIETY, and the BARBARIANS WHO WOULD, IF THEY COULD, BECOME THE DESTROYERS OF OUR RACE” (uppercase in original).¹¹⁵

Patterson tracks the identification of black Americans as ideal ritual sacrifices at the height of lynching in America. Via Winthrop Jordan, Patterson writes of the association of black American slaves and ex-slaves with sin and of the “traditional color symbolism, which identified whiteness with goodness, purity, and beauty, and blackness with ugliness and evil” that made black Americans “the most exquisitely appropriate representational object.”¹¹⁶ The victimization of black bodies, in

¹¹⁵ Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two Centuries* (New York: Basic Civitas, 1998), 191.

¹¹⁶ Patterson, 211.

Patterson's analysis, follows on a wave of theological associations brewing in the 19th and early 20th centuries:

Negrophobia tended to go along with a different theological explanation of the tragedy of Southern defeat, one that blamed Satan and "satanic influences" as the cause of the great evil. . . . The fundamentalist emphasis on satanic influences was a symbolic disaster for Afro-Americans, for it was all too easy to identify the hated ex-slaves with the satanic presence. Afro-Americans became to the body politic what Satan was to the individual and collective soul of the South. For both, the same metaphor of a "black" malignancy to be excised was employed.¹¹⁷

This demonizing framework was not limited to religious communities in the South; as Edward Blum has shown, Northern Protestants contributed their fair share of unionizing narratives that left black Americans at the bottom:

Protestant Christianity in the North helped to forge a new sense of white American nationalism after the Civil War that sanctified the segregation of African-Americans and their political disenfranchisement. From the end of the Civil War to the war of 1898, Northern religion—its spokesmen and spokeswomen, practitioners, ideologies, and movements—played a critical role in reuniting Northern and Southern whites, in justifying and nourishing the social and spiritual separation of whites and blacks, and then propelling the United States into global imperialism. Northern white Christians, in short, were essential to the reforging of the white republic.¹¹⁸

This "sanctification" of segregation and disenfranchisement from the end of the war to the turn of the century was a move shared by North and South, and the price of the reunion of the white race and the forging of a white identity for the whole nation was the exclusion of black Americans from the imagined (and legislated) body politic. In their introduction to *Vale of Tears*, their edited volume on religion and reconstruction, Edward Blum and Scott Poole write of the reversals that followed hard on the momentary black civic access of the Reconstruction years, marking the Compromise of 1877 as the moment "Republicans in the North had abandoned their black Southern allies, leaving

¹¹⁷ Patterson, 214-215.

¹¹⁸ Edward Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 3.

them to the mercy of their former masters.”¹¹⁹ These former masters were in the process of “Redeeming” the South from “the yoke of ‘Yankee and negro rule,’” much as portrayed in Dixon’s novel and Griffith’s epic.¹²⁰ Daniel Stowell has analyzed the use of “Redemption” by white Southerners to describe the deliberate move away from Reconstruction’s insupportable indignations. He notes the religious and economic connotations of the word, particularly for a white South that was anxious not to be made into slaves by the North:

The religious use of the term also implied a new birth: “the redeemed of the Lord” were not only saved *from* their sins and their deserved punishment but also saved *unto* a new “life eternal.” In this sense, a “redeemed” South was a “New South” rather than a restoration of the “Old South.” . . .

White Southern evangelicals had cast the wartime conflict in terms not simply of North against South, but of good versus evil or God versus Satan.¹²¹

With such black and white understandings of the Civil War and the conflicts of Reconstruction it is not difficult to see the affiliation of darkness and the demonic at play. As Griffith’s introductory intertitle attests, black Americans were *the* problem par excellence, particularly once the fetters of white domination were forcibly removed, and the response to their freedom was as the response to an apocalyptic event.

In this context, the Dark Mask served not only as a means of categorizing an entire race of people, but also as a means of measuring the killability of (newly “free”) black Americans. The “symbolic disaster” of the representation of darker-skinned Americans, of which Patterson speaks,

¹¹⁹ Edward J. Blum and W. Scott Poole, eds., *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2005), 5.

¹²⁰ Daniel W. Stowell, “Why ‘Redemption’? Religion and the End of Reconstruction, 1869-1877,” *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction*, Edward J. Blum and W. Scott Poole, eds. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2005), 140.

¹²¹ Stowell, 137, 140.

had very real, and horribly brutal material consequences. This brutality and exclusion was a necessity to the maintenance of the White Mask, or whiteness representationally writ large, which, as the symbolic counterpart to demonic, brutish, and cunning blackness, fought its way into the category of rightness, goodness, and divine design.



Figure 4.1. The coming of the African to America; Griffith, D. W., and Thomas Dixon. *The Birth of a Nation*. Los Angeles, CA: David W. Griffith Corp., 1915.



Figure 4.2. Ku Klux Klan outside black homes; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.3. Ben and Elsie's honeymoon; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.4. (White) Jesus Christ in the Halls of Peace; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.5. The God of War; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.6. Abolitionist and black man; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.7. Abolitionist and black boy; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.8. Puppies and kittens play at Dr. Cameron's feet; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.9. "Chums—the younger sons. North and South"; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.10. Elsie Stoneman's cat; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.11. Elsie Stoneman emerges; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.12. The lovers kiss a bird; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.13. Innocent Flora plays with a squirrel; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.14. Silas Lynch throttles a dog; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.15. Flora Cameron; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.16. Gus; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.17. Elsie Stoneman; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.18. Silas Lynch; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.

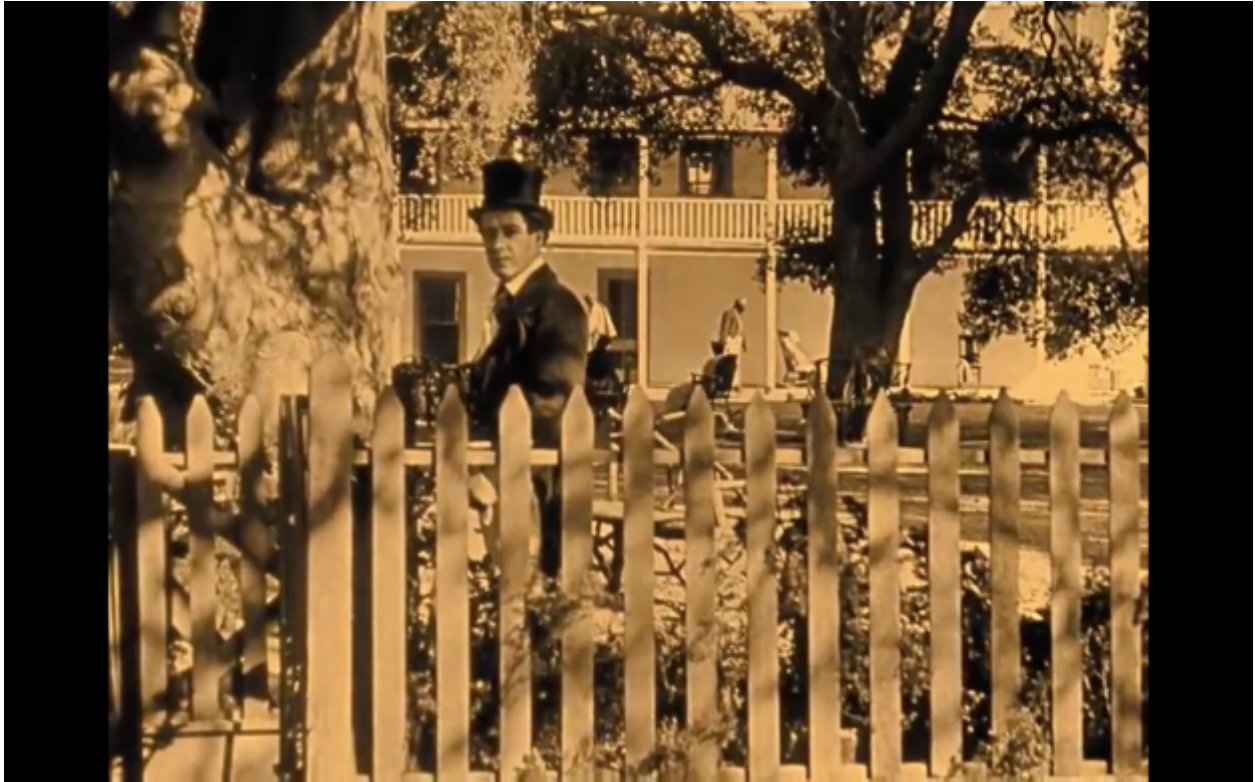


Figure 4.19. Ben Cameron pauses at the gate; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.20. Black girl falls out of a wagon full of enslaved children; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.21. Gus looms at the gate; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.22. Elsie and Flora embrace, Gus in background; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.23. Black Union soldiers and Ben Cameron; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.24. Dancing black freedpeople, "Forty Acres and a Mule"; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.25. Dancing black slaves with masters and children watching; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.26. Black legislature antics, eating chicken leg; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.27. Black legislature antics, drinking alcohol; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.28. Black legislature antics, removing shoes; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.29. Black legislature antics, wide shot; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.30. Black legislature antics, the “helpless white minority”; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.31. The kindly master under arrest; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.32. Tarred and feathered white man; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.33. Riot in the street; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.34. Dark eye through the peephole; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.35. White sheet and black children—the inspiration for the Klan; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.36. Jeff's white fists; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.37. The Klan prepares to receive the accused; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.38. The vigil; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.39. Apprehension; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.40. Gus' body on the steps, "The answer to the blacks and carpetbaggers"; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.41. The confederate flag in blood, Klan ceremony; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.



Figure 4.42. Ben refuses to shake Silas Lynch's hand; Griffith and Dixon, *The Birth of a Nation*.

Conclusion

This plot is bigger than me, it's generational hatred
It's genocism, it's grimy, little justification.
I'm African-American, I'm African
I'm black as the heart of a fuckin' Aryan.

(Kendrick Lamar, "The Blacker the Berry")

Of all that was gravely troubling about the shooting of black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO on August 9, 2014, offending police officer Darren Wilson's grand jury testimony was particularly chilling in its descriptions of the encounter, altercation, and slaying of the eighteen-year-old. Wilson, himself 6-foot-4 and 210 pounds at the time of the hearing, recounts his feelings of terror and physical inadequacy before Brown, on foot and unarmed, whom Wilson judged to be an extreme threat:

And he said, "Hey man, hold these." And at that point I tried to hold his right arm because it was like this at my car. This is my car window. I tried to hold his right arm and use my left hand to get out to have some type of control and not be trapped in my car any more. And when I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan.

Prosecutor: Holding onto a what?

Hulk Hogan, that's just how big he felt and how small I felt just from grasping his arm.¹

¹ Damien Cave, "Officer Darren Wilson's Grand Jury Testimony in Ferguson, Mo., Shooting," *The New York Times*, 25 November 2014, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/11/25/us/darren-wilson-testimony-ferguson-shooting.html>.

Whether or not Wilson felt his life threatened in the encounter with Brown was a significant point of contention, to be ironed out in determining whether Wilson would be indicted or not. He was not. Significantly for our purposes, Wilson described the event as an encounter with a demonic presence:

After seeing the blood on my hand, I looked at him and he was, this is my car door, he was here and he kind of stepped back and went like this.

And then after he did that, he looked up at me and had the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked. He comes back towards me again with his hands up.

At that point I just went like this, I tried to pull the trigger again, click, nothing happened.²

Rather than review the elements of the case, which included the accusation of shoplifting and threatening physical behavior, I will focus here on the deployment of the word “demon” to refer to Brown and Officer Wilson’s tale of terror in the presence of the teenager he felt was stronger and bigger than he. The story of their struggle in the moments before Wilson killed Brown, who could not testify on his own behalf, including a contested “punch” that Wilson recounts, fear front and center:

I felt that another one of those punches in my face could knock me out or worse. I mean it was, he’s obviously bigger than I was and stronger and the, I’ve already taken two to the face I didn’t think I would, the third one could be fatal if he hit me right.³

By his account, Wilson found himself face to face with a demonic presence—an “angry” black teenager—and his response was, unsurprisingly, violent and persistent. According to the autopsy

² State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson, Grand Jury Volume 5, pp. 224-225, available at <https://int.nyt.com/newsgraphics/2014/11/24/ferguson-evidence/assets/gj-testimony/grand-jury-volume-05.pdf>

³ Damien Cave, “Officer Darren Wilson’s Grand Jury Testimony in Ferguson, Mo., Shooting,” *The New York Times*, 25 November 2014, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/11/25/us/darren-wilson-testimony-ferguson-shooting.html>.

the family requested, Brown was shot no fewer than six times, including twice in the head during his retreat.

Michael Brown is an example of a child wearing the Dark Mask. As a result, Brown was indecipherable to the authority that met him in the street as anything other than a pure and malignant threat. That Wilson moves easily to the identification of Brown with a demonic force is startling. That, in the presence of this teenager whose physical size he matched, this armed police officer felt like a five-year-old borders on absurdity when one does not take color into account. If Brown is recognized as a bearer of darkness in the form of the Dark Mask, receptacle for all the negative associations of both darkness and blackness, Wilson's extreme and violent response makes more sense. Moreover, the grand jury's sympathy with his story is more easily deciphered as a product of an ingrained racist imaginary, which can easily make the association between the victim's color and size and his capacity for evil, to the point that even as a response to a potential threat unachieved, Brown's killing can be read as a rational and reasonable response to the stimulus of his Dark Masked presence. Thus, what might have been an unpleasant altercation and perhaps even an arrest escalated into a fear-driven killing in moments. The Dark Mask's presence acts as tinder to the flame of racial anxieties and deadly solutions.

One would not think that the language of the "demonic" would crop up at a moment like this, but, as we have seen, this material connection with symbolic signifiers is an old one in this country. In Cotton Mather's time, the feeling of being under siege was shared by the whole (white) community, and shared fears blossomed into a witch hunt in the interests of preserving the community's safety and Godly mission. I submit that Salem's fears are a not-so-distant ancestor to the ones we are facing today, and that in each case, the Dark Mask is a key player.

The Masks' Work

The Dark Mask is a severe representational problem facing darker-skinned Americans. As ethicist Emilie Townes succinctly puts it: “[T]he challenge is to resist measuring Black realities by the ideological stereotypes, the denigrating myths, of the fantastic hegemonic imagination.”⁴ There are realities of living and lived experience, of individual personality, of dreams and desires, of communal strivings that are obscured and hampered by the imposition of the Dark Mask, which would paint all black people with the same brush. Like its white counterpart, the Dark Mask is a great unifier; not only of darker-skinned Americans mired in the products of malignant stereotypologies (i.e., frustrated attempts at required empathy, acceptance, and full participation as individuals), but also of fair-skinned Americans coded as “white,” who can find in the Dark Mask and the bodies that wear it a means of identity creation.

We have seen the Dark Mask at work to justify the denigration and exclusion of non-European peoples in times of war and external pressure, as in Cotton Mather’s time. We have noticed its use as a unifier of the chosen community of God, New England the “New Jerusalem,” which was tasked with striving to fulfill divine expectations for their behavior and spiritual practice in order to achieve the promise of being the crown jewel of saved nations, bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth by means of example. The Devil, supreme Dark Masked evil entity, envious of New English piety and superiority, set about the work of troubling them with foes natural and unnatural. The line between the two, natural (wars against the inhabitants of the land, wasting sicknesses, floods), and unnatural (the advent of witchcraft within the community and sending of demons into the land to attack the people of God), is decidedly blurred for Mather and those believing with him.

⁴ Townes, 22.

The insecurity of the line between visible and invisible, natural and supernatural, typical and uncanny, is the Dark Mask's bread and butter. This blurring manifests itself in a belief in the ability to see the work of the powers of darkness in the material world, and in an ongoing association of non-European peoples with the forces of Satan.

This association with evil precludes participation in the grace and promises of God, and further, participation in the category of humanity. We see this phenomenon most clearly in Mather's treatment of the Salem witches, who are no longer themselves human, having tarried too long with the forces of darkness, they take on the characteristics of monsters or demons themselves. Their discovery and ejection from the community (and from life itself) is necessary to the purity of the chosen community, and the authorities of the time committed themselves to the business of determining where and how these excisions (and executions) must take place. Mather's concern for the spiritual education of black slaves is a detour from the hardline rejection of all inherently associated with the Devil, but which is in line with the Christianizing aims of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Though Mather encourages the experiment, he acknowledges the superior difficulty of such an undertaking; given the black slave's innate "stupidity" and the depths of "perdition whereinto they are fallen" Mather stresses the potential failure of the experiment given the quality of the (Dark Masked) persons being considered. We have seen that even with the application of Christian education and European clothes and culture, indigenous individuals were unable to shake the chosen community's deep suspicion of them.

Stowe, descendant of Puritan America, is not as cautious as Mather in recommending the spiritual education and emancipation of black slaves. Her belief in the innate religiosity of black Americans fuels her recommendation of a (temporary) symbiotic relationship between white and black, with white Christian people (white women in particular) doing the work of educating and civilizing slaves to European-descended standards of behavior, speech, and appearance. Though

Stowe is significantly more hopeful than Mather, her vision relies heavily on the looked-for removal of all black people from the country, returning them safely to a missionary's life in Africa: a scheme attractive not only for its spiritual promise but also for its guarantee of the separation of the races and the unique inheritance of the country and all its divine promise by white Americans.

In the example of Topsy, the ongoing development of the Dark Mask is readily visible. She is aligned by Stowe with the Devil from her entrance into the narrative. An "imp," a "goblin," a dark creature from "the land of Diablerie," Topsy's darkness is read loud and clear by her white interlocutors, Stowe included. The Christianizing and civilizing process begun by Miss Ophelia is one that must start with a setting aside of understandable revulsion in favor of the higher good. Miss Ophelia is up to the task, and Topsy makes much progress toward the white European-descended ideal, but her blackness is not included in the list of good qualities she possesses. Her salvation, though heartfelt, is not natural to her without white supervision and strenuous revision of her character and personality. As a result, Topsy's salvation appears to this reader as being of a different (and in this world, lesser) order than that of the angelic white Eva, her childhood playmate. Topsy, like Rowlandson's horrifying indigenous Christians, cannot remove her Dark Mask; no matter how much she may practice piety, as Rowlandson puts it, "there [is] a vast difference between the lovely faces of Christians, and the foul looks of these heathens."⁵

As Valerie Babb points out in *Whiteness Visible*, Mather's representations of black and indigenous Americans are a precursor for racialized representations and philosophies to follow:

It is ostensibly a religious imperative that prompts Mather's discourse, but embodied in his religious imperative is a racial hierarchy. Hand in glove with arguments for Christianizing Africans and their African American descendants go arguments asserting that social order is

⁵ Lepore, 80.

best maintained if they are baptized not only into a holy state but also into a social state in which they are subservient.⁶

We see this trouble at work in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and in the Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* and D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. Stowe is concerned with the spiritual state of the nation whose commitment to slavery is a commitment away from the design of a loving God. She sees in black Americans, most iconically represented by her portrayal of Uncle Tom, the faithful, naturally religious black slave, the example of a free, feeling and natural spirituality that—under white direction, of course—makes them ideal subjects for conversion and missionary work on the African continent. By the end of the Civil War, the advent, execution, and death of Reconstruction and the success of Southern Redemption, this narrowly positive view of black Americans as a result of their potentiality to salvation recedes, to be replaced by a pragmatist vision of separation and domination, as exemplified in *The Clansman* and *The Birth of a Nation*, which feature an unreasoning and bestial black horde that must be subdued by any (white) means necessary.

Consistent through all the devaluations of darkness and those who wear the Dark Mask is a denial of inclusion in the chosen community, whether community lines are drawn around a charter, around Christian faith and appearance, or around civic participation and political access. The Dark Mask is a signifier of (necessary) exclusion, and that exclusion is often put into terms of life and death. Whites in Dixon and Griffith's epic are terrified at the possibility of the end of the American experiment as a result of the participation of black Americans in the political life of the nation. Calls for equality of civic participation spark hysterical and unfounded fears of communal contamination

⁶ Valerie Babb, *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (New York; London: New York University Press, 1998), 65.

through the rape of white women. In describing what she calls the “erotics of white supremacy,” Mason Stokes summarizes the American system of (fantastic hegemonic imagination rendered) racialized characterization:

White supremacy is a fleshy ideology; it’s very much about bodies. An obsession with skin color is only the most obvious manifestation of this. Put simply, for all its fascination with color, white supremacy is perhaps equally driven by its fascination with sex. Black female bodies are sites of ungovernable lasciviousness. White female bodies become sexual territory to be displayed, fought over, and protected. Black male bodies, sometimes disguised in the white imaginary as female bodies, hold multiple fascinations as sexual threat, sexual perversion, and objects of unspeakable desire. And white male bodies, for all their apparent invisibility, depend absolutely on the bodies of others to feed the various systems that their invisibility maintains.⁷

With the stability of these representational arsenals comes the permanence of black bodies as problematic by virtue of their relative darkness, keeper of negative and terrifying messages about the bearer. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster has remarked on the ways that whiteness itself is unreal; it is an identity that is constructed and perpetuated in performance and reperformance, “so much so that it seems ‘natural’ to most”⁸:

Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum as a copy lacking an original (*Simulacra*) can be applied to whiteness. The failed search of white supremacists and others for a “lost pure white race” proves this point.⁹

The ungrounded nature of whiteness that Foster speaks about is in keeping with the use of non-white bodies to craft an elusive identity by negative means. Thus, the White Mask depends on the applied Dark Mask for its instantiation and justification. Moreover, this generation of “good,” “right(eous)” and “civilized” identity is in constant need of comparison with a maligned other for sustenance.

⁷ Stokes, 133.

⁸ Foster, 2.

⁹ Ibid.

Fighting the Dark Mask

Though my emphasis in this project has been on the generation and contents of the Dark Mask as applied conceptually and materially to darker-bodied Americans, the application of the Dark Mask was not one that went unchallenged by black Americans. So much so that by the middle of the twentieth century, the phrase the “white devil” was a familiar one in the national cultural consciousness. Malcolm X tells us (via Alex Haley) of his encounters with other black men in the attempt to help them to see the truth of the situation:

I would keep close watch on how each one reacted. I always had to be careful. I never knew when some brainwashed black imp, some dyed-in-the-wool Uncle Tom, would nod at me and then go running to tell the white man. When one was ripe—and I could tell—then away from the rest, I'd drop it on him, what Mr. Muhammad taught: "The white man is the devil."¹⁰

Malcolm X's retelling of the effect of this single tenant on caged black prisoners, among the "millions of black men in America [who] have been like sheep; in a den of wolves," is a reversal of the symbology of darkness we have been concerned with here. The statement "The white man is the devil," is not only a statement based upon material experience with oppression, violence, and disregard, but it is also the solution to a mystery. Elijah Muhammad's *Message to the Blackman* features a retelling of natural, human, and faith history that accounts for why blackness earns such awful, unjust treatment at the hands of white people. In an account of a people chosen by Allah, eerily reminiscent of Mather's account of the chosen few, Elijah Muhammad recasts the typology of blackness: "The black people are by nature the righteous. They have love and mercy in their hearts

¹⁰ Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), 182-183.

even after trying to live the life of the devils—this is still recognized in them. When they are fully in the knowledge of self, they will do righteousness and live in peace among themselves.”¹¹

Martin Luther King addresses the Nation of Islam's move toward a reversal of the light-good/dark-evil dichotomy in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, seeking to walk a line between the forces of black middle-class complacency and "the hatred and despair of the black nationalist" as black people respond to the stimulus of oppression. The answer is the kind of "extremism" that was Jesus' way: "Jesus Christ . . . was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists." King's analysis of the social challenge does not feature a white devil, but it does introduce a black peaceful protester who is the one most like Christ, faced with awful and deeply unjust violence at white hands, and watched by "white churchmen [who] stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities."¹²

These antidotes, responses to the injustice of being seen without ever being truly seen, paint a picture of the problem as it developed further under Jim Crow and came to a head in the middle of the 20th century. These are attempts to remove the Dark Mask by reassigning the negative moral qualities of darkness to white Americans on the basis of their behavior toward black people over the course of the nation's history. It is a move from Phyllis Wheatley's testimony—"T was mercy brought me from my pagan land"—to Frederick Douglass' indictment of Christianity:

Come, saints and sinners, hear me tell
How pious priests whip Jack and Nell,
And women buy and children sell,

¹¹ Elijah Muhammed, *Message to the Black Man in America* (Phoenix, AZ: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1973), 108.

¹² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research Institute, Stanford University, available at <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>.

And preach all sinners down to hell,
And sing of heavenly union.¹³

A natural next step for this dissertation is a focused engagement with these dissenting prophetic voices as significant attempts to remove the burden of the Dark Mask from black people in America (and around the world).¹⁴

Whether it is Darren Wilson's infamous testimony about the teenager he killed because "It looked like a demon," or if it is the heart- and neck-breaking speed with which police officers gunned down a 12-year-old in a playground, or if it is the wholesale discrediting and discarding of eye-witness testimonies because the abuse of power they witnessed is trumped by their geographical location (the ghetto), which facilitates the application of type (morally deficient), the Dark Mask is alive and well, adhering to human bodies and creating uniform life-stories, personalities, and negative moral significance for those who wear it. One of the central aims of this project is to interrogate the constellation of stereotypes that assert themselves over the lives of black people as they attend to their individual, distinct, valuable human lives. Therefore, the work of identifying and interrogating the work of the Dark Mask does not cease in an examination of its historical situatedness.

After the case of the "white devil" antidote to the Dark Mask, close engagement with two sets of contemporary courtroom/hearing testimonies may prove useful in delineating the work of

¹³ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, introduction and notes by Robert O'Meally (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003), 103-104.

¹⁴ The burden of the Dark Mask is not unique to the American context by any means. For instance, Edward Blum and Paul Harvey write of the use of a decidedly white Christ to justify and inform the colonization and expansion of the empire into further reaches of the earth: "Jesus became an imperialist emblem as a white big brother to the 'half devil and half children' foreign peoples, as Rudyard Kipling so ominously wrote." Edward Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 159.

the Dark Mask in the contemporary moment: first, the documents and testimony presented to the grand jury in Ferguson, MO, and second, the video and coverage of the George Zimmerman trial. In particular, further dilation on the testimony of Darren Wilson and on the testimony and treatment of Rachel Jeantel may prove illuminative. Wilson's confession of how threatened he felt, how helpless and yet tasked with authority and a duty to perform is of enduring interest to me as it gives us a glimpse of the stakes of the encounter with blackness unknown. Zimmerman's testimony and the courtroom and pressroom exploration of Trayvon Martin's height, build, voice, temperament, and language provide additional evidence of the expected, desired, and creatively painted portrait of the wicked, threatening dark dead, which has the effect of vindicating and even lionizing the accused. Rachel Jeantel's testimony and her treatment in the media provide us with another telling example of the import of bodily aesthetics today. Like Brown, teenaged Jeantel and the deceased Martin, who were on trial as much as Martin's killer, can be read with Topsy (and Pecola) as black children suffering beneath the weight of a signification that obscures the unique, valuable individual.

The tapes of Jeantel's testimony are full of moments in which she is positioned as fitting the stereotype of the illiterate, salacious, belligerent, and even lazy ghetto black child, but beyond setting up the witness' character as suspect — a tactic to be expected — the defense made a point of dilating on moments that brought out the witness' and Martin's difference from the (white) norm in racial and moral terms. Jeantel's speech and diction was the subject of much media coverage and pundit criticism, as was her attitude toward the defense and her threat not to return to complete her testimony.

The courtroom scene with Jeantel is best treated as a piece of theatre, a theatrical narrative grounded upon (stereotypical) expectations and the accentuation of cultural and (culture read as) moral difference, in which the viewer, the jury and the television/internet audience, is encouraged

toward a characterization of this particular witness as Other: untrustworthy, and yet entertaining. As with Topsy (and Pecola), Jeantel's whole person is up for grabs, and it is being critiqued against (and therefore bolsters) a social "norm" that is neither recognized in nor expected from her. The repartee between Jeantel and defense attorney Don West throughout her testimony proves fruitful, not only in showing the outlines of this boxing of the black child into an amoral (or even anti-moral) stereotype/social expectation, but also in showing Jeantel's refusal to bend, a stubbornness and perseverance in the face of erasure that we later find out brought on the symptoms of PTSD.¹⁵

The Dark Mask is a formidable foe to interpersonal empathy and participation in the life of the national community; however, it is not without its vulnerability, which is, ironically, materiality. There is hope in the continued perseverance of those who wear the Dark Mask to be known, understood, and respected on their own terms. There is hope in the awakenings of those who wear the White Mask to its artificiality and parasitic deception. The project of dismantling the work of the Dark Mask is not one that can be undertaken in isolation. Theologian James Perkinson has written of the difficulty of the work of "break[ing] up . . . the structures of white fear and guilt" and counsels an approach that leads with "self-confrontation":

¹⁵ Last year, the NY Daily News ran an update on Jeantel under the titillating title, "Trayvon Martin friend Rachel Jeantel, who was humiliated during Zimmerman trial, turns life around." What we are witnessing here is a couching of this woman's personal narrative in terms of the redemption narrative we have seen play out in Stowe's account of Topsy's journey after making first contact with white attention and benevolent interest. Before being ironically "found" by being thrust onto the witness stand, Jeantel was just another black child with an unfortunate life that needed "turning around." Her getting her G.E.D. and planning to go to college, a promise she made to the departed Trayvon, is narrated in this piece as a rising out of humiliation over the revelation of her illiteracy to the court and the world. (David Boroff, "Trayvon Martin friend Rachel Jeantel, who was humiliated during Zimmerman trial, turns life around," NY Daily News 14 Jul 2014; online article and video; 11 Apr 2015; available at:

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/trayvon-martin-friend-rachel-jeantel-turns-life-article-1.1866446>; accessed 15 Apr 2015).

What is required in place of denial is continuous self-confrontation, slow exorcism, and careful revision in a conscious resolve to live “race” differently. It is ultimately a matter of learning how to live creatively out of one’s own diverse genealogy and experiment with one’s sense of embodiment gracefully—*against* the dominating structures and conforming powers of white supremacy that have already conscripted one’s body for their service. That hope is obviously utopic—but not to be abandoned simply because it represents the eschatological endpoint of white “salvation.”¹⁶

Significant for the process of self-confrontation with the realities of supremacy and one’s own consignment within its structures is frequent, humble, and honest encounters with blackness, which Perkinson acknowledges is a fine line to walk, appropriation and misapprehension being two risks of the attempt.

For white people the functional equivalent of such a “baptismal” reprogramming is lifelong self-discipline and self-confrontation in the existential schools of racial encounter, inculcating a different habit of perception, able to see and feel the significance of the entire system of supremacy that bears down with such intransigent weight under the skin of advertised equality.¹⁷

One of the “interior effect[s] of such baptismal work,” is the “disinterring of the *theological structure of whiteness* . . . as a mode of identity ever demanding an absolute reference point (‘blackness’ or other perceptions of ‘color’) against which to feel secure.”¹⁸ Doing the work of dismantling white dependence on a darker Other to found identity creation and maintenance requires an “immersion in uncertainty,” and an openness to “salvation as a process.” The end of the work of self-confrontation in engagement with blackness is the generation of a “deep understanding of the situation of race,” and of a “capacity for a new structure of passion, a new ‘long anger’ capable of incubating and animating a will-to-change over the course of a lifetime.”¹⁹ This is deep communal

¹⁶ James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

work undertaken by individuals open to the encounter with the Other that removes identity formation and reformation from the equation. This is respect before the infinite diversity of human life and experience. This is the antidote of material and meaningful interaction, away from the identity creation project. Though we have a long way to go in terms of the creation of images, stories, and visual and cultural ideals that strengthen and reify the work of the Dark Mask and its white counterpart, sustained and open-handed interpersonal interaction may be an even stronger means of fighting back.

Failing Attempts

One of the implications of the Dark Mask as a critical framework is the way its permanence calls into question one of the age-old strategies for combating racism and racialization: respectability politics as antidote. The idea that the *behavior* of darker-skinned Americans is the problem, and that if they would change their behavior, culture, speech, bodily performances to match the “mainstream” (White Masked) ideal, they would be better treated is simply untrue. Not only does adherence to cultural, social, and linguistic (white) norms produce at best marginal protection from unlooked-for violence (in perception, word, and deed), the insistence on individual propriety serves to lay the burden of responsibility, guilt, and negative perceptions on the shoulders of those who wear the Dark Mask. Further, as Michelle Smith argues, beginning her discussion with Brittney Cooper’s 2014 *Salon* article on black rage,²⁰ respectability politics serves not only to disavow black outrage—a reasonable response to the treatment black people receive at

²⁰ Brittney Cooper, “In defense of black rage: Michael Brown, police and the American dream,” *Salon.com*, 12 Aug 2014, available at https://www.salon.com/2014/08/12/in_defense_of_black_rage_michael_brown_police_and_the_american_dream/.

the hands of civic authorities, police at the top of the list—but also to divide the suffering community into camps based on adherence and non-adherence to the ideal of (White Masked) respectability:

I am worried about what this means for the growing, largely youth-led anti-police violence movement. To Janine, Olivia and even Al Sharpton, the critical theorizing and deliberate action of the young men and women (and boys and girls) who make up the Lost Voices, with their neck tattoos, XXXL white t-shirts, sagging pants, dread locks, outdoor voices, hip hop ethos and civil disobedience-rejecting rage, is either unintelligible as politics or unworthy of attention.²¹

The deployment of the language of respectability and all of its “don’ts,” as in don’t appear in the world the way you do, serves only to exacerbate the work of the Dark Mask, as it participates in the imagined (and flattening) unification and marginalization of groups of black people on the basis of whether or not they participate in the attempted attainment of a White Masked ideal. I say attempted attainment, because it is at last impossible for any darker-skinned American to achieve the White Masked ideal—that is part of its temptation and false promise. The normalization of whiteness has been too fully achieved for those who wear the Dark Mask to overcome the barrier posed by their appearance in the world, which is freighted with all the negative and dubious content the Mask can muster.

One iconic example of the failure of respectability politics to protect Dark Masked Americans from police profiling is the arrest (and handcuffing) of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. just outside his own home, into which he was accused of forced entry. Gates had come home from a trip to China to find his front door jammed, and was helped by his cab driver (also Dark Masked) to force the door open and gain entry. A “white female caller” alerted the police to the

²¹ Michelle Smith, “Affect and Respectability Politics,” *Theory & Event*, vol. 17, issue 3 Supplement, 2014, available at <https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.uchicago.edu/article/559376>.

presence of two black men on Gates' porch, and when the police officer arrived an argument, naturally, ensued, which ended with Gates being taken away from his own house in handcuffs.²² The Cambridge, MA Police Department launched an investigation into the event in an attempt to determine the role of bias and found that both parties acted in ways that led to the escalation of the event:

Because Sergeant Crowley and Professor Gates did not change their attitudes toward each other, even after each man realized that the other posed no physical threat, the encounter continued to deteriorate and eventually reached an outcome that the Police Department and Professor Gates agreed was unfortunate. If, on the other hand, both men had shared responsibility for understanding each other and communicating openly, the outcome could have been better.²³

The report casts the incident as a routine stop gone wrong, and both parties, who were later invited to the White House to reconcile,²⁴ admitted there were other actions that might have been taken once it was clear Gates was not breaking and entering another's home. Nevertheless, for our purposes, the question that remains is what was the role of fear in this incident. As in the case of Michael Brown, shot while retreating from police, Professor Gates, theretofore a great success story as far as adherence to the outward codes of respectability go, remained an object of fear to the police officer even after it became clear that it was *his* home. The Committee reports, "It appears that fear was an issue for both men," and one again wonders what role fear had to play in the handcuffing of the professor after it was clear there was no crime in progress.

²² Abby Goodnough, "Harvard Professor Jailed; Officer Is Accused of Bias," *The New York Times*, 20 July 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/21/us/21gates.html>.

²³ The Cambridge Review Committee, *Missed Opportunities, Shared Responsibilities: Final Report of The Cambridge Review Committee*, 15 June 2010, available at <http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/cambridgereview063010.pdf>.

²⁴ Krissah Thompson, "Arrest of Harvard's Henry Louis Gates Jr. was avoidable, report says," *The Washington Post*, 30 June 2010, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/30/AR2010063001356.html>.

The Dark Mask is no respecter of persons. The permanence of the application of the Mask results in an erasure of that which defines an individual—their work, their personality, their achievements, their desires and intents—and replaces the infinite complexity and diverse reality of a life with a twisted reduction. The Cambridge Police Committee’s report shows that the incident could have been avoided in a number of ways, but I wonder that in the presence of Dark-Mask-sparked white fear, there is very little that an individual can do to prevent being taken as a threat. This conundrum is clearly visible in the story of Philando Castile’s last moments on earth, who was shot while reaching for his identification by a terrified police officer.²⁵ It is in the actions of McKinney, Texas Police Corporal Eric Casebolt, who tackled and pinned fifteen-year-old Dajerria Becton to the ground at a pool party.²⁶ It is hard at work in our coverage of riots, in our skeptical treatment of the black deceased, and in our pathologizations of the “ghetto.”

As Toni Morrison tells us in *The Origin of Others*, “Color-ism is so very available—it is the ultimate narrative shortcut.”²⁷ This is true not only of literary production in this country, but also of our encounters with our neighbors, with would-be friends/foes, and with strangers unmet. The Dark Mask and its white counterpart allow us a shorthand with which to judge the identity, capability, and intent of others. These receptacles for unquestioned “good” and “evil” silently absolve us of having to do the nuanced work of getting to know one another as unique human

²⁵ Mitch Smith, “Minnesota Officer Acquitted in Killing of Philando Castile,” *The New York Times*, 16 June 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/16/us/police-shooting-trial-philando-castile.html>.

²⁶ Kristine Phillips, “Black teen who was slammed to the ground by a white cop at Texas pool party sues for \$5 million,” *The Washington Post*, 5 January 2017, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/01/05/black-teenager-who-was-slammed-to-the-ground-at-texas-pool-party-sues-ex-cop-city-for-5m/?utm_term=.14bc8a78fd71.

²⁷ Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 2016* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 2017), 44.

beings, worthy of respect and humble appreciation—it prevents us from having the courage to encounter another and say, “You I do not know yet.” And this inability to see beyond the works of the fantastic hegemonic imagination to the encounter with another who may in fact be much more like than unlike is a toxic stilling of our best empathetic instincts.